

# "Too Close for the Guns!"

## 9 Canadian Infantry Brigade in the Battle for the Rhine Bridgehead

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The spring of 1945 was the "sweetest of all seasons" for Dutch and Canadian participants in the Second World War. That April, First Canadian Army lifted the yoke of Nazi oppression once and for all from the people of the Netherlands. It was a month of rapid advances from the Rhine to the North Sea punctuated by sometimes bitter "mopping up" battles to clear isolated German garrisons from towns like Zutphen and Groningen. Despite suffering casualties until the last days of the war, many Canadian soldiers remember that spring of liberation fondly.

In those first days of spring, however, the North Nova Scotia Highlanders experienced one of their most savage battles of the war. It left 68 of them wounded and 44 dead after a single day of battle in the town of Bienen, Germany. These losses represented 30 per cent of the unit's fighting strength and would be considered devastating at any time during the war, but especially so given the end was in sight. German losses numbered over 200 dead, a similar number of prisoners, many of whom were wounded, and an unknown number of recovered casualties. Most wounds on both sides were inflicted by bullets and grenades.<sup>1</sup>

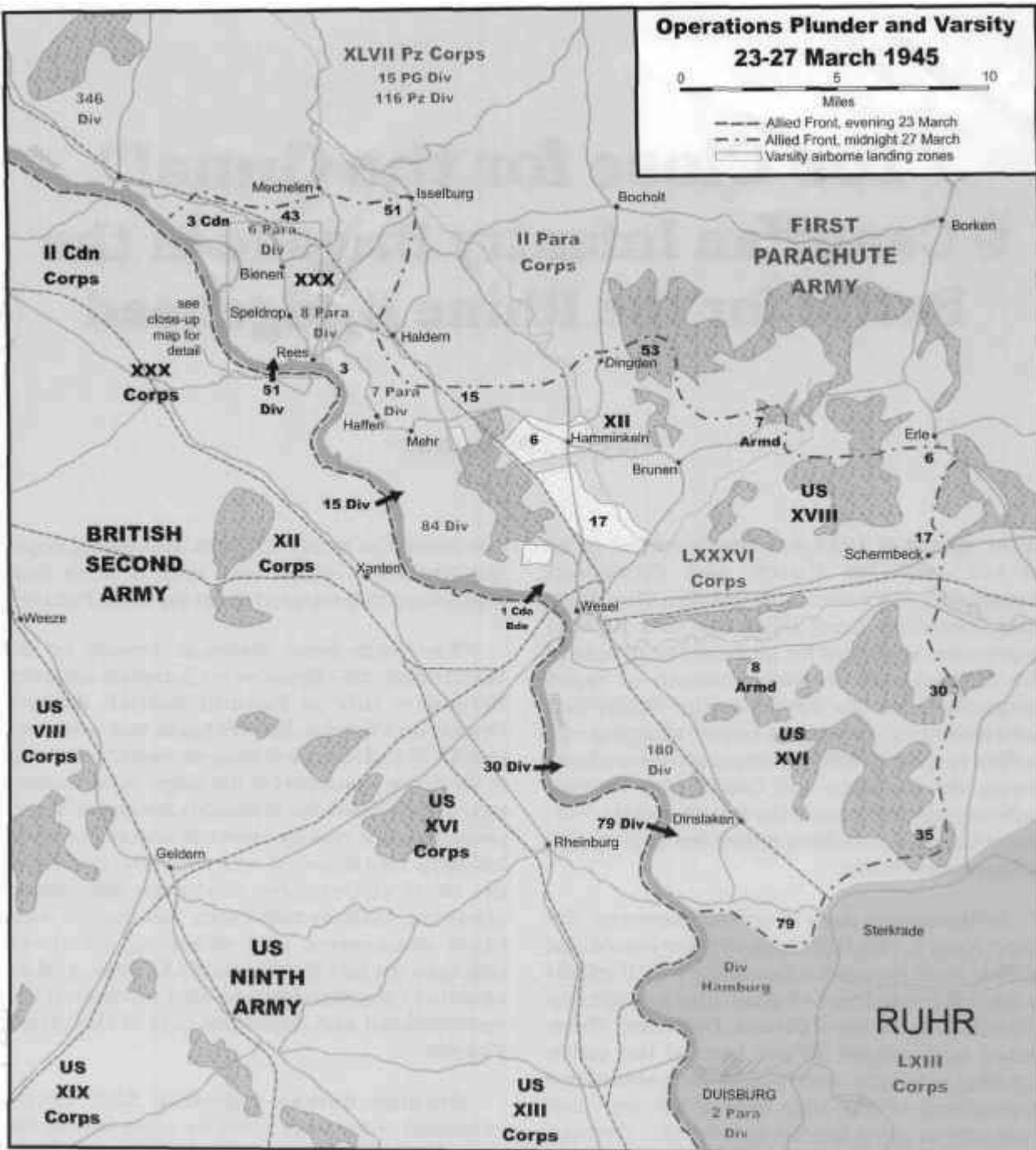
The outcome of this battle contradicts the popular belief, initiated by American Lieutenant-General George S. Patton Jr., that the German army on the east bank of the Rhine was beaten.<sup>2</sup> It also provides an example of vicious close-quarter fighting, challenging the widely-held view that Anglo-Canadian citizen soldiers preferred to stick close to cover and let their overwhelming artillery and air power do the killing.<sup>3</sup> The Canadians also discovered that their enemy did

not consist of weary old men and young boys, but the latest, albeit last, crop of keen Nazi replacements prepared to die for their Fiihrer.

The North Nova action at Bienen on 25 March was the climax of 9 Canadian Infantry Brigade's role in Second British Army's Operation Plunder. Nine Brigade was attached to XXX British Corps during its assault crossing of the Rhine in support of the larger main landing near Wesel. It was the dramatic crossing at Wesel, preceded as it was by airborne and commando landings and followed by a climactic dash into the heart of Germany, that drew historians' attention. Military historians' fascination with rapid manoeuvre and sweeping advances obscures the fact that it was XXX Corps, and its attached Canadian brigade, that carried out the most difficult and important task of Operation Plunder.

German Forces opposing XXX Corps consisted of the only cohesive army left on the western front, General Alfred Schlemm's First Parachute Army. Schlemm's frontline divisions were rested, reinforced, well dug-in, backed by 150 pieces of artillery, and a powerful reserve in the form of XLVII Panzer Corps. This corps, consisting of the veteran 116th Panzer and 15th Panzer-Grenadier Divisions, was the last operational-level manoeuvre formation left on the German order of battle in the west.

These forces could not stop Plunder. Nevertheless, they were strong enough to impede a breakout and delay plans to encircle the Ruhr, capture Berlin and end the war as soon as the spring flooding abated.<sup>4</sup> Field-Marshal Montgomery was acutely aware that the division



of post-war Europe between the Soviet Union and the Western Allies would be decided by the positions of their armies on the day the war ended. He could also not help but be aware that every day the war dragged on, more Allied soldiers, concentration camp inmates, and European civilians would perish. Montgomery therefore deemed it essential that General Schlemm's forces not be allowed to delay the breakout to Berlin.<sup>5</sup>

While ostensibly ordered to "advance" on the flank of the main assault, the real mission of XXX Corps and its attached Canadians was to cross the Rhine where the Germans expected it

most, between Rees and Emmerich. There the corps was to plow into the bulk of First Parachute Army, force the commitment of XLVII Panzer Corps and destroy it in a battle of annihilation. Such action would allow the main portion of Second Army to drive on Berlin unimpeded.

Destroying XLVII Corps meant prolonged periods of intense fighting between forces similar in size and combat power. It also meant considerable bloodshed and little to show for it in terms of ground gained. However, once the process was complete, especially after 9 Canadian Brigade broke the back of the last

German formations around Bienen, advances into Holland and the German interior came swiftly.<sup>6</sup>

Because it took time and cost lives, fighting in the north end of the bridgehead is downplayed in accounts of Plunder. Instead, the rapid, low-cost advance further south caught the eyes of historians seeking to measure success by miles travelled. Indeed, some Rhine crossing commentators suggest that XXX Corps' sluggish advance along the northern flank resulted from poor motivation among leading infantry units. For example, Canada's official army historian, C.P. Stacey, wrote that despite having plenty of artillery support as well as help from heavy mortars and medium machine guns, the North Nova Scotia Highlanders got hopelessly "pinned down" in front of Bienen.

According to Stacey it was only after XXX Corps' famous commander, Brian Horrocks, visited the North Nova command post that the unit was inspired to get moving again. Even then, they needed help from Wasp flame-throwers, tanks and further artillery concentrations. Yet, with all that support, the North Novas still only gained a foothold at the edge of town. A second Canadian battalion was needed to clear the objective and move past it.<sup>7</sup>

Stacey's paragraphs about Bienen reflect his judgement of the Canadian Army's performance evident throughout *The Victory Campaign*.<sup>8</sup> Stacey implies Canadian infantry alone were incapable of overcoming prepared defences manned by more skilful German troops. It was, in Stacey's view, only when Canadian infantry advanced as part of a massive mechanical juggernaut, and behind a curtain of artillery that they could move at all. More recently, Timothy Harrison Place suggested that slow Anglo-Canadian progress throughout the war resulted from a fundamental lack of tactical training and knowledge among junior infantry and armour leaders. This shortcoming was, he argues, overcome by relying on artillery to win battles.<sup>9</sup>

The story told by surviving veterans and the records of units in 9 Brigade paints a very different picture of the battle for Bienen. Contrary to the orthodox interpretation that Allied armies in the Second World War possessed decisive material and numerical superiority over German forces, Canadian units fighting in Bienen had no such advantage.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the full-strength, well-equipped and motivated German units defending the town outnumbered their attackers, and in addition possessed all the advantages inherent in defending a fortified village with flanks secured by water obstacles.

51st Division Signals detachment south of Speldrop, 24 March 1945. Rees can be seen burning in the background. In the foreground lies a 154 Brigade Highlander killed earlier that day. 9 Brigade relieved the exhausted Scotsmen later that evening. The flat, featureless topography of the Bienen-Speldrop area is most evident.



