

The Battle of Moyland Wood

The Regina Rifle Regiment, 16-19 February 1945

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Although I have written accounts about the AD-Day Landings in Normandy and several costly battles from the beaches to Falaise, I have always been reluctant to write about the tragic events at Moyland Wood in Germany. My reluctance stems from the fact that this operation was the most traumatic for me personally and, I think, for our Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Allan Gregory, DSO, during the fighting in Western Europe. I take no pride in telling this story because my own performance in the battle was inadequate. Further, I don't wish to offend anyone by resurrecting memories that might better be forgotten, or to reveal information that does not reflect favourably on anyone. However, battle conditions place intolerable pressures on people, with unpredictable results. A hero today can fail tomorrow. A great leader last week can suffer from battle exhaustion this week. Fortunately, the Regina Rifles still had many heroes at Moyland Wood. Unfortunately, most of them were either killed or wounded. That's why the story must be told.

The situation that prevailed in mid-February of 1945 must be recounted if the story of Moyland Wood is to be adequately told and the heavy casualties explained. The 3rd Canadian Infantry Division had been in combat almost continuously since the invasion of Normandy on 6 June 1944. The casualties in eight months of fighting had been horrendous. Regiments lacked trained and experienced officers and non-commissioned officers, and many soldiers had no battle experience. However, our greatest problem was attitude. It was clear to everyone that the war was almost over in Europe. The Russian and Allied armies were inside the borders of Germany. It was only a matter of time before Victory in Europe would be achieved. Our combat officers and men had lost their earlier

drive and determination, feeling quite naturally that it would be folly to lose one's life with the war's end in sight. Those of us who had been with our units in England and since the invasion were near exhaustion. Some had been wounded once or twice and had returned to battle voluntarily, but they too were sick of the horrors of war. The gung-ho spirit of 1944 had been replaced with caution and apathy. We didn't want to take unnecessary risks or to suffer casualties through errors, either on our part or on the part of higher command. This malaise affected all ranks, at least those on the battlefield and vulnerable to injury or death. The static warfare in Holland from November to February had contributed to our lethargy. When, early in February, the orders came for the attack into Germany, it was with some relief, but with little enthusiasm, that we began the final resolution of the war.

The Operation

British and Canadian Forces were to capture the city of Cleve, just a few miles inside the German border and near the Rhine River. We were to clear the enemy from the area west of the Rhine and strike south to link up with the Americans who were pushing up from the south. An important goal was to find another bridge over the Rhine for access to the northern plains of Germany. Despite the flooded fields and roads, 3rd Canadian Division and a couple of British Divisions captured the battered city and struck south. The 15th Scottish Division advanced down a main road and through the villages of Bedburg and Calcar. Then they ran into strong resistance from a small forest east of the road. This was Moyland Wood. A force of German paratroops, fighting as regular infantry, stopped

the Scots cold. The 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade, like other Canadian units, was understrength, cautious and lethargic, but had a reputation of being highly successful in the heavy going. We were ordered to take over from the 15th Scottish and to clear Moyland Wood, so that the road south would be opened to armoured units pushing south. The Regina Rifles would attack the north end of the wood and the Canadian Scottish would then capture the south end. The Winnipeg Rifles would remain in reserve. The Regina Rifle Regiment, like other 3rd Div units, had suffered very heavy casualties, but was fortunate to have former second-in-command, Lieutenant-Colonel Allan Gregory, in command. He had served well in Normandy, been promoted to command the Queen's Own Camerons of Winnipeg (2nd Division) and had been wounded near the Seine River in France. He had returned to the Johns in October to replace our beloved CO, Foster Matheson. The latter had been given a well deserved rest and a promotion to full Colonel with the task of organizing Canada's Occupation Brigade in England. Allan Gregory, or "Greg," as I knew him, was a competent and hard working officer who took his responsibilities very seriously. We were also fortunate that Regimental Sergeant-Major Wally Edwards was still with us, along with senior NCOs in the Quartermaster jobs. We had fine Administration Support from QM Earl Rouatt, Paymaster Don McDonald, Transport Officer Jim Cameron, and Vassar Hall, Admin. Company chief. We had lost three Medical Officers over the months. Captain Syd Huckvale had been seriously wounded in Caen. Captain Harry Dickson was killed near Falaise and Captain Griffiths transferred after several months of great service. He had been replaced by another capable MO, Captain Frank Olacke. We were still blessed to have Captain Graham Jamieson as our dedicated Padre. What we lacked were confident, competent company and platoon officers, NCOs, and men. There were exceptions of course, and some of the original D-Day veterans were still going well, despite being out once or twice with wounds. We had also benefitted from the return of Majors Bob Orr, 2 i/c, and Len McGurran, officer commanding Baker Company, from Italy. Nonetheless, we had lost hundreds of our best officers and men since D-Day and we were not very happy about continuing a war which seemed all but over.

