

“They Were Just Shadows and Whispers in the Night”

Major MX. Tucker, Officer Commanding
23 Canadian Field Company, Royal Canadian Engineers

*J*n September 1944 the 23rd Canadian Field Company, Royal Canadian Engineers, was attached to 43rd (Wessex) Division of British 30 Corps. It was to support that division's proposed assault across the Rhine to relieve 1st British Airborne Division in the Arnhem bridgehead.

On the morning of 25 September, Major M.L. Tucker, the officer commanding the 23rd Field Company, was called to an Orders Group. The decision to evacuate the remaining airborne troops had been made and Major Tucker was told the Canadians should use their stormboats for the operation. They were given no additional resources for carrying, off-loading or assisting the men evacuated, presumably because no one believed that large numbers of men could be rescued. Major Tucker and Lieutenant R.S. Kennedy went forward to reconnoitre the area and subsequently Lieutenant Kennedy and Lieutenant Tate located two sites northeast of Driel where stormboats could be launched.

Fourteen stormboats and 17 Evinrude outboard motors were available and 10 Field Park Company provided 12 fitters and equipment repairers who proved invaluable.

Major Tucker was told that Oosterbeek Church, directly across the river from the launching site, was the centre of the airborne bridgehead. The first stormboat was to be on the north side of the river by 2140 that night.

Major Tucker's account of that incredible night was written on 30 September 1944.



Memorial erected in honour of the Canadian operation to rescue British paratroopers near Arnhem.

Photo by L. Copp

Lieutenant Kennedy was put in charge of the off-loading of vehicles and the carrying of stormboats to launching sites, about 500 yards ahead. Lieutenants Martin and Cronyn were delegated to clear and tape routes for moving the stormboats from off-loading points to launching sites. Subsequently Lieutenant Martin was detailed to proceed to the far bank to determine the situation there and Lieutenant Cronyn was placed in charge of the beach on our side of the river. This beach had two bays, one on the western end, about 20 yards wide, and one on the eastern end about 60 yards wide. The two were separated by a groin built out of rock and projecting about 30 yards out into the river. The small bay was used for the launching of boats and the wider one and the groin as operating bases for the craft. Lieutenant Tate was slated to assist Lieutenant Kennedy and to supervise the setting up of advance petrol dumps and Regimental Aid Post.

Two flood walls blocked the path from the off-loading area to the launching sites. The first of these was about 20 feet high with banks sloping to about 45 degrees, the second one was about half the height and the slope of the bank was much less severe. These obstacles became most difficult to negotiate. The heavy rain softened the ground and the churning of men's feet as they struggled over with stormboats soon created a slippery mess which lent no footing whatsoever. Hand ropes were fixed, but even with these the going was extremely difficult.

The first boat was launched at 2130 hours, but it had been badly holed when the men carrying slipped coming down the side of the floodwall and the stream of water which poured into it would have sunk it before it could have completed a crossing. The next boat was launched at 2145 hours and set off with Lieutenant Martin in command. This boat did not return and neither Lieutenant Martin nor any member of the crew has been seen or heard from since. Two witnesses report having seen it break apart and sink as the result of a direct mortar hit. They cannot be positive of this, however, as visibility was very bad. Corporal McLachlan captained the 3rd boat to be launched and soon returned bearing the first load of Airborne troops to be

evacuated by us. He continued and completed 15 trips before he was relieved by a fresh crew. The fourth boat, in charge of Corporal S.F. Smith, was launched twenty minutes later, at 2235 hours. This boat made its way safely to the bridgehead, but swamped when a mortar fell close by on the return voyage. Corporal Smith, although not a swimmer, floated back on his open greatcoat to the far side. Four of his passengers also got back, but all other occupants of the boat appear to have been lost. Succeeding boats were launched at intervals of about 20 minutes and all 14 boats were in the water by 0330 hours. None of these boats were sunk in the channel, but several of them were eventually holed by enemy fire or submerged obstacles and had to be abandoned on reaching shore. An enemy mortar was observed firing from directly opposite the launch site during the time that the first four boats were being launched but was not seen afterwards, so that it is presumed that our troops in the bridgehead must have cleared it up.

The night was intensely dark, but fires started by our bombers in the afternoon and the numerous flares sent up by the enemy must have revealed a great deal of our movement to him. These fires helped us greatly too, since they provided beacons by which our boat crews could direct their craft. Intermittent burst of Bren were fired across to mark the limits of our beach boundaries, but in view of the fact that the fires provided stationary and constant light the crews did not resort to observation of the incendiary bursts from the Brens. Heavy rain was accompanied by a bitter wind which made things most unpleasant, but the bad weather was probably less to the liking of the enemy than it was to us and most surely have resulted in our having had less casualties than should have done had the night been clear and fine. The rain cause the Evinrude motors to give endless trouble and was responsible for their failing altogether in many cases. Something must be done to protect the electric circuits of these motors if they are to be continued to be used for such purposes. E. & M. personnel and our own fitters worked ceaselessly to keep the motors in running order, but they could never keep up to the breakdowns.

Inscription on plaque marking the site of the rescue operation.