From this village, and others like it in 9 Brigade's area, the enemy commanded the surrounding flat, featureless terrain with fire. Despite these odds Canadian infantrymen fought their way into town, killed large numbers of Germans and took many more prisoners. By doing so, 9 Brigade contributed significantly to the goal of breaking XLVII Corps' capacity to conduct mobile operations.

Capturing real estate was of secondary importance in the Allied strategy and doctrine for defeating Germany. Indeed, the reason German units finally yielded ground in the Rees area was because they suffered crippling losses. Ultimately the Allied objective at Bienen, and perhaps most other Second World War battles, was to kill, capture or otherwise incapacitate members of the German Army."

Undoubtedly, such goals were distasteful to politicians and voters at home, the soldiers ordered to achieve them, and even to historians writing years after the event, especially with Great War memories of bloody attrition so close at hand. Perhaps for this reason, Allied leaders deliberately or otherwise couched their gory objectives in more palatable terms. In the north end of the Rhine bridgehead, the term used to describe the mission of wiping out XLVII Corps was "flank protection."

The Canadian portion of the Rhine crossing story began in March, when 9 Brigade was pulled out of the line to begin training and integrating reinforcements for the next offensive. Allied intelligence, together with the number of German corpses and burned out equipment lying between Nijmegen and the Rhine, convinced Montgomery that the German army could not defend behind the river in any depth. Indeed, the Allies succeeded in their goal of destroying most of the German Army on the western front before it could escape over the Rhine.<sup>12</sup> They correctly believed that once the remaining forces defending the river were destroyed, Allied armies could unleash their own "blitzkrieg" and end the war rapidly.<sup>13</sup> Montgomery's plan for Operation Plunder reflects this assumption.

Field Marshal Montgomery took two weeks to build Second British Army into a massive amphibious landing and pursuit force organized to storm the Rhine, establish a secure bridgehead and then break out for the final race

to Berlin. Second Army's riverborne assault would be delivered by XXX British Corps on the left in the Rees area, and XII British Corps on the right, west of Wesel. In front of XII Corps two airborne divisions would drop on the high ground commanding the approaches to the river. Behind them stood the rested and refitted troops of British VIII Corps which would rapidly pour into the bridgehead once it was secure. It was planned that XII and VIII Corps would break out together and not stop until they reached the front steps of the Reich's Chancellery in Berlin.

The orders given to XXX Corps' were to advance northeast protecting Second Army's flank. On the night of 23 March, 51st Highland Division would assault across the Rhine. The following morning, 9 Canadian Brigade was to move into the bridgehead under 51st Division command and drive down river, seizing road and bridge sites so that First Canadian Army could advance into Holland.<sup>14</sup>

Commanders of these formations knew that within hours of landing they would be hit with local counterattacks that were the hallmark of German defensive doctrine. They also planned to receive a major counterattack by XLVII Corps 12 to 24 hours after landing. This counterattack was in fact more than planned for, it was hoped for. The reality of 1940s weapon technology meant that dug-in and concealed defenders held an advantage over attacking forces moving in the open. From 1943 onward, Allied doctrine and training manuals taught that the key to defeating the German Army was to capture defensible terrain which the enemy would be compelled to counterattack.<sup>15</sup> When the infantry and armoured vehicles of XLVII Corps emerged from the safety of their fortified houses and dugouts, they would be destroyed by waiting Anglo-Canadian troops.

The problem with Second Army's plan was that even this late in the war, Allied numerical and material superiority only existed when parts of the front were thinned out to achieve concentration at a decisive point. Montgomery was able to concentrate overwhelming combat power in the Xanten-Wesel area by committing a much weaker XXX Corps against the main strength of First Parachute Army. Modern soldiers starkly refer to such endeavours as "economy of force" operations.



NAC PA 145737

9 Brigade crossing River Rhine west of Rees, 24 March 1945. Even though 51st Division controlled the far bank, the Canadians were still subjected to mortar and shellfire. The HLI crossed by amphibious "Buffalo" armoured carriers, while the SDG and NNSH riflemen crossed by stormboat as seen here. Support weapons travelled by Buffalo or engineer ferry.

On the night of 23 March, the "economy" XXX Corps began Operation Plunder. At first, 51st Highland Division experienced little difficulty when they landed and began to expand the bridgehead. However, the German reaction was every bit as strong and somewhat swifter than expected. Within hours Schlemm's paratroopers came alive to fiercely contest Scottish attempts to secure Rees and expand the bridgehead. A few hours later XLVII Panzer Corps sallied out of its bivouac areas into the counterattack.

The 15th Panzer Grenadier Division joined II Parachute Corps in a counterattack on the Highland bridgehead. The 115 Panzer Grenadier Regiment of 15th Division poured into the Bienen gap between the Rhine flood plain and Millinger Meer, joining two parachute regiments already fighting the Scots. The 104 Panzer Grenadier Regiment, joined 8th Parachute Division's counterattack south of Millinger Meer towards Rees.<sup>16</sup>

The arrival of these German reinforcements tipped the balance of strength against 51st Highland Division and signalled the start of the German counteroffensive. Unfortunately, the Scottish bridgehead was not yet large enough to

be effectively defended. Ferry and bridging sites near Rees were still under heavy shellfire from German artillery to the north and east, restricting the speed with which XXX Corps could build its combat power. To make matters worse, Millinger Meer is situated inside a great bend in the Rhine creating two bottlenecks of land which the Scots had to seize if the corps was to break out of the Rees pocket. Those two bottlenecks became plugged by three well-equipped and fully-manned German divisions. At the same time 116th Panzer Division attempted to slip south towards what the Germans by then identified as the main assault at the Diersfordter Wald across from Xanten.

In such circumstances 51st Highland Division could not shift to a defensive posture to grind up enemy counterattacks. Its very capacity to do so using large quantities of observed artillery fire was hampered by the narrowness of their bridgehead. Lack of depth and bridges meant supporting arms, ammunition and reserves were not present in sufficient quantity to kill Germans while keeping Allied costs low. There was also the matter of 116th Panzer's effort to escape XXX Corps' containment task. Although it was increasingly outnumbered, 51st Division's mission was clear,

it must attack. After inflicting heavy losses on German counterattacking forces early on 24 March, the Highland Division hurled itself at the line of fortified villages north of Rees. During this desperate fighting attack met counterattack and positions changed hands repeatedly.<sup>17</sup>

According to the original plan once the ground at both ends of Millinger Meer was secure, 9 Canadian Brigade would pass through and attack strong German forces in the Emmerich area. However, much of that enemy force had already marched to the sound of the guns to reinforce Bienen in the northern and more narrow of the two bottlenecks leading out of the Rees Pocket. Also, by midday on 24 March, 51st Highland Division was reaching the point of exhaustion. The divisional commander, Major-General Thomas Rennie, had expressed concern about the weakness of forces allotted to the Rees sector prior to Plunder. As if to confirm his apprehensions, a German mortar bomb killed him in his jeep after checking on the progress of his 152 Brigade in Rees.<sup>18</sup>

More pressing than Rennie's death was the situation at the road junction village of Speldrop on 154 Brigade's front. The 1st Black Watch reached the town at dawn, but were driven out by regimental-sized German counterattacks which left two platoons cut off. Several attempts to reach the beleaguered platoons were stopped with heavy losses from German machine gun, mortar and artillery fire. After the third attempt, the Black Watch were spent.

The other battalions in 154 Brigade, 7th Black Watch and 7th Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, were in no position to help as they took on the better part of a German division near Reeserward and Bienen.<sup>19</sup> The other two brigades of 51st Division were equally absorbed in a desperate fight to clear the southern bottleneck at Rees, forcing General Horrocks to commit the Canadians to help 154 Brigade. First into the fray were the Highland Light Infantry from Waterloo County, Ontario with orders to rescue the trapped Scottish platoons in Speldrop.<sup>20</sup>

The HLI, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel P.W. Strickland, received priority support from divisional field and corps medium artillery for their 1730 hours attack. However, as was the

case with every other fortified village attacked by Canadians since landing in Normandy, the unit first had to cross 1,000 yards of pancake-flat, exposed terrain. Supporting artillery concentrations reduced, but did not entirely stop, German machine gun, anti-aircraft gun and mortar crews from cutting down several Canadians during the approach. Nevertheless, the two leading HLI companies skilfully and quickly crossed the open ground and broke into the village.

Among those hit during the approach were all the platoon commanders in Major J.C. King's "B" Company, advancing on the northwest corner of the village. Lance-Sergeant C.J. Reidel picked up a Bren light machine gun, took command of the leading platoon, ordered them to fix bayonets, and charged an orchard strong-point dominating the company's line of advance. After the first ten of their number were killed, the remaining fifteen of the orchard's defenders surrendered. Several machine guns, 20 mm anti-aircraft guns, and three 75 mm infantry guns were captured in the orchard.

After Reidel's successful assault, Major King led the balance of the company into its objectives in Speldrop's north end. However, they immediately came under intense fire from three German tanks as well as a number of machine guns and rocket launchers sited in a cluster of fortified buildings beyond the company's assigned objective. "B" Company's orders were to secure a firm base for a follow-on company to pass through. Apparently realizing that his base was not yet secure, Major King called for the battalion's support weapons. Shortly thereafter, with a pair of Wasp flame-throwing vehicles, four 6-pounder anti-tank guns and two rifle platoons plastering the German positions, King's remaining platoon successfully stormed the fortified houses. For their "initiative" and "great personal courage" in securing the north end of Speldrop, L/Sgt. Reidel was awarded the Military Cross and Major King, the Distinguished Service Order.

Similar drive was demonstrated in the southeast corner of the village by Lieutenant George MacDonald. MacDonald's 8 Platoon led "A" Company's assault on the HLI right flank. Under covering fire from a section of carrier platoon Bren guns, MacDonald's men sprinted



Soldiers for the HLI relax in the village of Speldrop after the battle has been won.

into the house designated as their objective. Once inside the platoon was nearly obliterated by a half-dozen machine-guns in neighbouring houses and the fire of two German tanks. After every one of the platoon's non-commissioned officers were hit, MacDonald rallied the survivors and put down a strong base of rifle and Bren fire to cover an assault by the rest of "A" Company. MacDonald earned a Military Cross for his actions, although he died two days later.

