

The Attack on Boulogne

Account by Lieutenant-Colonel Roger Rowley, OC,
Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders given to
Historical Officer, 21 September 1944

BOULOGNE was prepared for all-round defence. In addition to its heavy coastal fortifications the city was also made ready against land attack. For this it offers excellent topographical advantages. The town is enclosed by a semicircle of high ground whose natural focus is the centrally located MONT LAMBERT, throughout this semicircle an elaborate system of mutually supporting strongpoints was constructed to make a formidable shield about the port. All positions were of three basic types, or combinations of types: coastal defence batteries, radar installations, and infantry positions.

ST. MARTIN-BOULOGNE, which was included in the initial objective for Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders, was an infantry position, both mined and wired. Mines were also known to be placed south of LA COCHERIE WOOD. Within the city itself were further fortifications; the port, for example, had been set apart from the rest of the town by a concrete wall and barbed wire.

The strength of the garrison had been estimated at from 5,500 to 7,000, which proved to be too modest a figure. The state of its morale, however, was accurately judged as being somewhat heartless.

The task of capturing BOULOGNE and destroying its garrison was assigned to 3rd Canadian Infantry Division on 5 September 1944. But it had also to assume responsibility for the defended coastal area as far as CALAIS. This secondary task being allotted to 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade, left only two brigades available for the assault on BOULOGNE.

The problem was solved by positioning 8th and 9th Canadian Infantry Brigades astride the BOULOGNE - LA CAPELLE road, which was to be the axis of attack, and by leaving the whole left flank, extending in a wide arc to the channel south of the city, to a single Machine Gun battalion, the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa. This unit, with attached troops, thus played the part of a "dummy brigade," and by various deceptive measures endeavoured to create an impression of equal strength in that quarter. The extreme right flank was guarded by 7th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment.

Topographical considerations, as already noted, were of prime importance. The enemy very naturally occupied the more advantageous ground. The approaches to his strongpoints were all covered by mutually supporting infantry and artillery positions. It was necessary therefore to smother the defenders with a weight of bombs and shells until the attacking infantry could cross the intervening ground and come to grips with them. The path of Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders, as will be seen, lay in fairly low ground between strongly armed heights.

The River LIANE, which protected the southernmost forts against attack from the east, was expected to offer a barrier to later stages of the operation.

Ninth Canadian Infantry Brigade was to commence the attack with two battalions up—Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders on the right and North Nova Scotia Highlanders on the left. When Phase I, the capture of LA COCHERIE, was complete, three armoured assault teams of 31st Tank

Brigade were to proceed into BOULOGNE to seize the bridges of the LIANE. Each armoured team consisted of one troop of 1st Lothians (Flails), two troops of 141 Royal Armoured Corps (Crocodiles) and one half troop from 6th Assault Regiment, Royal Engineers (AVREs). Each team had also under command one platoon of infantry—two from Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders and one from North Nova Scotia Highlanders. Teams A and B were to operate with Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders, two of whose companies were to follow on foot to clear the river area and establish a firm base so that engineers could begin work there. The balance of the battalion was to capture the citadel of BOULOGNE. In this it was to be assisted by two AVREs (One half troop).

Phase III was to be the capture of the northern part of the OUTREAU peninsula (the area centred on LE PORTED. The final phase was to be the capture of the NOCQUET feature.

For Phase I, Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders had under command one troop of M10s (3-inch SP anti-tank guns) and in support two troops of tanks from 10th Canadian Armoured Regiment, one half troop 87 Assault Squadron, Royal Engineers, one section 18 Canadian Field Company, Royal Canadian Engineers, 20 Kangaroos and seven armoured troop carriers. In later phases allotment of these devices varied with the nature of the task.

The Kangaroos are "stripped" Priests, i.e. 105 mm Self-Propelled equipments (minus the gun), converted into troop carriers. Their task was to carry the assault troops as far as the bomb-cratered area, discharge their passengers and return to a rally to await orders. In addition six other Kangaroos were to go forward with the special armour teams to seize the LIANE bridges.

Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders were also allotted certain flame-throwing devices: Lifebuoys (portable flame-throwers), and a section of Wasps (carrier-mounted flame-throwers), from 7th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment.

Air support was arranged to begin before the operation with the heavy bombing of five selected areas of the defence system. The first and largest target, which included the MONT LAMBERT feature, was to be subjected to an hour's attack, at the conclusion of which the land operation was to commence. During this time forward troops were to be withdrawn 2,000 yards from the perimeter of the target area. From H+1 to H+3 hours the other four areas were to be engaged. In addition, rocket bombers and fighter bombers were to be available on call.

The fire plan was most extensive. An impressive weight of artillery, including two AGRAs, had been assembled. Every potential centre of enemy resistance and interference had been allotted a series of "stonks" and concentrations. An unusual feature of was the assignment of two heavy AA regiments to fire low airburst concentrations over known flak positions during the course of the bombing effort.

