But not quite so for Burns, who believes still in love.

> To make a happy fire-side clime,
> To weans and wife,
> That's the true pathos and sublime
> Of human life.
>
> *To Dr Blacklock.*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning—beautifully, without a cloying rhyme in sight, tells what our aim must be to discover love.

> For life, with all it yields of joy and woe,
> And hope, and fear, —believe the aged friend—
> Is just a chance o' the prize of learning love.
>
> *A Death in the Desert*, 1, 245.

Such love can transcend life, perhaps through grief when this is inevitable, and otherwise through our friends and through our children. As she says:

> But love me for love's sake, that evermore
> Thou mayst love on, through love's eternity.
>
> *If thou must love me*

Finally, Shakespeare again gives the full picture. In lines 1 and 2 one can and must reflect. In lines 3 to 6 we have to live with pain, but it helps (lines 7–8) to have a partner in life.

> When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
> I summon up remembrance of things past,
> ...
> Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
> And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
> The sad account of fore bemoaned moan,
> Which I new pay as if not paid before.
> But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
> All losses are restor'd and sorrows end.
>
> *Sonnets*, 30.

REFERENCES

1 Burton R. The anatomy of melancholy, 1621. All English text. Dell F, Jordan Smith P eds. New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1927.
2 Meyer A. The psychobiological point of view. In: Bentley M, Cowdry EV eds. The problem of mental health. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1934.
3 Engel GL. In: Psychological development in health and disease. Philadelphia: Saunders, 1962.
4 Paykel ES. The classification of depression. *Br J Clin Pharmacol* 1983; **15:** 155.
5 Kraepelin E. In: Manic-depressive insanity and paranoia. Edinburgh: E and S Livingstone, 1921.
6 Crisp AH. 'Biological' depression: because sleep fails? *Postgrad Med J* 1986; **62:** 179–185.

Proc. R. Coll. Physicians Edinb. 1995; **25:** 451–475

TOWARDS VICTORY IN EUROPE: THE BATTLE FOR WALCHEREN

J. O. Forfar, Medical Officer, 47 Royal Marine Commando*

In *The Eighty-five Days: the Story of the Battle of the Scheldt* R. W. Thomson commented that the higher a soldier's rank the smaller is the scale of the maps he uses as he ponders large areas of a battlefield and the broad tactical and strategic considerations which are his responsibility. In contrast, the large-scale 'map' required by the frontline soldier is frequently little more than the ground around him, a house, a hedge, a ditch, a fold in the ground, a few yards of river or stream, a copse, a cross-roads: and in human terms the enemy in front of him—an espied rifleman, soldiers manning a machine gun, unseen mortar men—the colleagues with him, his 'mate' who has been wounded.

A marine commando contemplating the battle for Walcheren knew little more than that he was to participate in an attack against powerful coastal defences on the Dutch coastline, part of the vaunted 'Atlantic Wall' and that his task was to put into practice his training for such an assault. He knew, too, that earlier opposed sea landings of the type planned had proved very hazardous. His 'maps' on this occasion were to be the inside of a Landing Craft Tank or Landing Vehicle Tracked and the sea around them; pools of mud; wet, sliding and seemingly endless sand-dunes; hostile enemy pillboxes; trenches and gun case-mates; ground to be fought over. He had to put his trust in many matters of which he knew little, trust the officers who led him and trust that, if he were seriously wounded, others including the commando medical staff, would make every effort to rescue him.

The officers' appreciation and understanding of their role, although wider, was also inevitably limited, defined from above in terms of the specific tasks allocated to them. In this sense the medical officer was no different. In military terms he had trained specifically for the task ahead but medical training and the duties of his non-combatant role gave him a unique opportunity to observe at close quarters, not only the nature of front-line battle, but also the human reactions in men exposed to extreme stress.

Time, an understanding of many of the features of the Walchern operation, unknown to the men when participating in it, and a wider appreciation of its strategic and historical background have put the operation into a more ordered and comprehendible perspective and revealed more of its significance and consequences.

PRELUDE TO WALCHEREN

Three months after the D-Day landings on the Normandy beaches on 6th June 1944 the Allied Armies had almost reached the Dutch border. During the

*Professor Emeritus, Department of Child Life and Health, University of Edinburgh. Address for correspondence: 9 Ravelston Heights, Edinburgh EH4 3LX.

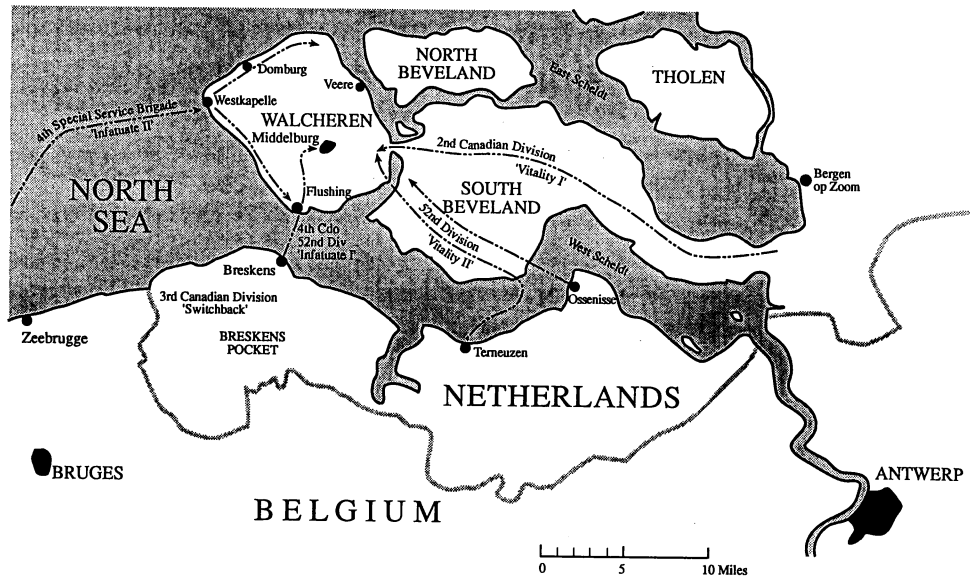


FIGURE 1
The Scheldt and its borders, 1944.

advance across France and Belgium the supply lines from the dispersed Channel ports had progressively lengthened. The port of Cherbourg was now over 300 miles away. Le Havre, recently captured along with Boulogne and Calais, was 200 miles away, but these were minor ports and all had suffered considerable damage. Dunkirk, isolated, was still in German hands. Dieppe and Ostend had been captured almost intact but had only limited capacity. The key to the increasingly critical supply problems of the Allied armies—now approaching two million men—was Antwerp, the second largest port in Europe.