With the outer crust penetrated, "C" and "D" Companies passed through to press the assault home. The HLI War Diary described resistance inside Speldrop as "fanatical." By midnight the battalion still only held part of the town. German paratroops fiercely contested every house and often launched individual suicide attacks on advancing Canadians. Many of the defenders were burned out of their defences by Wasps. During the night-long street battle, the HLI also made much use of grenades and bayonets.<sup>21</sup> The strength, firepower, and tenacity demonstrated by the Germans in Speldrop was merely a taste of what was to come.

The Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders from eastern Ontario were next to

cross into the bridgehead at 1100 hours. They were followed by Brigadier R.M "Rocky" Rockingham's headquarters at 1345 hours and the North Nova Scotia Highlanders at 1600 hours. General Horrocks limited Rockingham's ability to coordinate his brigade's deployment by ordering the Canadian battalions into the battle piecemeal to relieve 154 Brigade.

Coordination was further jeopardized by the pressing need to get ferry and bridging sites out of artillery range. Rockingham experienced this necessity first-hand when his armoured command car rolled off a ferry straight into an accurate German shell concentration on the river bank. Remarkably, no one was injured. Despite these pressures, Rockingham's staff made plans to formally relieve 154 Brigade at last light and to take control of the battle in the north bottleneck.

In the afternoon of 24 March the SDGs, or "Glens" as they were known, received orders to relieve 7th Black Watch on the far left flank. That unit fought off counterattacks all day and was unable to press beyond the collection of farms known as Reeserward. The 7th Argylls faced similar problems in front of Bienen. At great cost



NAC PA 130232, courtesy of T. Robert Fowler

Brigadier J.M. Rockingham, who was awarded the bar to the Distinguished Service Order for his actions in the Rhine bridgehead, confers with officers of the 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade and the Royal Canadian Engineers, XX March 1945.

the Argylls fought their way into a farm 150 yards from the edge of town, but all attempts to move beyond it were stopped. They were to be relieved as soon as possible by the North Nova Scotia Highlanders. However, the Glens and the North Novas were still crossing the Rhine when the new orders were issued.<sup>22</sup> They would not be available to effect the relief until well after dark. Movement efforts were further hampered by incessant heavy German shelling.

The arrival of two fresh Canadian battalions did not significantly alter the force ratio on this flank which still heavily favoured the enemy. German 16 and 24 Parachute Regiments, 115 Panzer Grenadier Regiment and bits and pieces of other units almost the equivalent of a fourth regiment occupied this narrow corridor. Each German battalion fielded 500 to 600 combatants and was liberally equipped with 40 machine guns and ten 81 mm mortars each when they began the battle that morning. In support the Germans could also call on a platoon of assault guns and a battery of six heavy 120 mm mortars in Bienen as well as field artillery batteries near Millingen. These forces doubtlessly suffered losses during the intense fighting on 24 March, but at sunset they still controlled the narrow

bottleneck with most of their heavy weapons intact.<sup>23</sup>

As the HLI discovered in Speldrop, terrain conditions magnified the enemy's force ratio advantage. In the flat, featureless topography found throughout 9 Brigade's area, villages were the decisive high ground. From the many two, and sometimes three story stone houses found in those villages, German infantry and artillery fire controllers easily observed and dominated the ground around them for thousands of yards. Furthermore, the level countryside enabled the numerous German machine guns to fire at extreme ranges of up to 1,500 yards, maximizing their effectiveness while limiting the ability of Canadian artillery observers to locate and engage them.

The Germans defending those villages were extremely well-motivated considering their homeland was collapsing all around them. First Parachute Army received Germany's last fresh draft of replacements several weeks before the battle. These were not old men, but teenagers newly-turned 17 or 18, most with Hitler Youth exposure to military training and Nazi ideology. They fleshed out divisions broken in the late

winter fighting, but which still possessed a strong core of trained and experienced officers and NCOs who promptly whipped the new recruits into shape.<sup>24</sup>

Brigadier Rockingham planned to advance into the bottleneck with two battalions abreast on the morning of 25 March. The Glens would advance on the left starting from the last position of 7th Black Watch on the bend in the road at Reeserward. They were to attack 2,500 yards northwards to a series of points beyond Grietherbusch and in line with Bienen. In the centre, the North Novas were to advance into Bienen using the farm, held by the 7th Argylls, as their startline. The ground on the right near Androp would not be attacked because, for the moment, two battalions were all that could be spared. When the plan was conceived the HLI were still engaged at Speldrop. During the night of 24/25 March the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment from 8 Brigade crossed into the bridgehead under Rockingham's command, but it would be after sun-up before they would be in a position to assist.

With Horrocks pressuring the brigade to get the crossing sites out of artillery range, there was no time to waste waiting for luxuries like reserves or reconnaissance. The best Rockingham could hope for was that the HLI and the North Shores would be available later on the 25th to breakout of the "bottleneck" after enemy forces defending the Bienen "cork" were destroyed. To support their attack, the Glens and North Novas would have their own heavy weapons, plus additional medium machine gun and 4.2-inch mortar detachments from the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa, as well as towed and self-propelled anti-tank guns from 94th Battery, 3rd Canadian Anti-Tank Regiment. A single troop of British duplex-drive Sherman tanks of the Essex Yeomanry would accompany the North Novas. Indirect artillery support would come from the 25-pounders of 14th Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery.

The Glens' unloaded and assembled first, as they had farther to travel to reach their

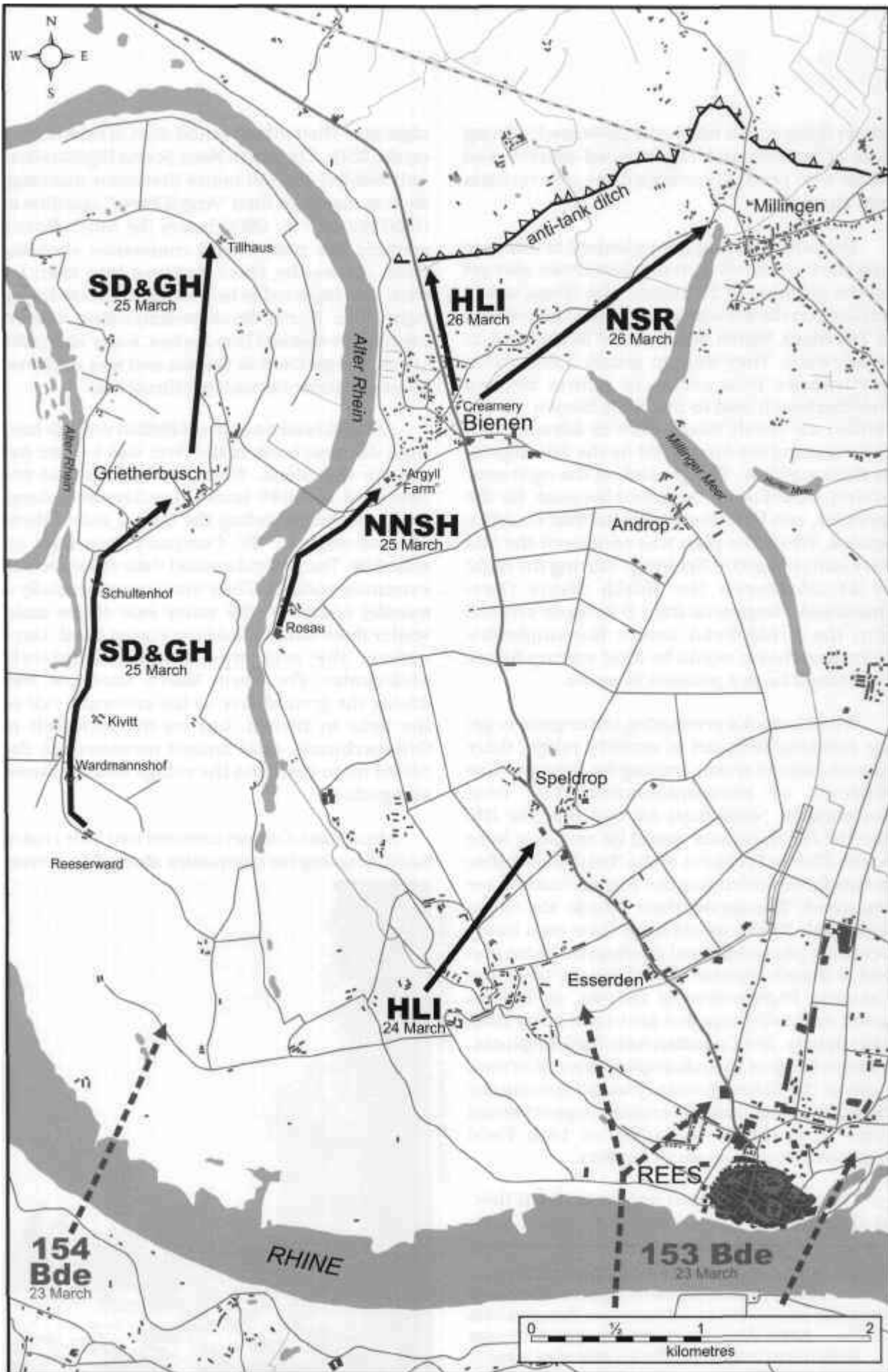
HLI Jeep Ambulance in Speldrop 24 March 1945. These nimble vehicles allowed the rapid evacuation of wounded soldiers and saved many lives throughout the battle. Also note the brick houses. All houses encountered in the Rees-Bienen area were made of concrete, brick or stone, providing strong protection to German defenders.

objective. Their attack would start at 0640 hours on the 25th. The North Nova Scotia Highlanders, only briefed at 0530 hours that same morning, were to march to their "Argyll Farm" startline at 0700 hours.<sup>25</sup> At 0900 hours the North Nova's artillery fire plan would commence shooting them across the short distance into town for what was expected to be a tough house-to-house fight. The North Nova commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Don Forbes, knew about the size of the garrison in Bienen and was under no illusions about his unit's difficult task.<sup>26</sup>

At 0630 hours a salvo of British rockets fired from the west bank of the river was to pave the way for the Glens. When the rockets had not appeared by 0640 hours, Lieutenant-Colonel Gemmel, commanding the Glens, called them off and ordered "D" Company to attack on schedule. The ground around their objective was extremely sodden. Their area was essentially a marshy island on the water side of the main winter dyke built to hold the spring flood. Days before, the area was almost completely underwater. The warm March sunshine was drying the ground fast on the eastward side of the dyke in Bienen, but on the approach to Grietherbusch, mud limited movement to the raised main road into the village and the farms alongside it.