For additional fire support Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders could call on their own 3-inch mortars and a platoon of 4.2-inch mortars. There were no prearranged mortar targets; their fire could be asked for by giving map references in clear. As it happened, they were not called on.

At 0855 hours, 17 September 1944, the first wave of Lancaster bombers appeared over the BOULOGNE area and the air programme began. At 0955 hours, just as the last bombs fell on Target 1, Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders moved forward from their assembly area near LA CAPELLE and crossed the startline. The Kangaroos bearing the two assault companies drove forward until mines made further progress impossible; the troops then debussed and advanced to their objectives. "D" Company on the right proceeded to the road junction at ST. MARTIN-BOULOGNE and "B" Company on the left seized a stretch of the BOULOGNE - DESVRES road. Behind them, on foot, "C" Company cleared and captured the woods at LA COCHERIE. "A" Company held in reserve.



Lancasters of RAF Bomber Command attacking Mont Lambert near Boulogne on the morning of 17 September 1944. At least nine aircraft are visible in the photo.

WLU Air Photo 183/4058

The bombing had done its work well. All positions were captured by H+45 minutes. The hardest fighting was done by "D" Company who ran into a minefield in the draw running south from LA COCHERIE Wood along the 71 grid line. This necessitated an assault on foot of 1,000 metres without armoured support, for the tanks were also held up in the dead ground of the minefield. "B" Company had debussed in the mined area and proceeded to its objective without event. Subsequently, "C", "D" and particularly "B" Companies were subjected to very heavy and extremely accurate shelling.

The disadvantage of the terrain was now painfully evident. On the right, beyond the road lay heights not yet seized by 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade. On the left the slopes of MONT LAMBERT were still not in the hands of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders. And from the southwest, beyond the river, the battalion area was in view of enemy positions. From all these points came heavy artillery fire which made movement almost impossible.

Under this fire an engineer officer of 18 Canadian Field Company did excellent work directing the clearing of the minefield up to the crossroads. The sole available bulldozer had gone astray and the work all had to be done by hand.

Late in the afternoon the two armoured columns of 31st Tank Brigade arrived. It had originally been intended that Column A should proceed along the BOULOGNE - LA CAPELLE road, but the CO had found this impassable owing to road blocks. It was therefore necessary to send both columns along B's route (the southern road) as far as the ST. MARTIN junction. This route had now been cleared for them.

Phase II therefore commenced with the two assault teams setting out for the bridges. The two accompanying infantry platoons were supplied by "A" Company. Column A, starting first, went very well, but had to stop short of its objective at darkness. Column B had got off to a bad start owing to deteriorating light conditions and also came to a halt within the city. The effect of the loss of one hour's

daylight (the change from "B" to "A" time was made on 17 September 1944) was very strikingly demonstrated here.

The next morning, 18 September 1944, the battalion started out on its part of Phase II. "B" and "C" Companies followed the armoured teams. "D" Company and the battalion command group proceeded along A Team's route, their task being the capture of the citadel. With them went two AVREs. The remaining platoon of "A" Company which accompanied them was reserved as escort for PW.

Arriving at the citadel, which was entirely surrounded, castle-fashion, by a high wall, "D" Company got into position before the bastion gate under cover of smoke. Then commenced a strange drama of medieval siege mingled with modern warfare. A French civilian approached and offered to point out a secret tunnel leading into the heart of the citadel. Major Stothard, the company commander, taking with him one platoon, at once entered the tunnel.

At the same time the Churchills wheeled up, raking the ramparts with Besa fire, and prepared to place petards against the portcullis. The gate was effectively blown in. At once a host of white flags waved from the walls. To add to the confusion Major Stothard had by now appeared in the midst of the besieged fort, utterly astonishing its "defenders."

The CO was sent for to take over the citadel. About 200 PW, including sixteen officers, were rounded up, most of whom were drunk and happy to be out of the war. The garrison was commanded by a major, who was as pleased as the rest. Also present was a German Oberstleutnant, formerly head of the military tribunal. A fairly large proportion were marines. More PW were taken during the day.

Meanwhile Columns A and B had reached the river bank where they found the bridges blown. "B" and "C" Companies established themselves there. Thus ended Phase II.



Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders then rested until further orders were issued at an "O" Group at 1500 hours the next day, 19 September 1944. The battalion had now to capture an objective somewhat enlarged from that originally planned for Phase III. It consisted of four features: the battery position on the 80 ring contour; the suburb of OUTREAU; the reservoir on the hill; and the two sugar factories. (See sketch map and air photo on the next page) To do this they were to pass through the bridgehead held by Highland Light Infantry of Canada on the west bank of the LIANE. Zero hour was 1600 hours and preparations had to be made quickly.

At the outset "A" Company found its path blocked by mines. As time was limited, "D" Company was directed on OUTREAU with orders, should opposition be light, to push on and take the gun position. Very shortly, however, "A" Company was able to extricate itself from the minefield and arrived on its objective *on* time, taking the village after little fighting and capturing numerous PWs.