On 4th September the British 11th Armoured Division with a dash which took the defenders by surprise captured Antwerp, virtually undamaged, but this achievement was of no avail because Antwerp could not be used. The port is sixty miles from the sea at the head of the Scheldt estuary, and the land to the south of the estuary, the 'Breskens Pocket', and to the north, South Beveland and Walcheren, remained in German hands (Fig 1) Powerful gun batteries and mining of the estuary prevented any access of Allied shipping. The lands bordering the Scheldt would require to be cleared of the enemy before the port could be used.

This requirement raised a serious dilemma for Field Marshal Montgomery. Admiral Ramsay, Eisenhower's (British) Naval Chief of Staff considered that the opening of the Scheldt must be the first priority but Montgomery was intent on a direct strike on a very narrow front into Holland with the objective of capturing in one incisive operation the bridges over the Maas, the Waal and the Rhine. He hoped to split the German army and open up the way for a thrust into the heart of Germany. This was the plan for 'Market Garden' or the Arnhem operation as it is better known. 'Market Garden' however required concentration of men, materials and transport and meant halting the pursuit of

the powerful 15th German army retreating from the Pas de Calais. The attack on the Breskens pocket, South Beveland and Walcheren would have to wait. The Germans were given the opportunity to reorganise their forces on both sides of the Scheldt and the formidable Scheldt defences were now reinforced by 3,000 troops escaping from South Beveland to join the 9,000 already in Walcheren.

'Market Garden' began on 17th September. By 25th September it was clear that, valiant as was the attempt, it had failed to achieve its main objective and that substantial resources of men and materials had been lost, compounding the problem of freeing the Scheldt estuary by reducing the available forces. At the same time the importance of freeing Antwerp had increased because the failure of the hoped for rapid advance into Germany meant that the war would now be prolonged and large amounts of supplies would be required for a broad front attack over an extended period. This was particularly a problem for the Americans with their main port of Cherbourg so far away, and with their need to supply an increasingly larger proportion of the total Allied armies. General Patton, too, was restlessly awaiting assurance of supplies before beginning his planned thrust into Germany. Fearful that preoccupation with Arnhem would blunt appreciation of the paramount need to free Antwerp the Supreme Commander, General Eisenhower, in the middle of the Arnhem operation (September 22nd), was urging that Antwerp must be opened as a matter of urgency and as an essential prerequisite for the final drive into Germany, adding for the benefit of Field Marshal Montgomery, 'this must be accepted by all'. Admiral Ramsay subsequently wrote, 'I told the Field Marshal before Arnhem that he ought first to open Antwerp but he would not do so. Now he realises that I was right and that we must open Antwerp before we can advance into Germany'.

For their part the Germans considered the denial of the Scheldt to the Allied armies as vital to their interests. A captured German command order clearly indicated this:

> 'The defence of the approaches to Antwerp represents a task which is decisive for the future conduct of the war. After over-running the Scheldt fortifications the British would finally be in a position to land great masses of material in a large and completely protected harbour. With this material they might deliver a death blow at the North German Plateau and at Berlin before the onset of winter. For this reason we must hold the Scheldt fortifications to the end. These fortifications occupy a role which is decisive for the future of our people. In this hour the eyes of the German people are upon you'.

Appealing less to patriotism and relying more on threats of sanctions against any contemplating surrender General Eberding, the German Commander in the Breskens pocket, issued a more decisive order:

> 'Any man who surrenders, no matter the circumstances, will be regarded as a deserter. His name will be made known to the civilian population at home and his next of kin will be looked upon as enemies of the German people'.

The task of freeing the Scheldt estuary was allocated to the First Canadian Army's 2nd Corps consisting of the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Infantry Divisions, the British 52nd (Lowland) Division (mainly Scottish and trained paradoxically, despite its title, for mountain warfare and the invasion of Norway but instead now asked to operate at or below sea level), the British 30th Armoured Brigade, the First Assault Regiment of the Royal Engineers, two Groups of Royal

Artillery and the 4th Special Service Brigade. The latter consisted of 41, 47 and 48 Royal Marine Commandos (Cdos) and 4 Army Commando. The Royal Navy had an important part to play in the seaborne attack and, in Southampton, 'T Force' was being assembled for this purpose. The battleship *Warspite* and the monitors *Erebus* and *Roberts* were there to support the operation. The Navy had a twofold role, to attack the western defences of Walcheren from the sea and to transport the seaborne attacking troops.

The responsibility for capturing the 'Breskens Pocket' on the south bank of the Scheldt ('Switchback', Fig 1) was given to the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division and part of the British 52nd Division. Early assumptions that this would take three days grossly underestimated the difficulty. The Germans were no longer in headlong retreat, they had turned to fight. The task took three weeks of bloody fighting over flat, cold, water-logged polders against a determined well armed enemy. The attack began on 6th October, Breskens was captured by 25th October and the whole of the 'Pocket' was in Allied hands by 31st October.

The clearing of the South Beveland peninsula on the north bank of the Scheldt was allocated to the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division and the British 52nd Division. Among the troops defending the peninsula were six battalions of German paratroops. By 23rd October the neck of the peninsula had been closed with the capture of Bergen-op-Zoom by the 4th Canadian Armoured Division. Next day the Canadian 2nd Division turned into the peninsula ('Vitality I' Fig 1). By 31st October the Canadians had reached the causeway linking South Beveland with Walcheren and achieved a precarious hold on the causeway's western end. This was only achieved after heavy fighting often in darkness, over exposed mud-flats, ditches and a narrow causeway giving every advantage to the defenders. The bridgehead at the Walcheren end of the causeway was lost and then retaken and the hold there then strengthened when the 52nd Division having crossed the Scheldt from Terneuzen and Ossenisse ('Vitality II', Fig 1) made a daring amphibious crossing to Walcheren south of the causeway and turned north to join up with the Canadians at the bridgehead. Further progress to Middelburg was not possible as much of the island had been flooded by the Germans, creating a barrier of water, mud, mines, defensive emplacements and other obstructions across the island from north to south. However, it was now 4th November and decisive events were taking place on the western side of the island. The 4th Special Service Brigade, in a seaborne attack on the batteries on that most vital side of the island had, within three days, accomplished most of its task.