Lieutenant-Colonel Gemmel had little choice but to leapfrog his companies along this narrow





Map drawn by Mike Bechtold ©2003

**Canadian Operations in the Rhine Bridgehead**

frontage securing each of the farm complexes in turn. By 0715 hours "D" Company secured Kivitt Farm. After working forward carefully and winking out two German prisoners, "C" Company reported Schultenhof Farm clear at 0800 hours. About this time the German defenders made their presence felt by shelling Schultenhof Farm and its approaches just as "B" company moved up to take the lead. No one was injured in the barrage, although shell fragments perforated one of the company's PIAT anti-tank weapons.

When Major Peterson's "B" Company resumed their advance beyond Schultenhof Farm sometime between 0800 hours and 0900 hours, German sappers of 15th Panzer-Grenadier Division's Engineer Battalion came to life. The German engineers easily dominated the narrow raised road area with machine gun fire. All attempts by "B" Company to manoeuvre were checked. At 0900 hours Gemmel learned that Peterson was wounded and that the advance had stalled.<sup>27</sup>

### First Attempt at Bienen

Meanwhile, the North Nova Scotia Highlanders moved forward on schedule at 0700 hours. At 0745 hours, Lieutenant-Colonel Forbes established his tactical headquarters near a great windmill at Rosau Farm. The battalion's 3-inch mortar platoon and attached Cameron heavy mortars set up behind the farm while the rifle companies formed up to advance. Major Don Learment's "A" Company would take the lead, followed by Captain Jack Fairweather's "B" Company.

At 0815 hours the lead companies set off in single file along the west side of the dyke. Compared with the flat ground around Bienen, this ten-foot high dyke was a significant terrain feature which shielded the battalion's right flank. The North Novas hoped the Glens could protect their left. They hoped too that their "Argyll Farm" startline was secure. With so much pressure to push on there had been no time to confirm either of these matters.

When the ripping sound of German MG 42 machine guns began, Learment's lead platoon

Lieutenant-Colonel D.F. Forbes, DSO, Commanding Officer of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders.

was scrambling over the intersection of the dyke and the road to Grietherbusch, a few hundred yards short of Argyll Farm. Bullets lashed at their exposed flank and knocked down several men in 7 Platoon. The fire that stopped the SDGs came from the same place and began around the same time the North Novas reached the level road crossing.

Major Learment's immediate reaction was to rush his men over the dyke to escape the withering fire, but when they reached the crest they met equally strong machine gun and sniper fire from the south and east. On top of the dyke the company found a partially completed trench and bunker system running dozens of yards in both directions. Learment's men dropped into it just as German mortar bombs began to rain down.

Behind "A" Company, Jack Fairweather's men fared little better. When the firing started only their lead platoon was pinned, thankfully with no one hit. Fairweather had his men dig in against the bank while the forward artillery observers laid on a fire mission. A quickly-planned smoke and high explosive artillery barrage was to cover both companies as they bolted over the dyke and into the farm. Everyone

Courtesy of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders Regimental Museum



involved still fully intended to be at the startline for H-hour at 0900 hours.

When the 25-pounders of 14th Field opened fire, "A" Company leapt out of the long trench and ran like the devil for the protection of Argyll Farm now plainly in sight dozens of yards away.<sup>28</sup> Several hundred yards behind, in "B" Company's positions, word of the hasty plan failed to reach 10 Platoon and part of 12 Platoon. When the shelling started only half of the company crossed. On the other side they faced intense machine gun fire from Androp as well as a German counter-barrage of mortars and artillery. Those who did cross promptly dove into whatever cover they could find.

Androp, situated on the edge of Millinger Meer, was defended by 24 Parachute Regiment manning dug-in machine gun emplacements.<sup>29</sup> Those positions lay 1,000 to 1,500 metres east of Argyll Farm and were thus able to put long range machine gun fire onto any movement in that area. However, Androp was not the greatest concern facing the lead North Nova companies.

When "A" Company reached Argyll Farm they found their startline anything but secure. Remnants of an exhausted 7th Argyll company were clinging to some of the houses in the complex but the others were lost during a strong German counterattack just before dawn. As H-Hour fast approached, the Novas found themselves fighting to secure the startline.

The Nova Scotians had to clear the farm fast if they were to meet their 0900 hours timing. Lieutenant Bob Hart's 7 Platoon, already weakened from its experience at the dyke-road crossing, rose to the occasion. Hart personally charged into one house and came under fire from a position to its left. One of Hart's Bren gunners, Private P.A. Sidney spotted the Germans firing on his platoon leader and ran toward them blazing away with his Bren gun to keep their heads down. Upon reaching his prey he loudly demanded their surrender at which point 19 dumbfounded German paratroopers filed back towards battalion headquarters with their hands in the air.<sup>30</sup>

At 0845 hours 14th Field Regiment began lobbing smoke and high explosive shells on the south edge of Bienen. "A" Company formed up

to assault on the right but B' Company was still pinned down further back. Forbes asked Fairweather by radio if his company could close the distance to the startline under the pre-H-Hour smokescreen. Fairweather, under intense fire and still unaware that half his men were on the other side of the dyke, responded that he could. Unfortunately, the Canadian barrage only "dampened" the machine gun fire from Bienen and did nothing to suppress the fire from Androp. When Fairweather's men hustled to the farm some were picked off, others went to ground under the incessant machine gun fire. By the time they made it to the startline the company was only 26 strong, and its ordeal was just beginning.

The two companies emerged from the relative safety of Argyll Farm into a killing zone. Bienen was defended by elements of 115 Panzer Grenadier Regiment, 16 Parachute Regiment, and a company from 18 Parachute Regiment. Although probably reduced in strength, these units possessed dozens of machine guns and most certainly outnumbered and outgunned the two understrength North Nova companies which barely mustered 85 men each when the battle began.<sup>31</sup>

Fairweather's company barely passed the farm when two German self-propelled guns at the edge of town began hurling high explosive shells at them. Of the three Essex tanks that made their way to the farm, one bogged in soft ground, another was holed by a German self-propelled gun and the third withdrew. Fairweather saw it was utter madness to press on in these conditions. He reported to Forbes at 0905 hours that he was barely beyond the startline, out of contact with two platoons, pinned down, and losing men. With "B" Company absorbing most of the German fire, "A" Company advanced somewhat further before they were stopped by the maelstrom of flying metal. Learment too could see the attack was futile until a new fire plan could be arranged, but his order to withdraw to the farm failed to reach 8 Platoon which was almost at the forward German trenches.<sup>32</sup>

The first attack stalled, but not in the way that C.P. Stacey's Official History suggests. The dogged determination of the two lead companies to launch their attack as planned, despite

impossible odds and without time to properly plan and reconnoitre, implies a high level of combat motivation among all ranks. Then, rather than sit idle or withdraw to safer ground when the attack stopped, platoon and company commanders demonstrated tactical skill and professionalism by collecting and positioning heavy weapons and ammunition. With great difficulty and under a huge weight of fire, the North Novas transformed Argyll Farm into a secure, if highly dangerous, firebase and jump-off point for further action.

What made the situation so difficult was the proximity of Argyll Farm to Bienen. The main German positions were close enough to pour accurate fire into the farm complex as well as anyone venturing north. These machine gun positions were located in strong stone, brick, and concrete houses and reinforced with overhead protection. They were nearly impervious to all but direct hits by medium or heavy shells. Unfortunately, there was not enough medium artillery to go around during Plunder. On 25 March, the few medium regiments spared for XXX Corps' economy role were busy supporting 51st Highland Division in the Rees bottleneck and in long-range air-observed shoots on columns of 116th Panzer Division as it attempted to move southward. The North Nova Scotia Highlanders had to rely on the 25-pounders of 14th Field that day, and even those had a limited number of shells to commit to the Canadian battle.<sup>33</sup>

The short distance between the startline and the farm also made it difficult for artillery observers or mortar fire controllers to put their heads up long enough to adjust the fire on the multitude of muzzle blasts coming from the front. With wounded Canadians lying at the edge of town, absolute precision was all the more necessary. The fighting was now too close for the guns to provide real suppression of the German line. Any Canadian soldier present near Bienen would also take great exception to suggestions that German industry was no longer able to adequately supply the Nazi war machine. Throughout the fighting German defenders were never short of small-arms, mortar, or artillery ammunition.<sup>34</sup>

After the first assault halted Lieutenant-Colonel Forbes organized a new fireplan and a new attack by "A" and "B" Companies. At 0920 hours he ordered Captain Fairweather and Major Learment to reorganize their sub-units for another attempt to break into the first row of houses. Forbes continued to hold back "C" and "D" Companies so they would be fresh for the next phase. Brigade's last orders were to destroy the defenders in Bienen and move beyond the town. Forbes could not count on help any time soon and would therefore need at least two full companies for the expected house-to-house battle in town.

Perhaps Lieutenant-Colonel Forbes felt the two lead companies would have a better chance

9 Brigade Headquarters near Esserden, Germany 25 March 1945. Brigadier R.M. Rockingham stands in the centre with his back to the house. The concrete block construction of the house was typical of structures in the area, making each one a strong-point.



Photo by Donald I. Grant/NAC PA 137735

making those few short yards to the town now that the startline was firmly in Canadian hands. The task would also be made easier by putting down a smoke and high explosive artillery concentration on Androp during the assault. It was up to Fairweather and Learment to reorganize and report back to Forbes when their companies were ready to go. That report never arrived.

The six platoons of North Nova rifleman scattered in and around Argyll Farm now had the full attention of every weapon the Germans could bring to bear. Artillery, mortars and machine guns targeted any attempt to move outside the protection of the farm or even on its front edge. Counter-battery efforts were non-existent as the guns and aircraft normally used for such missions were focussed on the main assault by XII Corps and the airborne forces.

The North Nova anti-tank platoon made several valiant attempts to position their guns at the forward edge of Argyll Farm to provide direct gunfire support, but the movement of the towed 6-pounder anti-tank guns and their tracked carriers only increased the intensity of enemy fire. The platoon was unable to get a single gun into action.<sup>35</sup> The bottom line was, with the inadequate firepower available to them in this close-in shootout, the North Novas could not win the firefight.