Brigade Headquarters had decided that the Johns should take a run at the wily and courageous German paratroops at 1330 hours on 16 February. Able and Charlie Companies advanced with Able in the woods on the left and Charlie along the fringe of the forest, on the road to the right. Able Company, under Major Art Gollnick, was stopped by heavy fire in the trees and dug in after some casualties. Major Gordon Baird and Charlie Company advanced a couple of hundred yards or so along the road with no resistance. Surprised at the lack of enemy action, Baird decided to send a platoon of men into the woods on a reconnaissance. To his chagrin, the platoon, commanded by Frank Shaugnessy, disappeared completely without shots being fired. Shortly, however, the balance of the Company was fired upon and Baird, realizing that he had been duped by the clever paratroops, withdrew his remaining troops to the startline and dug in. One of the riflemen from Shaugnessy's Platoon escaped that night and told how the platoon had been surrounded in the trees by German soldiers, who simply ordered them to surrender.

Baker Company, under 2 i/c Captain Doug Howat, was sent forward to enter the wood to the right of Able Company and to advance as far as possible. The Company came under machine gun and rifle fire, suffered several casualties and dug in among the many dead 15th Scottish soldiers scattered throughout the wood. The morale of "A" and "B" Companies sagged badly. During the night my good friend Al Gregory called me to Battalion Headquarters and told me that Dog Company, which I commanded, was to attack through Baker Company and drive the paratroops out. I had been unaware of the extent of the losses suffered by the 15th Scottish, so I prepared for the attack and briefed my Platoon Commanders, feeling that, with the support of Able and Baker Companies, we would be successful. I wondered a bit, however, how Dog Company was supposed to crush a German force which had already stopped units of the 15th Scottish and three Companies of the Regina Rifles. "Ours is not to wonder why; ours is but to do or die."

We went forward in single file with Lieutenant Warren "Buzz" Keating's platoon in the lead. I and my runner-batman, Frenchy Paulin, went with Buzz's platoon. It was a foggy morning but

"Sunrays " sunning - The senior officers of the Regina Rifle Regiment enjoy the sun a little over a week after the Regiment's traumatic battle in Moyland Wood. Gordon Brown writes, "It was not a luxurious holiday in the Reichswald, but we were due for a change, out of range of German shelling, and we could relax in our dug-outs and wear berets in place of the uncomfortable helmets. Someone took a picture of Colonel Gregory, standing, second-in-command Major Bob Orr lying on the ground, Major hen McGurran sitting against a tree, and me, of course, occupying the only chair in sight"



we must have been under observation, for we were shelled heavily en route. We had a number of casualties before we reached the woods. When we reached Baker Company's position we came under machine gun, rifle grenade and rifle fire. Our casualties convinced us to hug the ground where we found that we were lying among the dead bodies of the Scottish units and some of our own Baker Company dead. Crawling to Doug Howat's slit trench, I learned that the enemy controlled a large open space in the woods and simply had everyone pinned down. The problem was, of course, that as in all fighting in heavily-wooded areas, the defender has all the advantages. He is dug in and camouflaged, while the attacker is vulnerable every time he moves. A determined force of 200 defenders, in heavy woods, can hold off hundreds of attackers who simply cannot see their enemy. Just ask veterans of the Vietnam war about this problem.

Buzz Keating had managed to get his platoon dug in and I asked the other two platoons to take cover wherever they could. Morale had been shattered by the sight of so many dead. I was appalled by the situation. I tried to advise Al Gregory of our plight but, as often happened, our radio (wireless) didn't work very well. I sent Frenchy Paulin the mile or so back to Battalion Headquarters. The little French-Canadian from Temiskaming, Ontario carried a written message outlining the situation and asking for direction.