APPROACH FROM THE WEST

There were those, including General Crerar the former commander of the First Canadian Army, who considered that a seaborne attack against the western side of Walcheren would be impossible because it would be met by coastal defences as formidable as any in the world. The disaster of Dieppe and the risks of seaborne frontal assault had not been forgotten. General Simonds who succeeded him just before the Walcheren operation, did not share this view. Much of Walcheren is below sea level and General Simonds conceived the plan of further flooding the western and northern sides of the island by blowing gaps in the dykes at Westkapelle, Flushing (Vlissingen) and Veere. Most of the western coastal defences were sited above sea level on the dunes and on the dykes (i.e. on the

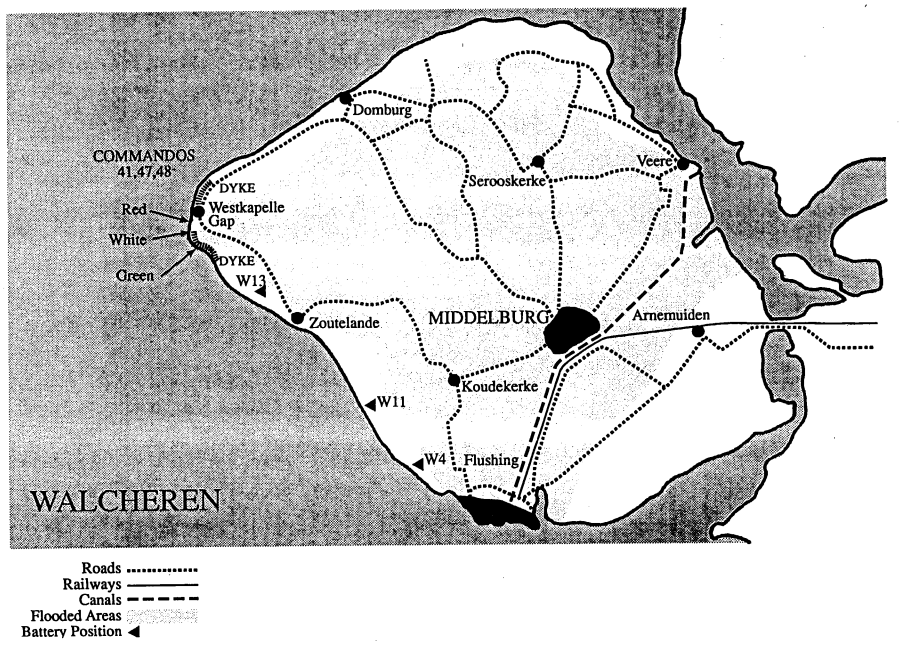


FIGURE 2
Walcheren Island, 1944.

edge of this saucer-like island) and would not be flooded by breaking the dykes but gun emplacements inland from the dunes would be flooded and this would also deny the enemy the use of some of the supply roads to and from the coastal batteries and impair communication (Fig 2).

The western defences of Walcheren consisted of about 30 batteries mounting 3 to 8·6 inch guns many housed in concrete casemates up to 14 feet thick, concrete 'pillboxes' from which machine gun and rifle fire could be directed, mortar positions, concrete bunkers, sand-bagged trenches and weapon pits, mines, barbed wire, concrete 'dragon's teeth' anti-tank obstacles, vertical steel girders concreted into the dykes and mined underwater obstacles (Fig 3a–f).

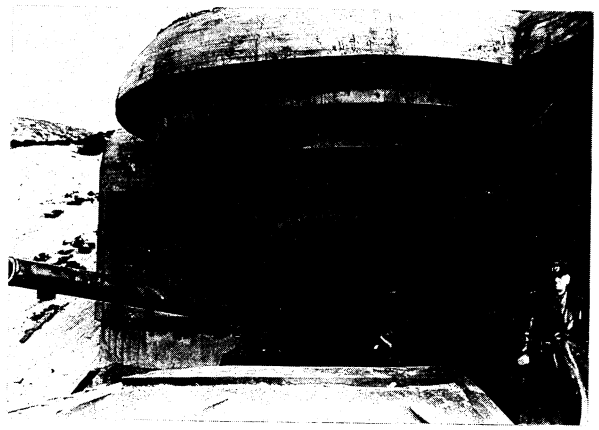
Most were concentrated on the critical (from a defence point of view) 10 miles of coast between Westkapelle and Flushing. It was the batteries in this area which, above all, prevented access to Antwerp.

The dyke at Westkapelle was 330 feet thick at the base and 30 feet high. The Royal Air Force (RAF) using 259 Lancaster bombers made the initial breach (Figs 4a, b). Later bombing enlarged the gap so that at varying states of the tide its width ranged from 100 to over 300 yards. Smaller breaches in the dyke were created on either side of Flushing and near Veere in the north. Between 11th and 21st October RAF bombers dropped over 3,000 tons of bombs on the west coast defences of Walcheren. Later analysis of the results was to show that this, and artillery bombardment from the Breskens area after Breskens was captured, had had a limited effect on reducing the fire power of the batteries.

The operational plan was that 4 Cdo followed by elements of the 52nd Division would assault Flushing across the 4 miles of Scheldt from Breskens ('Infatuate I', Fig 1) while 41, 47 and 48 Cdos sailing from Ostend in a 40 mile

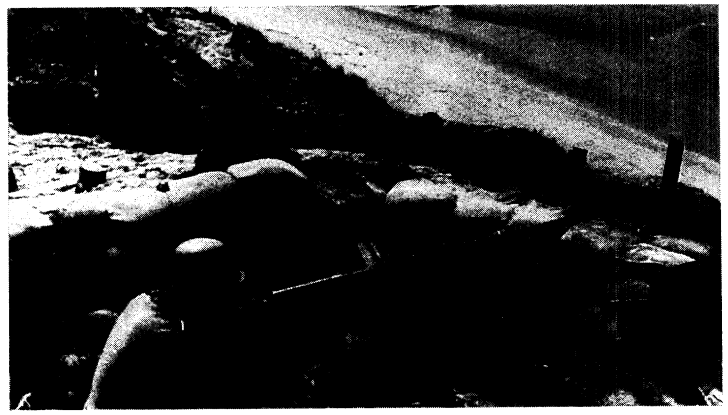
FIGURE 3 GERMAN DEFENCES.

a. A coastal gun, West Walcheren (Copyright: Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv, Koblenz).



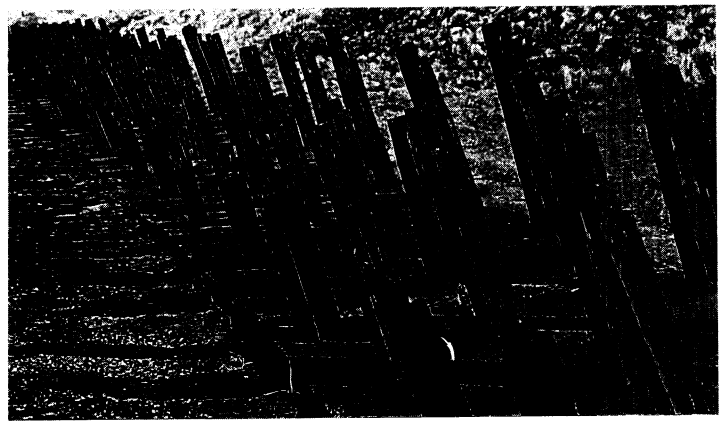
b. One of the Battery W11 6 in. guns housed in a concrete casemate with 'umbrella' roof (Copyright: Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv, Koblenz).

c. German soldiers preparing trenches near Klein Valkenisse (Copyright: Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv, Koblenz).



d. Sandbagged machine gun (Hotchkiss) weapon pit near Klein Valkenisse (Copyright: Bundesarchiv-Bildarchiv, Koblenz).

e. Anti-tank 'dragon's teeth' near Groot Valkenisse (Copyright: Battle of Britain Prints International).



f. Anti-invasion steel girders embedded in the dyke near Westkapelle (Copyright: Battle of Britain Prints International).