Two "A" Company attempts to rescue 8 Platoon under cover of 25-pounder smoke met with failure and more dead and wounded men. In the end, only the platoon leader and one other man made it back to the farm, both wounded. Likewise, attempts to assemble "B" Company met with limited success. Both companies lost a platoon commander and several NCOs, contributing to a further breakdown in control. By mid-morning, Fairweather still only mustered 30 men from three platoons, although between them they possessed all company heavy weapons including Brens, two-inch mortars, and PIATs. These would soon come in handy.

At 1030 hours Fairweather and Learment were still attempting to assemble isolated platoons under the noses of enemy machine guns firing at ranges which made it difficult to miss. When Brigadier Rockingham came forward to

Forbes' HQ at 1145 hours, "A" and "B" Companies were still scattered and pinned by fire described in the usually stoic war diary language as "murderous." Forbes proposed to his Brigadier that the unit start "from scratch" with a new attack by his two fresh companies. Rockingham agreed and while he had no additional infantry battalion to offer as yet, he was able to direct a flight of Typhoons on Millingen in the direction of the hostile artillery. He also scrounged up another troop of Shermans from the British 4/7th Dragoon Guards.<sup>36</sup>

## The Glens in Grietherbusch

More importantly, the Brigadier provided some badly needed coordination with the Glens in Grietherbusch. The new North Nova attack would not be made until 1430 hours. In the meantime, 14th Field Regiment turned its attention to destroying machine gun posts blocking Lieutenant-Colonel Gemmel's advance. The narrow dry axis of advance now hindered the Germans as much as it did the Glens that morning, for it enabled accurate and concentrated shooting by the Canadian guns.

Captain John Dure's "D" Company took over the lead for the push into Grietherbusch. As had been the case in Speldrop the day before, even the most accurate artillery could only suppress German machine gun and mortar fire during the approach. When the shell concentrations lifted as the distance to the objective closed, the Glens still had to fight their way into German-held trenches and houses with section and platoon leaders making the most of their tactical skills.

The lifting Canadian barrage brought a renewal of German machine gun and mortar fire which forced Dure's leading platoon to ground. Leaving his pinned platoon on the main road as a fire base, Captain Dure led the remainder of "D" Company in a "text-book" left flanking attack. In the face of intense fire from his front and from the north, Dure's men smashed their way into the German engineer battalion's position, killing 14 and capturing 22 more. By noon, Grietherbusch was in Canadian hands. Lieutenant-Colonel Forbes' left flank was now secure enough to get on with the job of clearing Bienen.<sup>37</sup>

## The Clearing of Bienen

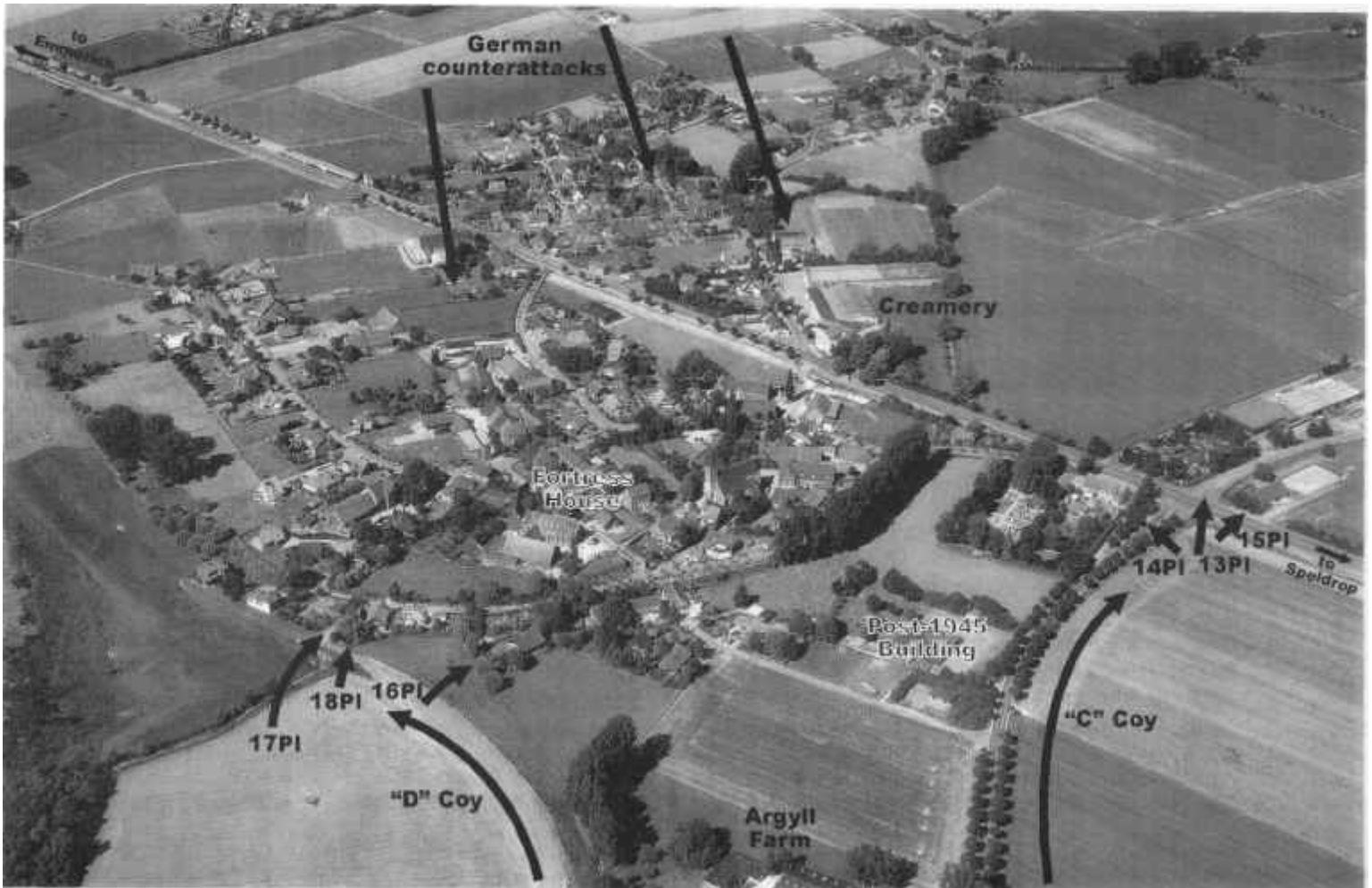
Unlike the first attack, the new North Nova assault was planned in detail taking into consideration valuable intelligence paid for that morning with "A" and "B" Companies' blood. It was now appreciated that the strength of German defences along the south edge of town and the presence of wounded North Novas lying in the grass in front of them, made it impossible to suppress enemy machine guns. Instead, 14th Field would focus on suspected mortar positions inside and behind the town, and on providing smoke to conceal the Canadian advance. Typhoons would take on heavier gun positions near Millingen.

The right flank at Androp would be neutralized by North Nova 3-inch mortars combined with Cameron Vickers machine guns and heavy 4.2-inch mortars firing smoke and high explosive bombs. Direct fire support would come from Argyll Farm, where at H-Hour, Fairweather and Learment would have what was

left of their companies open up on Bienen with everything they had. The two surviving Essex tanks would move up to add their 75 mm guns and machine guns to the firebase. It was also hoped this renewed attempt to win the firefight in front of Bienen would convince the Germans that another frontal assault was about to go in. In fact, Forbes had other ideas.

Forbes' plan was to take advantage of his secure left and the winter dyke by moving Major Dave Dickson's "D" Company to the west edge of town by slipping it up the left side of the dyke in the minutes before H-Hour. Major Lloyd Winhold's "C" Company would form up behind Argyll Farm. At H-Hour Winhold's men would attack parallel to and south of the Grietherbusch-Bienen road, towards the main intersection at the southeast corner of town. This move required the company to cross 500 yards of flat open terrain, but Forbes banked on the Germans expecting another frontal attack and not a dangerous sweep to the south. If the smoke screen was thick enough, "C" Company might

## Bienen - Dispositions for the 1430 hours NNSH attack on modern air photo



just make it into the houses at the intersection before the Germans smelled a threat. The 4/7th Dragoons Shermans and Carrier Platoon's Wasps would accompany Winhold's men in intimate support.<sup>38</sup>

Lieutenant-Colonel Forbes briefed Majors Dickson and Winhold, together with the supporting arms commanders, at 1300 hours. Also present was General Horrocks who impressed on those present the need to deliver the attack quickly and to "succeed at all costs," in order to put an end to German shelling of the Corps rear areas and bridging sites. One can only guess what was running through Forbes' mind listening to this pep talk after four hours of trying, without heavy guns, to bash through an enemy with at least twice his firepower sitting comfortably in concrete and stone emplacements.

With great haste Dickson and Winhold prepared their companies for the assault. Both moved up the west side of the dyke from Battalion HQ at Rosau towards Argyll Farm. This time, with the Glens controlling the left, the ten-foot high dyke provided a greater measure of concealment and protection. Fifteen minutes before H-Hour at 1430 hours the mortars, under North Nova Mortar Platoon leader Captain Webber, started hitting Androp while 14th Field smoked off the front of town and pounded the centre and rear with high explosive. "A" and "B" Companies and the Essex Shermans added Bren, rifle, 2-inch mortar, .30-inch Browning and 75 mm fire to the front of town, soliciting the expected vicious German response.

Under this covering fire, Winhold's "C" Company hurried across the dyke level-crossing and in behind Argyll Farm where they proceeded to form up with the Dragoon Guards tanks and Wasps. Dickson's men continued along the west side of the dyke in single file. Lieutenant G.L. Monkley's 17 Platoon led, followed by Lieutenant Ron Boyce's 18 Platoon, company headquarters and Lieutenant Donald Pearce's 16 Platoon, making its way all the way up to a culvert under the dyke.



courtesy of the Honourable D.M. Dickson

Major D.M. Dickson and his wife Lorna in England before D-Day, May 1944.