Readers of this account will be wondering why we didn't have any tank support and what sort of covering fire and artillery plans were used. It's too long a story to tell here, but our tank units had been badly battered in Normandy and anywhere that the Germans had their powerful anti-tank guns. The famed 88 mm anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapon had been especially devastating. Further, it was practically

impossible for tanks to operate in a heavily-treed area like Moyland Wood. Three tanks had been assigned to fire their machine guns and cannons into the wood from hull-down positions near where we had entered the trees. The tank crews could not see the enemy positions and could only fire wildly in the general direction of the enemy. The trees absorbed most of the lead.

An artillery fire plan had been used in support of D Company's attack but, without adequate forward observation, the fire was inaccurate and shells often exploded against the tops of trees, raining shrapnel down on us more often than not. With good observation and direction the artillery fire could have been devastating to the Germans in the wood. However, our Forward Observation Officer could not be found.

As I waited in a shallow slit trench for a message from Colonel Gregory, I thought about those well trained paratroops who kept peppering us with bullets. They were probably the best troops we had faced, and they were now fighting in defence of their homeland. They were not wild-eyed nazis like the SS back in France, but brighter and just as dedicated. They had been



*Infantry of the Regina Rifles awaiting the signal to attack Moyland Wood.
(Photo by Colin McDougall, NAC PA 177577)*

selected to block our drive south and in particular to control the road. Relatively safe from tanks and artillery, they could toy with vehicles trying to use the road and they could destroy large numbers of infantry attacking blindly into the forest. They probably did not have more than seven or eight hundred men in the entire wood, which extended for several hundred yards. We were perhaps confronted by about 400 soldiers in the northern half of the forest, but they had all the tactical advantages, were well dug in and could stop a brigade attack. They had proved it by destroying some 15th Scottish units. There was a natural killing ground in the trees; a large open area of triangular shape directly in front of us. They had placed machine guns along their two sides of the triangle, while we were pinned down among the dead *on* our side. We were being invited out into the open where we could go nowhere but into hell. How could we deal with the situation, I wondered? I devised a plan which I felt might work. In the late afternoon I was asked to see Al Gregory at Battalion Headquarters.

I walked several hundred yards and found my trusty young jeep driver, Arnold Dahlen, who drove me the rest of the way. Greg met me with a friendly smile and took me into a separate room. He said that he had just received further

direction from the Brigadier, and that Dog Company should attack without delay. I was very upset, of course, and tried to explain the futility of frittering away one company after another while achieving little or nothing. I sounded the Colonel out about my alternative plan. We poured over the detailed map of the area for a very long time, well into the evening, tugging at our mustaches the whole time.

My plan was to make use of tanks on either side of the wood, followed by two companies of the Johns on one side and two companies from the Winnipeg Rifles on the other side. Under cover of darkness we could create panic by entering the wood well behind the triangular killing ground and perhaps split the paratroop force in two. They would have to withdraw or face annihilation. The tanks would not be vulnerable in the darkness and the sound of their motors might frighten the enemy. There were no enemy tanks in the area and few, if any, anti-tank guns. It was a rare opportunity for the armour to play an effective role. Our troops would feel better too about doing a joint tank-infantry operation, rather than moving alone against an enemy that held all the cards.

After explaining the plan, I calmly told Greg that I would refuse to order the men of Dog

Company to attack across that killing ground, but that if a better plan were adopted, along the lines of my proposal, Dog Company would be involved. Greg warned me strongly about refusing to carry out the plan that had been devised by Brigade HQ. He asked me if I knew that I could be court-martialled for refusing a lawful order. I said that I was well aware of that possibility, but that I would rather face a court-martial than order my officers and men into a hopeless attack. Greg shook his head and smiled grimly. "OK, Gord, you've convinced me that we must have a new plan, along with an artillery barrage or an aerial bombardment. I don't know how the Brigadier will take to the idea, but I'll let you know. Wish me luck."