FIGURE 4

a. The Westkapelle Gap. Aerial photograph taken by the RAF on 3 October 1944, the day the dyke was bombed and breached (Copyright: the Ministry of Defence, U.K.).

b. The destruction caused to Westkapelle by bombing and flooding. The Westkapelle tower (lighthouse) in the background (Crown copyright: Imperial War Museum, London).

seaward loop would land at the Westkapelle gap and clear the coastal defences between Domburg and Flushing ('Infatuate II' Fig 1). 41 Cdo would move northward from the gap to Westkapelle, Domburg and beyond, and 47 and 48 Cdos move southward from the gap to Flushing.

The landing of the three Royal Marine Commandos would be covered by an attack on the coastal batteries by the supporting ships of 'T' Force manned by naval personnel and marine gunners. These ships were mostly open, flat bottomed LCTs (landing craft tank) converted into assault ships.

'T' Force would consist of 8 LCGs (landing craft gun, carrying 4·7 inch, 17 pounder guns), 6 LCFs (landing craft flak, carrying Oerlikon, 20 mm and 2 pounder 'pom pom' guns), 5 LCT(R)s (landing craft rocket) and 6 LCS(L) (converted, partially armoured, wooden infantry landing ships carrying 6 and 2 pounder guns). Only small shallow-draught ships of this type with less than 7 feet (213 cm) draught could get close enough to the Walcheren shores.

On this occasion, unlike the Port-en-Bessin operation (*Proceedings* 1994; **24**: 218–46) where 47 Cdo was on its own and cut off from medical support services, the Canadian 17 Field Ambulance, 10 Field Dressing Station (FDS), 8 and 9 Surgical Units (FSU) and 5 Field Transfusion Unit (FTU) would be in support of the whole of 4th Special Service Brigade.

THE PREPARATION

On 24th September 47 RM Commando, which had been in action since D-day and was part of a force investing Dunkirk, still in German hands, was ordered to move to Wenduine on the Belgian coast and two days later was established there. It was soon clear that a major opposed landing was in prospect and in due course the location was revealed as Walcheren Island. 47 Cdo and 48 Cdo were to attack the island's coastal defences extending from the Westkapelle gap to Flushing (Fig 2).

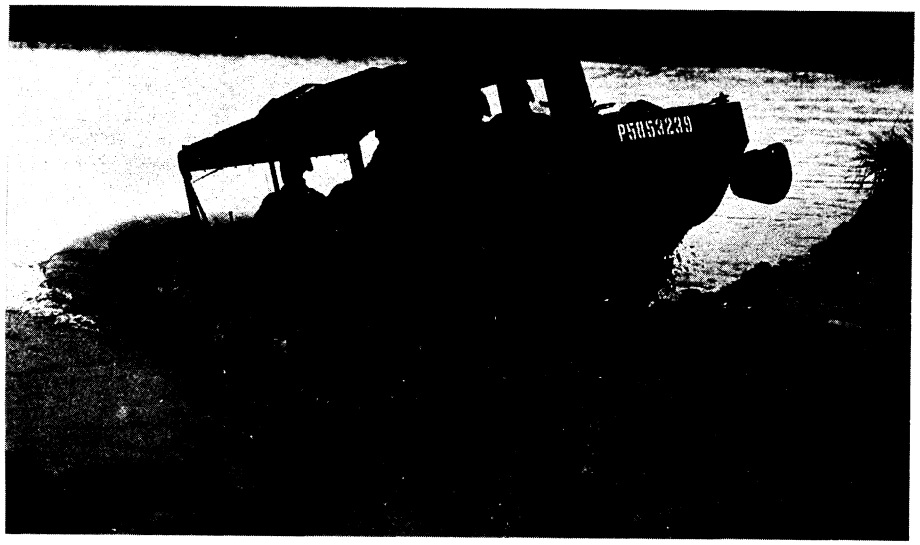
New equipment and limitations

In Wenduine the routine of intensive training for assault landing was soon in full swing, now with two new fighting 'animals', the 'Buffalo' and the 'Weasel'. The official name for a Buffalo was Landing Vehicle Tracked (LVT) (Fig 5a). It looked like a small tank with an open top, was lightly armoured and was amphibious, with a maximum water speed of 5 knots and a maximum land speed of 25 miles per hour. It could carry about 24 marines. The Weasel was also a tracked amphibian but much smaller (Fig 5b). This was the first time that Buffaloes and Weasels were to be used in a British military operation. That the objective was Walcheren gave no encouragement since Walcheren had been the graveyard of a disastrous British expedition in 1809 in which oared barges carried men and horses in an attempt to invade the island. It was hoped that in 1944 motorised barges, Buffaloes and Weasels would fare better than the oared barges and horses had done 135 years ago.

Another new type of weapon with which the commando was provided was a mobile flame-thrower. Sadly unforseen circumstances resulted in it causing more harm to the marines than to their enemies.

In training, the Buffaloes impressed as valuable new additions to assault landing armamentaria. Used medically, stretchers laid out on the floor were certainly open to the elements but the lightly armoured sides of the LVT would

FIGURE 5
a. The 'Buffalo' or Landing Vehicle Tracked (LVT).



b. The 'Weasel' (Crown copyright: Imperial War Museum, London).

give some protection to casualties being rescued under fire. In the event the terrain and anti-tank obstacles on Walcheren prevented the LVTs being used in this way. Before the operation there was only limited opportunity to test out the new Weasel. This was at Blankenberghe harbour. There, the Weasel, tested on the harbour surroundings and in its unruffled waters, appeared to perform satisfactorily. Four stretchers could be fitted into it. Unfortunately, in due course, experience under the more rigorous conditions of the open sea, strong currents, soft sand, steep sand dunes and the actions of a hostile enemy was to demonstrate that the Weasel's seaworthiness and reliability on both land and sea, under adverse conditions, left much to be desired.