At H-Hour two platoons, mustering just over 50 men between them, would rush over the dyke into the first line of houses backing onto it. Monkley's platoon on the left would take the houses near a small pathway leading down the dyke into town. Pearce's platoon on the right was to dash across a short open stretch into buildings closer to the front edge of town. After allowing a few minutes to secure those houses, Boyce's platoon, Dickson's headquarters group and the FOO party would follow them over to consolidate the houses and organize an advance into town. At the suggestion of Company Sergeant-Major Harry Bishop, Dickson designated a small "left out of battle" (LOB) party of approximately 15 men to stay on the safe side of the dyke. The group was made up of men the CSM observed were not fully recovered from battle exhaustion after the bitter fighting in the Rhineland campaign and some of the battalion's first batch of conscripted replacements or "Zombies." The latter spent the previous two weeks training and integrating themselves into the unit, but Bishop was still reluctant to give them their first taste of battle in such a difficult action. The other conventional purposes served by LOB parties were to provide a reserve force or a core of men around which to rebuild the company should it be destroyed.

Tragically, CSM Bishop's foresight proved necessary. The Germans in Bienen were unable to fire on the Novas as they assembled behind the dyke, but their positions further north alerted them to the threat. At 1430 hours "D" Company charged over the top into a boiling hell. Pearce's platoon melted. Ten of the small band of 25 men were struck by bullets before they were off the dyke. The remainder dove into a shallow depression in the ground just beyond the base of the dyke.

The depression offered scant protection. One man after another was hit by bullets or blown apart with grenades hurled from German trenches only a few feet to the front and by machine guns in a large three-story fortified

house a several dozen yards away. Pearce's Bren gunners took aim and died with their shoulders to their weapons. Bedlam reached a climax when the Germans began firing Panzerfaust anti-tank rockets into 16 Platoon at point-blank range. This put Private G.P. Cameron over the edge. He stood up calmly, removed two No.36 grenades from his webbing and walked towards the German trench. The astonished Germans failed to cut him down as he calmly walked forward and dropped the grenades into the trench before turning around. The blast killed four Panzer-Grenadiers and wounded three others. Cameron was shot in the back as he returned to the depression filled with 16 Platoon dead and dying.

Monkley's platoon also lost men as it stormed over the dyke into a crossfire of machine guns, but they had less ground to cover and were out of the line of sight of the huge fortress house. They managed to kick their way into the houses with grenades, sten gun bursts, and bayonets killing most of the occupants except 11 who surrendered. A further 90 Germans spilled out of neighbouring houses with their hands held high.

On the other side of the dyke, Major Dickson waited impatiently for his artillery FOO. The FOO's radio operator arrived, but the gunner officer was nowhere to be found. When the time came for the second wave to cross the dyke, Dickson sent Boyce's 18 Platoon on alone. He would follow as soon as the FOO arrived. Dickson felt that to go without him would be foolhardy as the company would need close artillery support to complete its mission of advancing deeper into town and of destroying the inevitable counterattacks.

Boyce's platoon clambered over the dyke to assist Monkley at the houses near the footpath. The German defenders, awakened to the potential collapse of their right flank, poured everything they had onto the "D" Company toehold. Vast numbers of machine guns combined with a mortar barrage acted like a wrecking-crew on the houses occupied by the company, shredding shingles and boards, grinding bricks to dust, and hitting more North Novas.

On the right only Pearce and four others from 16 Platoon could still move. Pearce ordered them

to make a break for the dyke after Private Cameron's sacrifice lessened the volume of fire pounding them. When they got up to run, three more were mowed down. Only Pearce and one other man made it back. Boyce also returned to the west bank of the dyke to report that 17 and 18 Platoons had suffered heavy losses and were holding on by their fingernails. In the few minutes since H-Hour, almost half the company was killed or wounded. The situation was especially desperate after 16 Platoon disintegrated on the right and the full attention of the fortress house turned to the remainder of the company.

Rather than wait any longer for the FOO, Dickson played the only card he had. He ordered the LOB party to follow him over the dyke to reinforce the company position. The artillery radio operator, Bombardier Robert Muir, was to lead the FOO over as soon as he arrived. Pearce would also stay behind. Having his entire platoon wiped out before his eyes, he could fight no longer. No one could begrudge him the rest.

Dickson and Boyce gathered the group at the foot of the dyke. With Dickson in the lead they then charged into the battle. As the company commander reached the top of the dyke, he paused to urge his troops on. As he did so he was struck in the abdomen by a bullet which passed through his body, throwing him to the ground. As Boyce and others following closely behind stopped to check on their leader, Dickson quietly urged them to keep moving on. Boyce then led the reinforcements into the main "D" Company position and took vengeance on the sniper.

Dickson customarily carried his pipe tobacco can inside his battledress jacket. The bullet which struck him first passed through the tin, possibly deflecting it enough to avoid hitting his spine as it exited through a gaping hole in his back. Nonetheless, as he lay on top of the dyke with bullets and mortar bombs landing all around him he prepared, with waning strength, for the end. One of Monkley's section commanders, Sergeant Edison Smith ran back over the dyke to contact the tanks and Wasps back at the Argyll Farm firebase. A mortar bomb exploded as he reached the top of the dyke heaving his broken body on top of Dickson and then down the slope.

With life fast pouring from his wound Dickson pulled out a picture of his wife and family. The movement was spotted by the sharp eye of Bombardier Muir, the artillery signaller, still waiting for the FOO. The sturdy gunner scrambled up the dyke to drag the giant 6'3" major down the side and out of harm's way. There Muir turned him over to two North Novas who had both suffered arm wounds. Together they half-carried, half-dragged Dickson's limp body several hundred yards till they met Private Daniel Shank's jeep ambulance. Lieutenant-Colonel Forbes stopped the jeep as it passed battalion headquarters to question Dickson on the status of his company. In his half-conscious state, the young major was only able to respond that his men had "done their best against the bastards." At the time, neither officer could fully comprehend what "D" Company's actions had accomplished.<sup>39</sup>

At this drama played out along the dyke, Lloyd Winhold's "C" Company made its way towards the main intersection at the southeast corner of town. This axis required a much longer and exposed approach march than "D" Company's, but everyone hoped the circuitous route would avoid the pre-registered kill zones that prevented all attempts by the 7th Argylls and then "A" and "B" companies to get into the front edge of town. This ground also better lent itself to the employment of the armoured vehicles.

The rifle platoons moved off in arrowhead formation at 25-yard intervals with Lieutenant Bill Myers' 15 Platoon in the lead, followed by Lieutenant Roper's 13 Platoon, and Winhold's headquarters group. The three Dragoon Guards tanks came next, followed by the Wasp sections and Lieutenant James MacDonald's 14 Platoon. The self-propelled anti-tank guns of 94th Battery brought up the rear. The smoke screen intended to shield Winhold's men from the right and left would last only five minutes after H-Hour in front of Bienen so the company would have to move fast.

Once the battlegroup moved out from the cover of the Argyll Farm it was clear that the mortar smoke and medium machine gun suppression on Androp was working well, but the artillery smoke on Bienen was dissipating too quickly. As the "C" Company force stretched out across the field, machine guns in Bienen

opened fire. Winhold ordered everyone to make a run for the objective while he called for more mortar smoke. Men began to **fall**, but the company pressed on knowing that to stop without any cover would be suicide.

In response Captain Webber's mortar crews poured 200 smoke bombs onto Bienen in four minutes, creating what Webber later called "a beautiful screen." Winhold then climbed aboard the 4/7th troop leader's tank and directed them to traverse their turrets left and blast Bienen with all their weapons. In the rear of the column Sergeant George Stewart took over 14 Platoon after fellow Prince Edward Islander James MacDonald was brought down. From his position Stewart could see several machine guns firing on the head of the column. He ran towards the enemy ordering a section to follow. After siting the section in a protected fire position from which it could take on the German MGs, Stewart ran back through a hail of bullets to rejoin his platoon.

Under this covering fire, Bill Myers and his men raced for the Speldrop-Bienen road. By the time the platoon crossed the road to assault the house on the other side, only eight men were left. As they rushed across a German officer stepped out of the house and shot Myers before he too was cut down. Myers' determination and unflinching encouragement to his men earned him the Military Cross, but the German bullet paralyzed him for life.

Platoon Sergeant J. Propokchuk, shot through both legs, dragged himself across the road using his rifle as a crutch to aid his wounded platoon leader and to urge the men on to finish the job. Private H.P. Christie took over the remaining seven men as they stormed the house. His body was found with his hand on the barrel of an MG 42. Three other Canadians lay dead behind him.

Roper's 13 Platoon followed the seven into the houses around the northeast corner clearing out numerous machine gun posts and consolidating the hard won gains of Myers's men. In the northwest corner, the remaining two sections in Sergeant Stewart's Platoon waded into a German trench system in and around the cemetery. "C" Company routed out some 100 prisoners as they consolidated their hold on the crossroads.



Two surviving Duplex Drive Sherman tanks pass the third of their troop "brewed-up" by a mine south of Speldrop, 24 March 1945. The Essex Yeomanry, equipped with DD Shermans, supported Scottish and Canadian units during the initial stages of Operation Plunder. Also note the flat, exposed terrain easily dominated by reinforced, multi-story houses.

At 1445 hours, a scant 15 minutes after starting its 500-yard dash, "C" Company was in Bienen at a cost of eight dead and 24 wounded.<sup>40</sup> Five minutes later Lieutenant-Colonel Forbes learned "D" Company was also in, with 18 dead and 23 wounded, including Major Dickson. This ratio of dead to wounded would certainly have been worse were it not for stretcher-bearers Gordon Scott and Daniel Shanks who repeatedly drove their jeep ambulances along the lethal dyke and through the field until they had recovered all the wounded. During those 20 minutes the Wasp flame-throwing vehicles, suggested by the Official History to be a key to the success of the second attack, all broke down or were damaged by German fire and never engaged the enemy.<sup>41</sup>

Not about to lose momentum again, Forbes ordered Captain Fairweather and Major Learment to take their reorganized companies into the cauldron to help root out diehard Nazis. "B" Company moved up on the left and began to clear houses on the road leading towards the dyke. The Essex Yeomanry DD Shermans accompanied them in close support, brewing up buildings to the front and right while

Fairweather's men worked their way house-by-house towards the beleaguered "D" Company.