"C" Company meanwhile was likewise held up at the start. Their route took them past the mouth of the railway tunnel running northwest from the road and track junction, from which came forth an embarrassing number of PW. Here they were forced to dispose of over 200 men, including perhaps 30 black Senegalese complete with fez. Proceeding forward once again, they took the reservoir area, again without heavy fighting.

Phase 2 was much more difficult. The gun position on the hill west of OUTREAU number 15 pieces in all, including six 88 mm guns.

Opposite Top: This air photo shows the citadel in the centre of Boulogne attacked by the SDGs. At the bottom left corner the River Liane is visible. Column B bridged the river at the railway crossing at the bottom of the photo while Column A established itself just above where the river leaves the photo at the left.

WLU Air Photo 157/4099

Opposite Bottom: A bridge-laying Churchill AVRE of the 79th Armoured Division in Boulogne on 16 September 1944. Photo by D.I. Grant, NAC PA 131234

But the enemy gunners were engrossed in heavy shelling of Highland Light Infantry and failed to notice "D" Company forming up in the woods east of the hill.

The hill itself was included among the potential artillery tasks and was known by the codeword "Norway." (See sketch map and air photo) The target had been allotted one medium concentration and four field "stonks." Observing that the nearest stonk would fall too near his own position, Major Stothard, the Company Commander, therefore called for "Norway, less Target 118." The result was magnificent surprise. The infantry, following the fire closely, swarmed over the hill with bayonets and grenades before the last rounds had fallen. At no time were they more than 250 yards from the bursts. The nearest position was overrun and its three 88s taken intact; the troops rushed for the other three, but these were blown up. The action resulted in the taking of 185 PW, but during it Major Stothard's only two remaining officers were wounded. It was now nearly dark and the company consolidated its position and remained on the hill all night.

The following morning one of the 88s was manned and fired against the enemy, the laying being done by two gunner officers. In three rounds a direct hit was made of another 88 in LE PORTEL which knocked it out.

With the capture of the sugar factories, the battalion's fighting in BOULOGNE was almost done. A few strongpoints remained yet to be dealt with, but the city itself and its most formidable defences were cleared of the enemy.

Despite the well-prepared defences of the BOULOGNE fortress, little use was made by Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders of the special mechanical devices which had been provided. Following the paralysing blow delivered by the bombers, the attack took shape along the familiar infantry pattern, valuable use being made of artillery support. An exception must be made in favour of the Kangaroos, which had two roles: (i) to bring the infantry swiftly forward from a safe area beyond the bombing limits, and (ii) to retain



The German strongpoint "Norway" which contained six 88s and nine smaller calibre weapons is clearly visible at the bottom of the airphoto. To the right, at the edge of the photo is the woods where the SDGs formed up for the attack.

Insert: Sketch map showing the SDGs Phase III objectives.

WLU Air Photo 18113036



A column of over 400 German prisoners pass through the damaged streets of Boulogne, 21 Sept 44.

Photo by D.I. Grant, NAC PA 137309

momentum and exploit into the city once the first objective was seized. These tasks were performed very well.

The special armoured teams, moving with great swiftness, were not called on to employ their Flails or Crocodiles. Nor was extensive use made of the AVREs, beyond the instance referred to above. The move the armoured teams Lieutenant-Colonel Rowley described as satisfactory but uneventful.

No suitable opportunity to use the Wasps was found. One was in fact knocked out by shellfire. They are nonetheless regarded as an excellent weapon and have been found ineffectual by the CO. Company commanders invariably asked for them. Owing to their cumbersome weight and vulnerability they travel in the rear of the column to be brought forward if necessary.

A Lifebuoy flame-thrower was used by "D" Company against a pillbox near ST. MARTIN-BOULOGNE; one squirt promptly brought forth 25 PW. On the whole, however, their performance in this operation was not satisfactory, only about 45% of them being in working order when needed. This, the CO felt, was to be explained first, by their fragility, and secondly, by the fact that it had not been possible to train those who were to fire them. Even granting their delicate nature, in the

hands of an experienced operator they are a reliable and effective weapon.

Lieutenant-Colonel Rowley remarked of the bombing that it had been slightly off its mark near MONT LAMBERT but had so splattered the objectives of the leading companies, instead of hitting LA COCHERIE Wood, that it actually eased their advance.

The fire plan as originally conceived had been excellent and in the closing stages continued to be so. Every possible enemy position had been taped and the response of the gunners had never been quicker.

As for the enemy, despite his numerical strength and the almost impregnable character of his fortifications, it was obvious that his morale left much to be desired. Given greater determination on his part, the debussing process from the Kangaroos, for example, could have been turned into a slaughter. The whole operation, moreover, would have been a much more costly undertaking. Concerning weapons, Lieutenant-Colonel Rowley said only one mortar had been encountered and that had been quickly eliminated by the carrier platoon.

Finally, the CO said that his men had a thorough dislike for Germans. Therefore the operation went well.