EMBARKATION AND APPROACH

Medical support arrangements

Under the command of Lieut-Col. C. F. Phillips (later General Sir Farndale Phillips) 47 RM Commando, mustering 22 officers and 378 other ranks (including 1 officer and 12 other ranks of the Dutch troop of Number 10 Inter Allied (IA) Cdo) embarked on four Landing Craft Tank (LCT) in Ostend harbour on the evening of 31st October 1944. Each LCT carried 5 Buffaloes, and 19 Weasels were distributed between the four LCTs. Two of the Weasels carried medical stores, stretchers, field dressings, splints, antiseptics, morphia and a variety of surgical instruments for use in emergency situations. Each of the six fighting Troops designated A, B, Q, X and Y had one RAMC lance corporal medical-orderly/stretcher-bearer attached to it as did the Heavy Weapons (mortars and machine guns) Troop (HW). The Headquarters Troop (HQ) contained the medical staff who manned the Regimental Aid Post (RAP) and consisted of one medical officer (Captain), one sergeant, and one private, all from the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC), along with two marines trained in first aid and the medical officer's MOA (marine officer's attendant), Cpl Pymm. Although administratively part of the HQ Troop the RAP staff operated at the discretion of the medical officer who was always fully briefed on battle plans. The presence of RAMC personnel among the Royal Marines, traditionally served by medical officers from the Royal Navy, arose from the reluctance of naval medical officers to volunteer for commando service with the foot slogging and landlubbering which that entailed. The Navy had had to turn to the RAMC and the RAMC had responded.

Embarkation in Ostend Harbour led to the usual flurry of activity which precedes such operations but by late evening of 31st October number 4 Special Service Brigade was ready to depart. By 0100 hours on 1st November the piers of the Ostend jetties were sliding past and soon the harbour with its subdued 'blackout' lighting was fading from sight as the LCTs moved out to the open sea. At the off-shore rendezvous the whole armada, 150 ships in all, assembled. It was led by the frigate *Kingsmill* acting as Headquarters ship, with the naval commander, Captain Pugsley RN, and the brigade commander, Brigadier Leicester RM, aboard. Within the armada were the 25 support craft under Commander Sellar. 47 Cdo was in LCTs serial numbers LCT18, 19, 20 and 21 with most of the medical section in LCT19.

As the armada headed northward into the open sea the water was calm, there was little wind and within LCT19 the throb of its engines, the lapping of water

against its sides and periodic low-voiced commands among the naval personnel were the predominant sounds. It was dark but from time to time as the night sky temporarily brightened the shadowy somewhat sinister shapes of accompanying LCTs loomed out of the darkness like creeping fellow conspirators, then faded from sight as if espied and anxious to retreat into hiding. To those aboard it appeared that the die was cast, the operation was 'on'. By 2 a.m. most of those who had no specific duties, including the medical officer, were attempting to sleep wherever they could find a resting place, and a stretcher on the bottom of the LCT was as good as any.

What those sleepers did not know, however, was that the die was not cast and the operation not necessarily 'on'. Commander Pugsley and Brigadier Leicester had been informed on leaving Ostend that due to fog in England the Lancaster bombers which were to carry out a preliminary bombardment of the Walcheren defences while the assaulting craft moved in were grounded. Some support from rocket firing Typhoon aircraft might be available but not spotter aircraft to monitor the accuracy of the long range guns of the battleships or long range artillery firing from the Breskens pocket. The two commanders had been instructed to set sail and to use their discretion as to whether, in the light of the bombing cancellation, the artillery difficulties and the battle prospects as they saw them, they would or would not proceed with the operation. They knew that due to tidal conditions there would only be a few days on which the operation could be mounted and that such delay would mean that surprise would be lost. As the little ships moved towards Walcheren the commanders made their decision, the operation would go on. Without air cover the supporting ships would have to assault the shore batteries at closer range than had been planned and the commandos would meet defenders undistracted and unharmed by concurrent bombing.

THE LANDING

As the night passed and darkness showed signs of lightening all were now alert. By 0700 the armada was turning toward the Walcheren coast through the mine-strewn waters of the outer Scheldt. Preliminary mine sweeping of the assault route had not been feasible. As watching eyes turned landward (Fig 6a), straining to penetrate the thin morning haze, the outline of the Walcheren coast, now eleven miles distant, gradually broke the line of sea and sky ahead and the prominent lighthouse tower at Westkapelle began to reveal itself, standing high like a sign-post to the coming battle (Fig 6b). There was little sound of warlike activity in this lull before the storm. By 0830, however, the first notes were sounding. The big ships *Warspite, Roberts* and *Erebus* 13 miles offshore were opening fire. The boom of their big guns was sounding across the water and the crash of their shells was echoing back from the Walcheren coast.

The little ships continued to move in with the 25 support craft leading the way. Behind were the LCTs of 41 and 48 Cdos followed by those of 47 Cdo. 47 Cdo was to land after 41 and 48 Cdos.

Bravery and price

As the support craft sailed on, the troop-carrying LCTs slowed, maintaining their offshore position. A remarkable scene now began to unfold. The forward support craft went right up to the shore, firing as they went, some closing with the

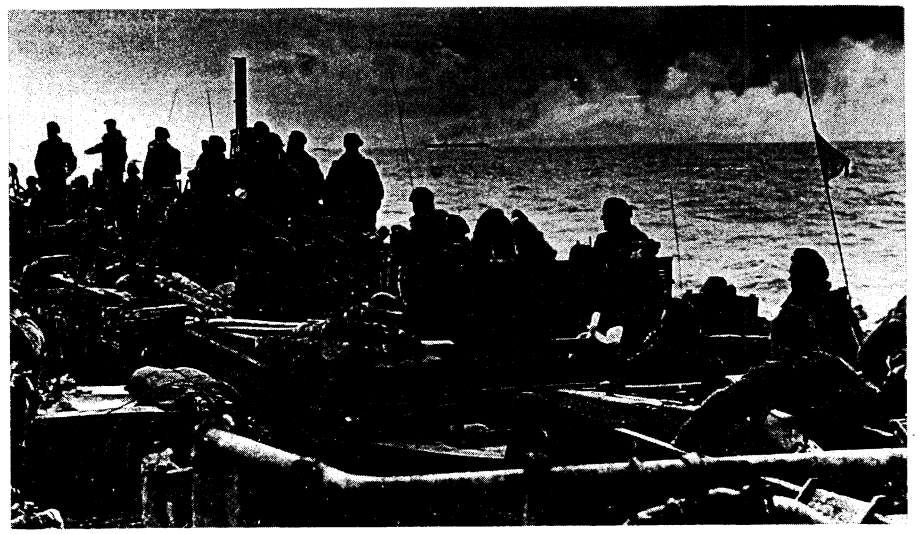
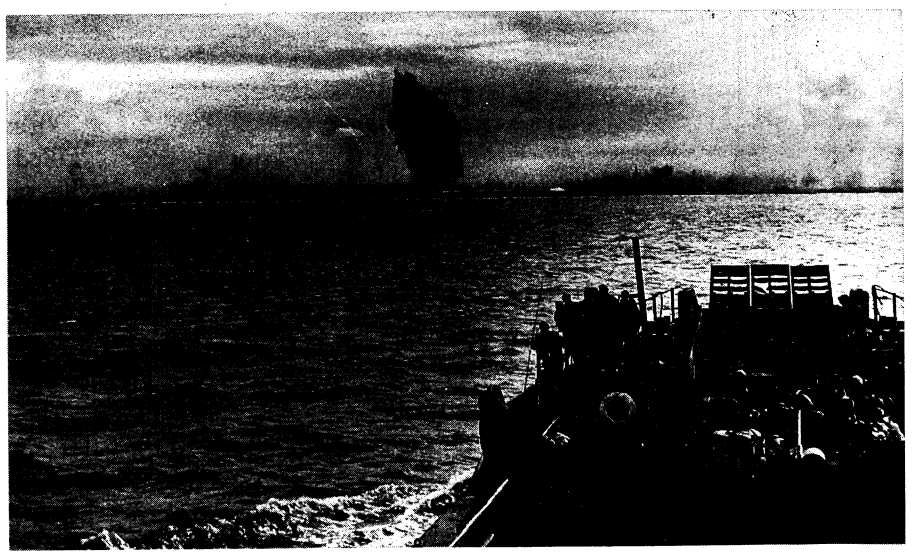