This movement drew the attention of Germans in the fortress house who shifted some of their fire off "D" Company and on to the new threat. Fairweather had the tanks fire into the upper stories while 10 Platoon burst in on the main floor with weapons blazing. Several Germans were cut down before those remaining on the ground floor surrendered, but the balance of the house's defenders began firing down through the floor at 10 Platoon. The Essex tanks and 12 Platoon closed up to the fortress house and laced the upper two stories with rifle, Bren, grenade and tank fire while 10 Platoon shot back through the floors. The vertical battle lasted several minutes with men yelling frantically as they emptied magazines through the walls and floor and hurled grenades through windows and up stairwells. According to the North Nova regimental history, the German defenders cried "uncle" to indicate that they had had enough.

The riflemen of 10 Platoon crept carefully up the stairs on the alert for German suicide attacks. In the upper stories they found 50 dead

# The Bienen Tablet

On 19 November 2000, the day which marks *Volkstrauertag* (the German equivalent of Remembrance Day), a bronze tablet was unveiled at Bienen, Germany, in a widely attended public ceremony. The plaque is mounted on a stone wall bordering the attractive courtyard of the Roman Catholic Church of St. Cosmas and Damien whose origins at the same location in the centre of town, date back some eleven centuries.

The inscription on the plaque is in German, translated from the original English draft which reads as follows:



THIS TABLET HAS BEEN PLACED BY A GROUP OF SURVIVING CANADIAN VETERANS OF THE NORTH NOVA SCOTIA HIGHLANDERS, 3 CANADIAN INFANTRY DIVISION, IN PROUD AND GRATEFUL MEMORY OF THOSE FORTY MEMBERS OF THEIR REGIMENT WHO FELL IN BATTLE AT BIENEN, GERMANY ON SUNDAY, MARCH 25, 1945 AND IN MEMORY OF THOSE FELLOW COMBATANTS OF 9 CANADIAN INFANTRY (HIGHLAND) BRIGADE AND 51 BRITISH HIGHLAND DIVISION WHO DIED IN THE SAME BATTLE AND IN THE SAME CAUSE AND, AS WELL, IN RESPECTFUL MEMORY OF THOSE ADVERSARIES IN THE GERMAN ARMY WHO DIED ON THAT SAME FATEFUL DAY.

AT THE GOING DOWN OF THE SUN,  
AND IN THE MORNING

WE WILL REMEMBER THEM.

ERRECTED AT BIENEN ON THE 55TH  
ANNIVERSARY OF THE EVENT, IN THE  
YEAR 2000.

The late Don Forbes, who landed as second-in-command of the North Novas in Normandy on D-Day and who commanded the battalion from July of 1944 to the end of the war, had in an article published in the summer of 1945 described Bienen as "probably the most important operation performed by the Battalion and as one whose effect on the operations of XXX Corps was far-reaching."

This project was launched by several North Nova Bienen veterans in November 1999. It was financed exclusively by small private subscriptions. A brief exchange of correspondence shortly gained the approval, confidence, assistance and support of a local heritage group at Bienen and of the Burgemeister and Municipal Council of the City of Rees - with which Bienen has amalgamated. Within six months the plaque, after preparation in record time at a foundry in Lunenburg, NS, had been taken to Europe by a detachment of sailors from HMCS *Montreal* and had been presented to the Burgemeister at Rees. Actual placement and unveiling of the tablet was postponed to November to allow for restoration of the courtyard which was then underway and to accommodate other associated activities.

The tablet is unique in a number of ways. Firstly, it was at the time of unveiling one of only a few - and possibly the only - memorial located within Germany marking the location of an engagement in that country by Allied land forces in the Second World War. Secondly, there are probably few, if any, memorials anywhere which, like this plaque, recognize the war-dead of a wartime adversary. We are now, almost 60 years later, the ally and friend of Germany and our soldiers now frequently find themselves serving beside those in her forces in peacekeeping and other missions. And of course there is the circumstance that located only a few hundred metres from the plaque-site lies a well-tended, and sizable, German military cemetery - whose graves also date from that Palm Sunday of 1945. Thirdly - and perhaps most importantly - the plaque serves as a reminder that even now, many years after the event, those words "We will remember them" still carry meaning.



Photos by Robb Furlong

Germans and 40 more ready to surrender, many of whom were wounded.<sup>42</sup> This full-strength company, with numerous MG 42s and an abundant supply of ammunition, was in essence the 'castle keep' guarding Bienen's inner line of defence. With the fall of the fortress house, organized and effective resistance collapsed.

Fairweather was finally able to link up with "D" Company's survivors now led by CSM Harry Bishop after all their officers were wounded or evacuated for exhaustion. Bishop's steadfastness in holding the hard-won ground earned him the Military Medal. For the next several hours the North Novas consolidated, reorganized and drew ammunition. As far as they knew, it was still up to them to clear the rest of town. "D" Company, reduced to half its strength, combined with Fairweather's company which had suffered about 25 per cent losses. "C" Company reorganized into two platoons after losing 33 men. Learment's "A" Company formed up in two platoons behind "C" Company, after losing 25 per cent of its strength.

The fight for Bienen was not over yet. The North Novas could not afford the luxury of digging in and taking the tactical advantage until the Germans emerged from cover to counterattack. The guns behind Bienen still had to be silenced. The exhausted companies once again summoned their resolve and resumed the advance at 1700 hours. Winhold's two platoons worked their way north on the two right-hand streets with tanks and anti-tank guns in support. Fairweather's composite company moved up the left street. Participants report capturing shaken and surprised prisoners in almost every house they entered, many of them paratroopers from the original 16 Parachute Regiment garrison.

The paratroopers may have been broken but it seemed that 115 Panzer Grenadier Regiment was still cohesive and not prepared to give up the Bienen bottleneck. Behaving true to form for the German army in a fluid tactical situation, they counterattacked. The move caught the weakened Canadians while they were still clearing houses. Leading the attack were three German assault guns which, apparently oblivious to how far into town the North Novas had penetrated, raced down the road past Winhold's right-hand platoon. Years of training in England, and ten months of combat professionalized the Highlanders so they did not

break when the enemy armour moved behind them. Winhold coolly stood his ground and radioed the tanks and anti-tank guns holding a firm shoulder with "A" Company at the crossroads short of the creamery.

In the twilight, just past 1815 hours, the German armoured vehicles spotted the Dragoon Guards Sherman's manoeuvring from positions covering the Emmerich road to meet the threat from the northeast. Each Sherman fired once at 30 yards range, but their shots went high. The German guns opened up with armour piercing shells at point blank range lighting up two British tanks. The surviving Sherman and enemy assault guns scurried away in opposite directions.

Shortly after the enemy armour clanked past "C" Company, German machine guns opened fire covering a rush forward by panzer-grenadiers. Winhold withdrew his strung out sections back to "A" Company's firm base where they prepared to destroy the counterattack. On the left, "B" Company's lead platoon was also caught in the open by the panzer-grenadier attack. Fairweather consolidated his men in a company stronghold at the fortress house. Once the battalion was firm in these positions, forward observation officers began bringing down artillery on the north end of town.<sup>43</sup>

This gunfire and the presence of North Novas deep in Bienen disrupted the Germans long enough for "A" and "C" Companies to establish strong defences backed by mortars and anti-tank guns. The German grenadiers who survived the shellfire loomed out of the darkness around the creamery into a prepared Canadian killing zone. A 94th Battery 17-pounder destroyed one of the German assault guns while Sergeant Stewart again distinguished himself by skilfully directing 13 Platoon's rifle and Bren fire onto the accompanying grenadiers. This action together with his earlier exploits won him the Military Medal.

As if to validate Anglo-Canadian doctrine, the North Novas defeated the counterattack, "terminated" more German men and machines, and broke 115 Panzer Grenadier Regiment's cohesion, all without any further cost in Canadian lives. Nevertheless, by this point in the day the battalion was physically and mentally exhausted. Thankfully, the Highland Light

Infantry, somewhat rested after their ordeal the night before, were on their way up to relieve the weary Nova Scotians.

As soon as the relief occurred at 2300 hours, the effort to clear the bottleneck and get the German guns continued. The HLI were as cognizant as any of the importance of this task after coming under continual shell and mortar fire while "resting" and re-supplying that afternoon in Esserden. Just as they had done in Speldrop, Lieutenant-Colonel Strickland's men worked their way forward with grenades and bayonets.

In the two weeks prior to Plunder the entire brigade underwent refresher training in village and wood-clearing drills. This training paid off because every house in Bienen was a mini-fortress complete with abundant machine guns. Each had to be cleared with deliberate section or platoon assaults. The Ontario men also endured more suicide attacks by determined Nazis, and a steady stream of enemy mortar and shellfire. The Canadians in the Bienen bottleneck still did not have priority for the XXX Corps counter-battery medium guns. In spite of these challenges, the men of the HLI gained a firm hold on Bienen by dawn, with the exception of the odd sniper. By mid-morning they had pressed 400 yards north, past German heavy mortar positions, to the anti-tank ditch on the Emmerich road. During their second night-long battle in a row, four more died, and 28 were wounded.<sup>44</sup>

That same night 51st Highland Division punched its way through the southern bottleneck, defeated 104 Panzer-Grenadier Regiment and shot up much of 116th Panzer Division. When the sun came up, so did fresh resources from 43rd Wessex and 3rd Canadian Divisions. On 26 March, with the situation around Rees under control, General Horrocks at last shifted artillery priority to the northern bottleneck.

The North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment benefited greatly from that re-prioritization. When they attacked Millingen, they had the support of a full squadron of 4/7th Dragoon Guards tanks, seven field and two medium regiments of artillery, as well as Typhoon fighter-bombers. When the North Shores entered

Millingen at 1700 hours, perhaps not surprisingly, they reported light resistance, although they received the surrender of many dazed Germans. The only fatal casualty was their much loved Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel J.W.H. Rowley. He was killed by a mortar bomb while standing on the deck of a 4/7th Sherman urging the tankers to form up away from his men so as not to draw fire upon them as they awaited H-Hour.

This attack marked the turning point in the battle and, in an operational sense, 3rd Division's war. Schlemm's First Parachute Army was broken. Second British Army began its march east while First Canadian Army embarked on its historic liberation of the Netherlands. The four American armies now in Europe stole the show with their sensational race to the Elbe River. In a few weeks the war would be over and the survivors would prepare to return home.