Back at the Dog and Baker positions we were still being hammered by rifle grenades, machine gun and rifle fire. Able Company was on a higher piece of ground about 70 yards to the left, so I called Buck Gollnick on the wireless and asked him if his boys could fire down on the Germans. He explained that Able Company didn't really control all of the high ground and that they could not help us. It was not a healthy place, Moyland Wood! At about midnight the Company Commanders were called to an "O" group (meeting) at Battalion HQ. Greg took me into a separate room before the meeting began. He told me in gravestones that both he and I were in serious trouble for taking such strong stands against the Brigade plan. Greg had argued strongly in favour of a new plan but had only been able to work out a compromise, better than the old plan, but not what we had hoped for. Three Companies of the Rifles would be involved in an attack at first light, supported by our own flame-throwing Bren gun carriers. We would withdraw quietly from our present positions throughout the night, in groups of 3 or 4 men, in order to conceal our change of plan. Baker Company would filter out first, followed by Dog and then Able. Under cover of darkness and the morning fog we would get into the open fields and farms to the right of the road as Charlie had done two days earlier. In order to achieve surprise no preparatory barrage would be fired, although shelling behind the German positions would continue. At first light Baker would attack into the woods and seize 40 or 50 yards of ground. Dog Company would then pass through Baker and attack the ridge about 100 yards further in. Able Company would enter the wood

and attack the enemy still covering the killing ground, hopefully from behind, of course. There would be no tanks involved but our Bren gun carriers would provide machine gun and flame support. There was to be no deviation from the plan and following the attack, Greg and I were to meet with the Major-General (Divisional Commander) and the Brigadier to straighten out our differences.

Greg asked me to accept the new plan, as a compromise, and promised all the support possible. The problem, from my point of view, was that in attacking down only one side of the Wood, we would permit the enemy to concentrate on stopping Baker Company's entry into the trees and to do the same with the subsequent attacks by Dog and Able Companies. If the paratroops were forced to look after both flanks and their rear, we could put them in an untenable position. I also felt that it was wrong to assume that three tired, dispirited and understrength Companies could dislodge a determined force of well dug-in Germans, in a heavily wooded area. We had already suffered a lot of dead and wounded and lost a platoon taken prisoner; while the Germans were fighting on their home ground. I expressed these concerns to the Colonel but agreed that the plan was much better than the old one. I said that I hoped that I would be able to accompany him, after the attack, to the meeting with the Brigadier and the Divisional Commander.

The Attack

We withdrew from our positions as planned and, I think, we did not reveal to the enemy that we were pulling out. There was quite a heavy fog that morning and we made our way along the right of the highway for 300 yards or more to some farm buildings which were to be our startline. Baker Company launched its attack as planned and penetrated the woods for about 40 yards before being stopped. They dug in. The enemy reacted quickly as we knew they would and, although taken by surprise, they met Dog Company with heavy resistance. The two forward platoons, under Lieutenant Warren Keating and Sergeant Hunt Taylor, charged through "B" Company's position and toward the ridge in the forest, about one hundred yards into the enemy's positions. I went in with our third platoon,



Far left: Lieutenant Warren "Buzz" Keating, "D" Company, Regina Rifles, somewhere near Nijmegen, Holland, December 1944. Keating was awarded the Military Cross for his actions during the Moyland Wood battle.

Top right: Lieutenant-Colonel A.S. Gregory, DSO, commanding officer of the Regina Rifles.

Bottom right: Sergeant Hunt Taylor, Company Sergeant-Major, Royal Rifle Regiment. He was awarded the Belgian Croix de Guerre at the Leopold Canal and received a Commander-in-Chiefs Certificate for his role as a platoon commander at Moyland Wood.

planning to stay directly behind the two forward platoons and consolidating on the ridge with them. However, we lost sight of them in the darkness of the woods and veered left toward the paratroops covering the killing ground. The crafty Germans had sensed what was happening and had turned their machine guns around 180 degrees to fire at us as we came in behind them. Our reserve platoon was the least experienced of the three, and we came under a hail of bullets and grenades. Several of our young soldiers fell, some killed, some wounded. The rest of us dived to the ground and, under cover of the trees, we withdrew almost to B Company's forward slit trenches. There was a lot of firing going on and chaos reigned supreme. The flame-throwing carriers tried to enter the fray but only one actually got beyond Baker Company, where the rough going caused it to throw a track. Sergeant Milton Adolph, in charge of the carrier, jumped out and grabbed a German paratrooper who was behind a large tree, punched him and took his rifle.- The poor fellow ran right into me and became our first prisoner.