There was a great deal of enemy fire during the night. Machine guns set on fixed lines swept the river and beaches on both sides. Fortunately most of the fire was high, at least it was on the operating site on the South side of the river. When daylight came the machine guns up on the hill above the bridgehead rained a murderous hail of bullets on those craft which were still operating, but the downward angle of the fire was much less effective than it would have been had the guns been in position to make more horizontal sweeps. Mortar and 88 mm fire fell everywhere. Many casualties were reported from the bridgehead, but on the river and on the South bank they were light. Three men were wounded in the off-loading area and one between there and the beach. Enemy snipers were also active and it was reported that some of the Airborne troops spotted the positions of two of them in crossing the river and proceeded to liquidate them when they reached the South shore.

It was found impossible to keep complete records of the crossings made and the passengers carried. Paper turned to pulp in the driving rain. There was no point, either, from which a picture of what was going on along the whole beach could be seen and in many cases passengers were landed well outside the limits of the beach when stalled motors had allowed craft to stray off line. It was impossible to regulate the number of passengers carried in boats at times. Men panicked and stormed onto the boats, in some cases capsizing them. In many cases they had to be beaten off or threatened with shooting to avoid having the boats swamped. With the approach of dawn this condition became worse. They were afraid that daylight would force us to cease our ferrying before they could be rescued. The maximum lift at one time was 36. All of these men were packed into his boat by Lieutenant Kennedy on his last trip, the last trip made by anyone in this operation. The minimum lift was 6. A corporal operating a boat which was leaking

They Were Just Shadows and Wispers in the Night

It is 25th September 1944 the battle of Arnhem is still raging, but the position of the surrounded British and Polish Airborne troops on the northern Rhine bank has become untenable.

Then the order for their evacuation across the river is given. In that rainy night hundreds of soldiers come in small parties to the river forelands, between the farmhouse and the Old Church . . . and wait to be rescued. Under heavy German fire from the Westerbouwing, British (260 and 553Fd Coys) and Canadian (20 and 23Fd Coy) Engineers make dozens of trips in their small boats from this bank. In one night, supported by other units, they manage to rescue 2,400 Airborne troops. At the time the rescued had hardly seen their saviors, so they have never been able to thank them. This monument has been erected to express their gratitude.

(15th September 1989)

badly decided he could make one more trip and bring off a few men before his craft went down. It sunk as he approached the South shore, but fortunately the water was shallow at this point and they were all able to wade ashore safely. It is estimated that approximately 150 boatloads were brought back by the stormboat crews and that approximately the average load carried was about 16 passengers. Thus approximately 2400 to 2500 troops were brought off.

No forward facilities were provided for the care of wounded, beyond what was available in the FAP's set up by 260 Field Company and this Company. Many of the rescued men were wounded and our own RAP dressed 69 stretcher cases as well as attending to over 100 walking wounded. Greatcoats and other clothing were used to improvise stretchers and were given to men who were in desperate need of cover from the elements. Caring for all these casualties proved a great drain on the man power of the Company and prevented adequate reliefs for the boat carrying parties

and boat crews. RAMC facilities were available in the rear of our off-loading area, but these were only designed to cope with casualties which it was expected might arise from within the personnel of the two field companies employed in the operation.

The work of all personnel employed in this operation was of a very high standard, but there were those who rose beyond that level. Lieutenant Kennedy, in addition to making a recce, planning the operation and supervising the off-loading and delivering the stormboats to the launching sites, took command of a boat when these tasks were completed and brought off 125 men from the bridgehead under very trying conditions which prevailed with the advent of daylight. Corporal Robinson did a tremendous nights work. With his section he constructed a bridge by which access was made possible to the orchard which was used as our off-loading area. With the arrival of the bridging lorries, he took charge of a party and was responsible for the safe and prompt delivery of many stormboats to the launching sites. On delivering the last boat, he took command of it and complete 6 trips before the boat was put out of commission. All of the boat crews were magnificent, and only gave up their ferrying when their boats were no longer operable or else when they were exhausted and had to be ordered from the beach.

Of these Lance Corporals Albright and Gunness and Sappers LeBouthillier and McCready were outstanding. H/Capt. Mongeon, the R.C. Padre, came under fire for the first time in his career and acquitted himself nobly. In addition to the normal duties of attending wounded and bringing courage and cheer to the exhausted men, he helped with the carrying of the stormboats, carried petrol to the beach and seemed to always be present where he was most needed. The E & M personnel attached from the Field Park Company rendered excellent service in keeping the Evinrude motors running.

The casualties suffered by the Company in this engagement were as follows :-

Lt. J.R. Martin	Missing & presumed KIA *
L/Cpl W.D. Ryan	Missing & presumed KIA
Spr D.L.G. Hope	Missing & presumed KIA
Spr H.C. Magnusson	Missing & presumed KIA
Spr L.J. Roherty	Missing & presumed KIA
Spr N.A. Thompson	Missing & presumed KIA
Sgt D.E. Barnes	Wounded
Spr D.E. Francis	Wounded
Spr D.J. McCready	Wounded
Spr R.T. McKee	Wounded
Spr J.P. LeToqueux	Wounded
	Killed in Action

Commander Royal Engineers 43 Division ordered cessation of operations at 0545 hours when it became evident that any further attempts to bring off men would be suicidal for the boat crews.

The Company with attached troops repaired to the off-loading area and embussed for the advance harbour area at VALBURG. Lieutenant Asper and his party had breakfast ready and took care of the feeding of many of the returned Airborne troops in addition to our own personnel.

Lieutenant Cronyn was left behind in the off-loading area to pick up and bring in any stragglers who might come in after the main body had moved off. He remained there until 1030 hours, but none of the above reported missing came in and there was little chance of anyone showing up until darkness fell again.