Many surviving North Nova Scotia Highlanders left Bienen with physical wounds and a great many more with deep scars of the mind. Next to the fighting on 7 June in Normandy, Bienen stands out as the battalion's most difficult and bloody battle of the war. The cost was made more bitter when veterans read the official history which implied the North Novas were incapable of carrying out their mission.

For survivors of Dave Dickson's company, memories are especially painful. "C" Company's charge at Bienen, which earned Lloyd Winhold a Distinguished Service Order, is now North Nova legend, while "D" Company's attack is remembered as less than successful. However, after considering all available evidence, including terrain, it is clear that "D" Company's sacrifice drew the bulk of German defensive fire and enabled "C" Company to break into town on the right. "D" Company also drew the attention of the fortress house as "B" Company closed in to finish it off.

To defeat the superior enemy force in Bienen the North Nova Scotians used fire and manoeuvre tactics supported mainly by their own battalion heavy weapons. The only way to succeed in such circumstances was to play on the German defensive principle of concentrating fire against the decisive threat. The North Novas

in effect created two decisive threats at Bienen hoping both would succeed, but appreciating that one would likely draw death upon itself so the other could succeed. This tactical phenomenon does not seem unique in the Canadian experience in the Second World War. From the fighting in Sicily and Italy, through Normandy, the Scheldt, and in Bienen, the Canadian Army often found itself conducting "economy of force" missions enabling British or American formations to achieve the great victories remembered by history.

Regrettably history records that after a day-long battle, the North Nova Scotia Highlanders were unable to clear Bienen and push past it in accordance with their "real-estate" oriented orders. C.P. Stacey's implication in the Canadian official history is that once again, fundamental problems in the way the Canadian Army did business prevented it from attaining its geographic objective and making the Rhine bridging sites safe.

This conclusion misses the heart of the matter. In the end, the North Novas broke the German defenders of Bienen, capturing 200 of them and killing even more. The real issue is that the North Novas, with the rest of 9 Brigade, fought and won a battle of annihilation against a larger German force. This was the unstated, but eminently clear, primary mission. In doing so they created a threat to the German line sufficient to draw the bulk of their artillery and mortar attention away from the crossing sites and onto 9 Brigade, thereby accomplishing their other task of easing pressure on engineers working at the river bank.

History's misinterpretation of events in and around Bienen calls into question the common assumption that "professional" German soldiers were better motivated and thus more willing to take aggressive tactical action than their Anglo-Canadian "citizen-soldier" opponents. The determination demonstrated by 9 Canadian Infantry Brigade on 24 and 25 March 1945 demands that historians take a second look at what the "citizen-soldiers" of 1939 had become when they came to grips with the best the German Army had to offer in 1944-45.

## Notes

1. This is unusual as most casualties on the battlefield are generally caused by high explosive shells. In Normandy it was estimated that 70 per cent of all casualties were caused by German mortars. See "The Location of Enemy Mortars," Report No. 11, No.2 Operational Research Section, contained in Terry Copp, ed., *Montgomery's Scientists: Operational Research in Northwest Europe, The Work of No.2 Operational Research Section with 21 Army Group June 1944 to July 1945* (Waterloo: Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies, 2000), pp.431-440.
2. Patton claimed the enemy was so broken and disorganized that he could cross the Rhine anywhere he chose without an artillery barrage. Peter Allen, *One More River: The Rhine Crossings of 1945* (London, 1980), p.254.
3. John Ellis, *Brute Force: Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War* (New York, 1990).
4. For more details of 21st Army Group plans for ending the war see L.F. Ellis, *Victory in the West, Vol II: The Defeat of Germany* (London, 1968) Ch.13; Allen, Ch.16.
5. *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein* (London, 1958), pp.328-31.
6. Terry Copp and Robert Vogel, *Maple Leaf Route: Victory* (Alma, 1988), p. 106.
7. C.P. Stacey, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, Volume III: The Victory Campaign* (Ottawa: 1960), pp.537-9.
8. For a more complete analysis of C.P. Stacey's critique of Canadian and Allied performance see Terry Copp, *The Brigade: Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade, 1939-1945* (Stoney Creek, 1992).
9. Timothy Harrison-Place, *Military Training in the British Army, 1940-1944* (London, 2000).
10. For more information on the "material superiority" interpretation see Ellis, *Brute Force*; see also Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*.
11. In their memoirs General Eisenhower and Field Marshal Montgomery repeatedly emphasize that the primary Allied aim was to kill German soldiers and destroy the German Army. See Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (New York, 1952); Montgomery.
12. Copp, *Victory*, p.96.
13. War Diary [WD], 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade [9 CIB], Annexes: *Plunder Operation Instruction*, 51st Highland Division, *Plunder Planning Notes*. 20-22 March 1945. All War Diaries were obtained from Record Group 24 of the National Archives of Canada.
14. WD 9 CIB, *Plunder Op. Instr.*, 22 March 1945.
15. Army Training Instruction #2 (May 1943) *The Co-operation of Infantry and Tanks*; Military Training Pamphlet #41 Parts 1 - 3 (Feb - Jul 1943) *The Tactical Handling of the Armoured Division and its Components*. Canadian War Museum Technical Pamphlet Collection
16. Intelligence Summary #171, WD 3rd Canadian Infantry Division [3 CID], 26 March 1945.
17. Ellis, *Victory in the West*, pp.288-291.

18. Allen, p.291.
19. Ellis, pp 288 -291.
20. WD 9 CIB, 24 March 1945.
21. WD Highland Light Infantry [HLI], 24 March 1945; T. Robert Fowler, *Valour in the Victory Campaign: The 3rd Canadian Infantry Division Gallantry Decorations, 1945*. (Burnstown,1995)pp.107-113.
22. WD 9 CIB, 24 March 1945.
23. 51 st Division Planning notes; Intsum 171.
24. Intelligence Summary 145, War Diary, II Canadian Corps, 20 March 1945; Horrocks, p.206.
25. This farm complex, 150 yards short of the front edge of Bienen is hereafter referred to as "Argyll Farm." This is the author's reference and was not used during the battle.
26. WDs 9 CIB, North Nova Scotia Highlanders [NNSH], Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders [SDGH], North Shore Regiment [NSR], HLI, 24-25 March 1945.
27. WD SDGH, 25 March 1945.
28. Interview with Don Learment, 13 March 2003; "A" Company After Action Report, WD NNSH, 25 March 1945.
29. O IntSum 170, WD 9 CIB, 26 March 1945.
30. W.R. Bird, *No Retreating Footsteps: The Story of the North Novas* (Hantsport, 1983) p.342. According to Bird's account Sidney's charge took place during the actual attack on Bienen. Documentary evidence suggests it occurred as "A" Company reached Argyll Farm.
31. Intsum 171.
32. "B" Coy Rpt; WD NNSH 25 March 1945.
33. Intsum 171; WD NNSH 25 March 1945.
34. WD 9 CIB 25 March 1945
35. 5 Platoon (Anti-Tank) After Action Report.
36. "A" and "B" Coy Rpts; WD NNSH 25 March 1945.
37. WDs SDGH, 9 CIB, 25 March 1945; Fowler, pp. 122-4.
38. WD NNSH; 9 CIB 25, March 1945.
39. This account of "D" Company at Bienen was compiled by cross referencing interviews with New Brunswick Justice D.M. Dickson and Lt. R.F. Boyce, "D" Company's After Action Report, the NNSH War Diary, Bird's unit history and Lt. D.R. Pearce's account in *Journal of a War: North-West Europe, 1944-45*. (Toronto, 1965) pp. 163-165
40. "C" Company's account based on "C" Company After Action Report; WD NNSH, 25 March 1945; Editorial in Regimental Newspaper, *The Mayflower*, 26 March, 1946; Bird, *No Retreating Footsteps*.
41. WASP Section After Action Report, WD NNSH, 25 March 1945.
42. "B" and "D" Company After Action Reports; and Bird, p.346.
43. Coy Rpts; WD NNSH 25 March 1945.
44. WD HLI, 25-26 March 1945.

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## CMH Mailbox

*continued from page 4.*

particularly for high intensity operations. Interestingly as brigade commander, Kitching received exposure, albeit briefly, to the problems of communication breakdowns, obscure information and employing unseasoned troops against an experienced opponent making effective use of the ground. One must still ask, how well did the Canadian Army prepare not only its troops, but its senior commanders for the demands of combat? For example, the 4th Canadian Armoured Division had but two divisional level exercises before its vehicles were quarantined. While we can delve into socio-historical analyses, I fear we are no closer to understanding this subject to the level we should.

This digression complete, the point of this letter is to address the portrayal of the 1st Polish Armoured Division.

The author states on page 18, that "not only did they [the 4th

Canadian Armoured Division] have to deal with Germans attacking from all sides and thousands of surrendering Germans, they also had to rescue the Poles." Really?

Told to close the gap "as quickly as possible," both armoured divisions in First Canadian Army set off immediately. Spearheading the Canadian advance, the Poles reached Chambois late on 19 August, becoming involved in a fierce battle with Germans trying to get out of the pocket, which stopped their linking up with the lead elements of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division at Molssy. The battlefield was, as one might say today, non-contiguous, and Maczek's troops were attacked from all sides. According to Stacey:

Cut off from the rest of First Canadian Army; unable to evacuate their prisoners and their own wounded, and running short of ammunition, petrol and food; and fighting desperately against Germans attacking both from inside and outside the pocket, the Poles had a hard and bitter day on the 20th.

Uncertainty marked the entire battle. As Donald E. Graves pointed out in his study of The South Alberta Regiment, unit war diaries from the period regularly used words like "confusion," "obscure" and "uncertain." This was the reality of battle in August 1944 and brought a number of problems, such as attacks on friendly units by Allied bombers and tactical fighters. One aerial attack destroyed half the petrol earmarked for the 2nd Polish Armoured Regiment (Is that incompetence?); rubble and destruction also hampered their progress. During the battle, the Polish armoured division suffered considerable casualties; combined with earlier losses, units were under strength, many leaders gone and performance affected, similar to the situation in 4th Canadian Armoured Division. Given the Polish situation, replacements were limited and many of those diverted to the 2nd Polish Corps in Italy. The author's apology that casualties

*continued on page 50...*