FIGURE 6

a. 47 RM Commando approaching the Walcheren coast. 4 LVTs and a 'Weasel' visible. The commandos wore berets not steel helmets (Copyright: Royal Marines Museum).



b. The Walcheren coast under bombardment as one of the commando LCTs moves in. The top of the Westkapelle tower is visible above the smoke (Crown copyright: Imperial War Museum, London).

coastal batteries at almost point-blank range. The big coastal batteries responded, the flashes and smoke from their gun barrels clearly visible. David in small fragile, lightly armed craft exposed on the open sea was taking on Goliath sheltering in concrete bunkers equipped with an array of all manner of weaponry, big guns, medium guns, machine guns, small arms and mortars. Soon the batteries from Westkapelle to Zoutelande had the range of the support craft and were exacting a heavy toll. Two of the support craft with the bigger guns, engaging the enemy at 500 to 600 yards, were sunk and two severely damaged. The support craft with medium guns had been given the task of beaching on the sides of the Westkapelle gap to attack the pillboxes which were a threat to the landing troops. One of these craft as it beached and engaged the pillboxes was set alight—none of the 31 officers and men, engulfed in flames, survived. Another, although damaged, continued firing for two-and-three-quarter hours and sank as it withdrew. Three of the other support craft were ordered to beach and engage strongpoints as the commandos came ashore—all three were set on fire. An LCF received a direct hit and the ammunition which it carried exploded—the few survivors thrown into the sea had to endure machine gunning from the shore.

A salvo from one of the supporting rocket ships fell short straddling four of the other support craft and wounding over 30 marine gunners. An LCT which was to be used as a hospital ship blew up on hitting a mine.

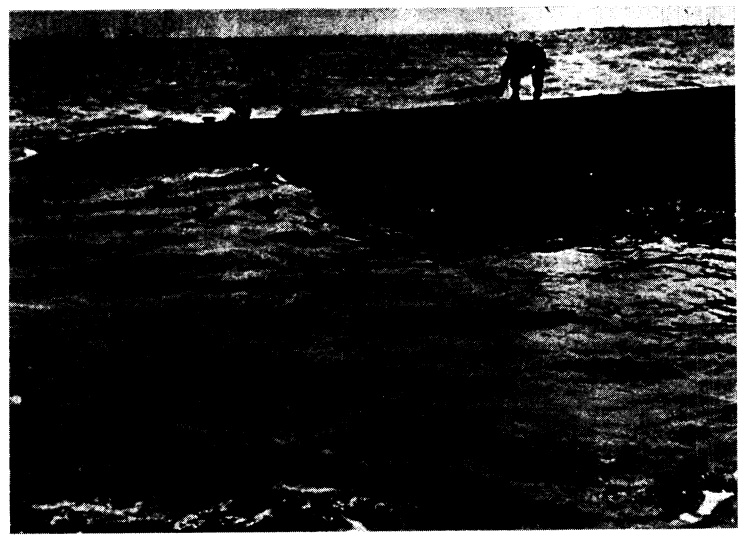
The overall picture was of some ships sinking (Fig 7a), some on fire, one exploding, and one floating bottom upwards. Men were in the water (Fig 7b). Guns flashed and the air was filled with the sound of explosions. A pall of smoke overhung the scene rendering it even more gloomy and forbidding on that sombre November day. As long as they remained afloat and their guns were capable of firing the support craft continued to fulfil their task of drawing the fire of the enemy batteries while the commandos got ashore. Mercifully, as this uneven contest continued, rocket firing Typhoons of the RAF, which had at last been able to take to the air, arrived to give the little ships some assistance by blasting the gun positions ashore.

In the three hours between 0900 and noon, 9 out of the 25 support craft were sunk and 8 damaged. Casualties were high. Out of a force of 1,030 men, approximately half of them naval personnel and half marines, 172 were killed and nearly 200 wounded. It is hardly surprising that General Eisenhower in his report on the Walcheren operation said, 'great credit for the success of the amphibious operations is due to the support craft of the British Navy, which unhesitatingly and in the highest tradition of the service attracted to themselves the point-blank fire of the land batteries, thus permitting the Commandos and assault troops to gain the shore with much lighter casualties than would have otherwise been the case'. The commandos owed the men of the support craft an immense debt of gratitude.

As the support craft engaged the shore batteries the LCTs carrying 41 and 48 Cdos moved towards the Westkapelle gap. From 47 Cdo's LCT19, carrying most of the medical section, their landing was obscured but just after 1000 hours one of the naval personnel, following radio contact, announced that both commandos had landed, 41 Cdo to the north of the gap and 48 to the south. The first wave of the troop-carrying LCTs suffered less harassment from the coastal batteries than those that were to come in later because of the extent to which in the early stage of the battle the coastal batteries were preoccupied with the terrier-like

FIGURE 7

a. A stricken LCG sinking. Some of the crew in the water and one diving into it (Crown copyright: Imperial War Museum, London).



b. An upturned LCT with men in the water (Crown copyright: Imperial War Museum, London).