I could not determine exactly where our two forward platoons had gone. There was a lot of noise up on the ridge so my runner and I, along with Captain Howat of "B" Company, tried to go forward. We were met by grenades and bullets, escaping death only by crawling on our stomachs. It was pointless. Able Company must enter the wood as planned and neutralize the enemy on the left or the whole thing might fail. We didn't know if Buzz Keating and Hunt Taylor and their heroic troops were still alive and we could not go forward to find out, so Frenchy Paulin and I returned to the farm across the road, running the gamut of machine gun fire coming down the road from the left. We found Able Company unable to get across the startline because of the heavy fire coming down the road from the left. The paratroops defending along the killing ground had decided to stop anyone from crossing the highway.

Knowing Keating and Taylor as I did, I could not believe that they had been taken prisoner or that they had not reached their objective. I ran across the road, diving between two German bodies to avoid machine gun fire, and checked

with Doug Howat and Baker Company. There was still no sign of my missing platoons, but things had quietened up at the ridge. Was that a good sign or a bad one? I returned across the road, found my runner and together we decided to go back into the trees and try to find the platoons. We dashed across the road once more, advanced beyond "B" Company and, under fire, dived into a small enemy trench under a tree. A shell hit the tree above us and we received a heavy blast. I felt some blood trickling down my forehead and raised my hand to wipe it off. Frenchy Paulin thought that I must be badly hurt and jumped out to charge forward himself. I grabbed him by the ankle and pulled him back. A tiny piece of shrapnel had gone through my steel helmet and stopped on my forehead. I was able to pick it off, but I was exhausted and badly shaken.

In Normandy we had learned that it was unwise to have both the company commanders and their 2 i/c's in action together. If they became casualties at the same time, the company would be leaderless. The same was true for platoon commanders and their sergeants. So a system was devised under which either the commander or his 2 i/c remained out of battle, so that the other could come in as a replacement, if necessary. When Francis Paulin and I reached Battalion HQ I briefed Al Gregory and recommended that the officers who had been left out of battle from "A," "B" and "D" Companies be brought in to relieve their buddies. That would mean that Captain Dick Roberts would replace me, Major Len McGurran would replace Doug Howat in "B," and Captain Bill Jansen would replace Major Art Gollnick in "A." Platoon Sergeants and Lieutenants would replace their counterparts. Charlie Company, under Major Gordon Baird, was still in reserve.

I apologized to a very concerned Colonel Gregory and asked my buddy, Dick Roberts, to get Buzz and Hunt out as soon as possible, assuming that they were still functioning. Frenchy and I went to "A" Echelon to rest. The next morning, who walked into my quarters but "Buzz" Keating. I threw my arms around him. His platoon and that of Hunt Taylor had suffered heavy casualties but had driven the Germans off the ridge and had beaten off the counterattacks. The paratroop position had weakened when Bill Jansen took "A" Company

in and neutralized the Germans on the left. Baker Company had helped Dick Roberts to get through to our two platoons. A clean up process had begun.

The north end of Moyland Wood was in our hands, but the south end was still controlled by the paratroops. The Canadian Scottish had attacked the south end during the night but had lost one full company and had not been successful. They had suffered very heavily. Al Gregory called to tell me that he had decided to assume full responsibility for what had transpired and that I would not attend the meeting with the Divisional Commander. Although I had not been looking forward to the meeting, I was a little disappointed at not being there to support Greg. I felt that we were justified in refusing to attack unless a major change could be made in the plan, and I was convinced that subsequent events had simply reinforced that belief. In any case, by not attending, it gave me time to do something that I felt obliged to do. I managed to get through to the headquarters of the 15th Scottish Division by phone. A Staff Officer answered and I wasted no time in telling him what I thought about them leaving their dead on the battlefield so long. He acknowledged that something should have been done before then, but explained that they had lost so many men that they didn't have the resources to get the job done. He promised to do as much as he could to arrange for burial of the dead soon.