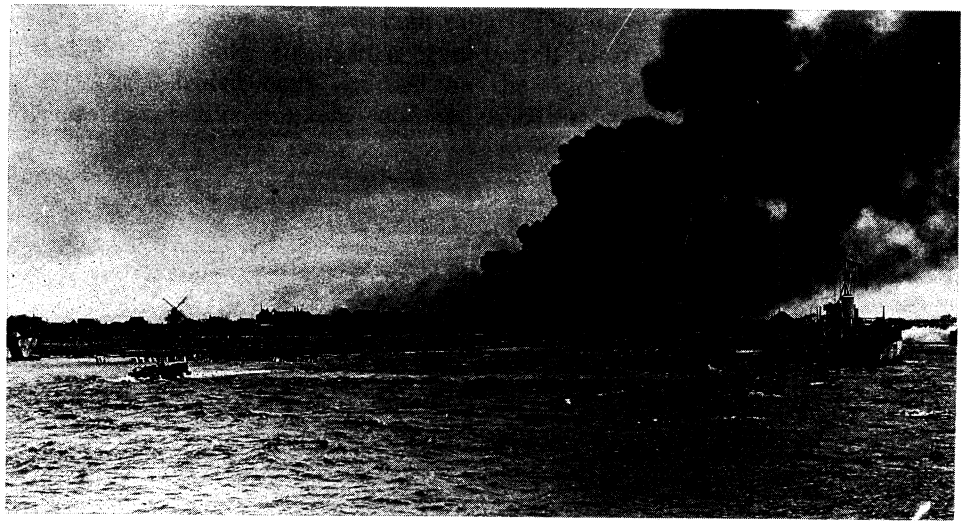


FIGURE 8
An LCT just off shore with 3 'swimming' LVTs making for the beach (Crown copyright: Imperial War Museum, London).

support craft snarling at their feet. The second wave of 48 Cdo's LCTs came in under heavy fire which intensified as the whole of 47 Cdo came in. There are those who think that the outcome of the battle for Walcheren might have been different had the coastal batteries concentrated on the troop carrying LCTs from the start rather than on the support craft.

47 Cdo moves in

For over 2 hours 47 Cdo waited offshore for the order to land, alert and ready, spectators of a unique naval panorama. Shells were falling around at periodic intervals. At 1230 hours, two hours after the planned landing time, a naval motor launch approached and shouted through its loud hailer, '47 Commando go in and land on White Beach and good luck to you'. White beach was within the Westkapelle gap on its south side. As the 47 Cdo LCTs moved in the intensity of shelling increased. Each shell as it exploded raised a spreading column of spray, a column including a lethal ingredient of whizzing shrapnel. Standing inside an LVT there was a sense of security that, short of a direct hit, there were two layers of armour (the walls of the LCT and the LVT) between the bursting shells and the inside of the LVT.

The two-hour landing delay imposed on 47 Cdo not only increased the length of time over which it was exposed to fire on the open sea but had another serious effect. A sandbank off Westkapelle could not be crossed within one and a half hours of low water. Towards full tide (incoming) underwater obstacles and the remnants of the bomb damaged dyke were just covered, constituting hidden hazards to incoming craft. There was a one-and-a-half hour 'safe period' around half tide but it was well past this before 47 Cdo sailed in.

The landing plan for 47 Cdo was that its LVTs and weasels would enter the water down the ramps of the LCTs in the Westkapelle gap close to the gap's southern side and that the LVTs and weasels would 'swim' to the southern edge (Fig 8). It was thought that this arrangement would expose the troops less to

FIGURE 9
Aerial photograph of the Westkapelle gap as the commandos landed. Some support craft and landing craft beached with others moving in (Crown copyright: Imperial War Museum, London).

hostile fire. The plan, compromised by the landing delay, was not a success. A senior regular officer of the Royal Marines who served throughout the war observed afterwards that he was convinced that there was no military action, not even the most successful, which did not have in it (in his words) a large element of 'cock up'. As far as 47 Cdo was concerned the landing had that element.

LCT 18 carrying the CO was leading in. Close to the southern edge of the gap it lowered its ramp but as it did so it received a direct hit. The shell passed through the driving compartment of one of the LVTs, killing the driver and wireless operator, and struck an adjoining weasel carrying the new flame-throwing equipment. The latter 'brewed up' and set fire to another Weasel. The port side of the LCT was now in flames and a number of marines suffered burns. The foremost LVT immediately drove down the ramp into the water. The next LVT, the one on fire, was blocking the exit of others. The Royal Engineer officer in charge entered it and drove it into the water. The occupants, in the water, had to swim. One of the remaining LVTs had sustained a broken track and could not move. Its occupants had to jump into the water. The LVT containing the CO then moved down the ramp and as planned reached the south side of the gap successfully. The remaining LVT got into the water but its steering had locked. It picked up some marines from the water. Due to the steering difficulty it could only move in wide circles but it finally managed to beach, not within the gap but south of it on the seaward-facing beach.

By this time the access to the gap was becoming partially obstructed by sunken support craft and damaged or manoevering LCTs and LVTs (Fig. 9). Due to the delay in landing and the rising tide, water was now flowing inwards through the gap at 6–8 knots making the navigation of 'swimming' LVTs much

more difficult. Some of the LCTs, to avoid obstructions, were veering to the north of the gap. The higher tide, rubble, large boulders and bomb craters in the gap created subsidiary channels and islands making it difficult to determine where the main channel lay, particularly as floating LVTs sank deeply into the water and the eye of a navigator was little above sea level.

As LCT19, containing the LVT in which the second-in-command and most of the medical section were travelling, approach the gap it became trapped between the sterns of two other LCTs and had to disengage, lowering its ramp further out than intended, 60 yards off the north shoulder of the gap. The LVT churned into the water. The small amount of freeboard allowed little protection against swamping should a shell land nearby but one felt a smaller, less conspicuous target than in the LCT. The LVT, aiming for the south bank, twisted and turned in tortuous currents which made navigation difficult. It grounded and was thought to be on the south bank. It 'waddled' out of the water and moved inland through a sludge of water, mud and rocks (Fig 10a, b) and as it did the course of the main channel became clearer. The LVT was on the wrong side. The area was under constant shell fire and two wounded marines (probably from 41 Commando) suffering from shrapnel wounds were struggling through the mud. They were examined, bandaged up and sent off to the beach dressing station which, according to plan, should have been already established at Westkapelle.

The main channel of the gap with its fast flowing current had now to be crossed. Coils of barbed wire threatened to entangle the tracks of the LVT and wooden posts to obstruct it but, avoiding these, the LVT turned into the channel. The crossing seemed painfully slow as the LVT was swept more sideways than forward but the opposite bank was finally reached and by 1330 hours the LVT was successfully clawing its way out. Another LVT from LCT19 had followed the same course but the other three had succeeded in reaching the south bank of the gap directly.

The next LCT, LCT20 had been hit before it beached and a number of its occupants, including the Regimental Sergeant Major, wounded. Near the north side of the gap it struck an abandoned LCT, delaying the lowering of the ramp. The LVTs then drove out landing on the north side of the gap. The occupants mistakenly thought that they could best cross the gap by making a detour on foot round the landward side of the flooding but after floundering about up to their waists in water found they could not. Returning, they found that their LVTs had disappeared; someone else had found a use for them! The stranded marines were later ferried across by other LVTs.