Conclusion

The Regina Rifle book written shortly after the war points out that on 19 February, Lieutenant-Colonel Gregory "was called to act as Brigade Commander, as the Brigadier was leaving." That was, of course, the outcome of Greg's meeting with the Divisional and Brigade Commanders. We had been vindicated in our position that Brigade HQ had underestimated the strength of the enemy in Moyland Wood. I knew the Brigadier well, having met him first in Normandy. I had sat with him on a Court Martial case in December 1944. He had served with distinction on D-Day and in the Normandy campaign, and had commanded the Brigade since August. He was, no doubt, tired and like our Colonel Matheson, earlier, entitled to a well deserved rest after months of tension and strain.

Major Bob Orr moved up from second-in-command to act as battalion commander. Colonel Al Gregory, acting as Brigade Commander organized an entirely new plan of attack to be carried out by the Winnipeg Rifles, to capture the area of the wood still occupied by the enemy. He arranged a blistering fire plan in support of the Winnipegs, including heavy artillery, anti-tank guns, tanks and aerial bombardment. The Winnipegs, with the loss of about 105 killed and wounded, were able to dislodge the paratroopers and drive them out. Our early Regina Rifle history (1946) states that the Regina Rifle Scout Platoon, entering Moyland Village brought back one prisoner of war who claimed that the balance of enemy troops had withdrawn on the night of 20-21 February.

Lieutenant Buzz Keating and I visited the scene of our struggle in the north end of the woods and found many enemy dead. We also confirmed that the enemy had indeed controlled the killing ground, i.e., the open area in the trees. The machine gun sites and slit trenches had clearly been set up to encircle any intruders into Moyland Wood.

I returned to command Dog Company in the advance to the Hochwald and Üdem. Then Greg arranged a nice gift for me - a trip to Arras and Cambrai in France to spend a week with an RAF Mosquito Fighter Squadron. The squadron was based at a former German fighter field near Arras and was flying in direct support of the Army, doing night bombing and other raids designed to aid us in advancing into Germany. I was to provide the airmen with information about the infantry and the nature of the battle on the ground, and to learn of some of the problems faced by the pilots. I had a wonderful week and flew with one of the hottest pilots in the squadron on a fly-over of the Vimy Ridge Memorial, hedge-hopping in France and an upside down view above Brussels. I returned to action east of the Rhine where the Johns had just captured the German city of Emmerich.

Moyland Wood had caused the Regina Rifle Regiment more than 220 men killed or wounded in 3 days, ahead of the one-day number of 211 at the Ancient Abbey of Ardenne in Normandy. The Leopold Canal battle resulted in the highest casualties suffered by the Reginas in Western Europe, about 300 in six days. Thus, Moyland

Wood holds second place in our experience from a casualty point of view, and ahead of D-Day, Bretteville-l'Orgueilleuse, Caen, Falaise, The Seine, The Channel Ports, Nijmegen, North Holland and Germany. Moyland Wood is, of course, one of our battle honours. It was a victory for the Regina Rifles, but a very expensive one, under very trying circumstances. Among those receiving awards for bravery were Lieutenant Keating, a Military Cross and Sergeant Hunt Taylor, a Commander-in-Chiefs certificate. There were others who also deserved awards, of course, but as with life, war can never be considered entirely fair.

Buzz Keating and Hunt Taylor deserved their recognition. Buzz lives in BC and Hunt in Ontario. They have enjoyed meeting each other again at reunions. For them, the topic of conversation sometimes centres on Moyland Wood! Ironically, about two months after the Moyland Wood affair, as a result of command changes at the divisional and brigade level, Al Gregory found himself in command of 7th Brigade and I was commanding th& Reginas in the absence of Major Bob Orr, 2 i/c, who was away on assignment. We were to fight our last battle of the war at Leer in Germany on 29/30 April 1945. Greg was pushing me to get on with the attack, but I reminded him about too much haste at Moyland Wood and we shook hands on that. We had gone through a lot together since 6 June 1944 and had become fast friends.

Unfortunately, Allan Gregory died of a brain tumour in 1955 at the age of 39. He had married after the war and had established himself in a law firm in Vancouver. He had returned to Europe to visit the battlefields in July 1955. I received a card from him from Caen, Normandy and I have kept it ever since.

Gordon Brown landed with the Regina Rifles in Normandy on the morning of D-Day. On 8 June he was promoted to command Dog Company. He remained with the regiment for the entire campaign in Northwest Europe except for two short periods when he was wounded. He retired at the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel and now lives in Red Deer, AB with his wife, Jean.