LCT21 received a direct hit while 300 yards from the beach killing the Royal Engineer Captain in charge of the LVTs, wounding the driver, the Y troop sergeant major and a marine. Four of the LVTs following one of the troop commanders then landed correctly on the south side of the gap but, indicative of the difficulty of reading the ground, the troop commander thought he was on the wrong side and crossed the gap to the north side followed by the four LVTs. Three of the five LVTs proceeded onwards and halted near Westkapelle, disembarking with their weapons and equipment. Then they realised that they had made a mistake, retraced their steps and after a detour recrossed the gap to the south side. The other two LCTs recognised as soon as they had crossed from the south to the north that they had made a mistake and crossed back again. As one of them did, it rescued four 47 Cdo marines who had been in a Weasel

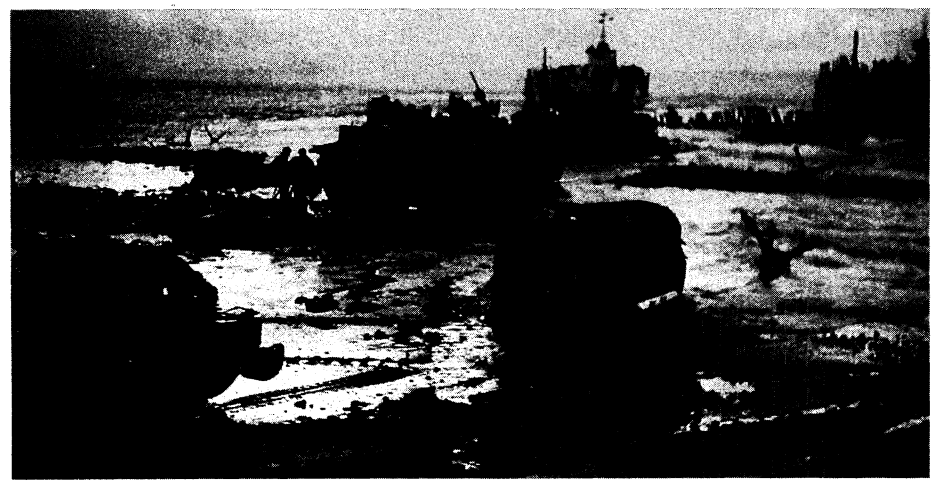


FIGURE 10

a. Two LVTs and 2 'Weasels' leaving LCTs at the Westkapelle gap and avoiding possibly mined obstructions (Crown copyright: Imperial War Museum, London).

b. An LVT, followed by another in the foreground, moving up the beach. Steel tripod obstacles ahead (Crown copyright: Imperial War Museum, London).

which had sunk in the waters of the gap. The marines were clinging to the poles which the Germans had planted to obstruct invaders but which paradoxically were now serving as life-savers for these self-same invaders.

These difficult landings had cost 30 casualties. A number of marines had been lost, others had been wounded or were suffering from burns. In November the water of the North Sea is cold. Some of the marines precipitated into it, especially the wounded and burned, suffered from hypothermia. Some of those who were not wounded, having landed, swam back again to help others in difficulties. Marine Lanyon was in LCT18. The shell which had hit it had blown one of this colleagues into the sea breaking his leg. Lanyon, no great swimmer, jumped into the sea to assist his colleague who was helpless and in great pain and managed to struggle with him to the beach 200 yards away. Lanyon had swallowed a lot of water and was exhausted. He removed his wet clothing at the beach dressing station and clad only in a blanket rejoined the commando, receiving more appropriate clothing at the RAP. Next day he was involved with his troop in the attack on the battery south-east of Zoutelande. His section NCO was killed and three other members of the section wounded. Rallying his depleted section Lanyon rushed the enemy post killing three of them and wounding a fourth.

Thus of the four LCTs carrying 47 Cdo two disgorged their LVTs on the wrong (north) side of the gap. Of the 20 LVTs, two were sunk and 12 ended up on the wrong side of the gap. The delay in the call-in to the shore, the obstructions encountered, the intensity of the shelling and the navigational problems of LCTs and LVTs caused major disruptions to 47 Cdo's landing. Some of the troops, many cold and wet, did not reach the assembly area 500 yards to the south of the gap until 2000 hours. A great deal of weaponry and ammunition and some of the wireless sets (including the equipment by which contact with the artillery at Breskens could be made) had been lost in damaged and sunken LCTs, LVTs and Weasels. The loss of weapons and ammunition and of LVTs and Weasels to carry them was potentially serious but the delay of itself was not of critical importance as 47 Cdo's main task was to pass though 48 Commando after that commando had reached Zoutelande and clear the dunes beyond that. Its main task was to be on the morrow.

The LVTs had proved their worth but the Weasels were not a success. Some had sunk in the open sea, swamped because of the very limited seaboard, others had sunk in the waters of the gap. Their progress in currents was akin to that of a dodgem. Only three of the 20 Weasels reached the assembly area. The loss of one of the medical Weasels meant that half the medical equipment had gone. The loss of stretchers was to add greatly to the difficulty of evacuating wounded.

THE ASSAULT

As the bedraggled marines of 47 Cdo gathered at the planned assembly area near the German radar tower (destroyed by previous bombing) in the afternoon of that landing day it was clear that 48 Cdo was making good progress. A number of German prisoners, cold and miserable, were huddled together in a bomb crater in the dunes round which a single strand barbed wire fence had been hastily erected (Fig 11). Number 10 Canadian Field Dressing Station (FDS) had already been established on the dunes south of the gap. Some of the members of the FDS had done excellent work in the shell swept beaching area in rescuing naval

FIGURE 11
German prisoners in a bomb crater with single surrounding strand of barbed wire (Crown copyright: Imperial War Museum, London).

personnel and marines who in the landing had been wounded, burned or near drowned.

Elements of 47 Cdo who had landed in good time were now being marshalled and moving forward from the assembly area under Major Donnell, the second-in-command. I went with him, the rest of the RAP staff following on. At this time air burst shells were a problem. One proved particularly anti-social. As we stopped in a hollow in the dunes Major Donnell's MOA produced a bottle of beer. As he made to open it an air burst shell exploded above. A piece of shrapnel shattered the bottle, another small piece lodged in the MOA's buttock. The beer had gone and the MOA's forethought had been rewarded with an inability to sit down for a few days.

Establishing the Regimental Aid Post

At this stage some of 47 Cdo's Heavy Weapons (HW) Troop were sent forward to be ready, if required, to give supporting fire to 48 Cdo's attack on battery W13 (Fig 2), its main target. 48 Cdo's first attack on the battery had failed and support from rocket firing Typhoons and artillery support from Breskens had been called in prior to a second attack. I decided that the RAP should be at the HW troop position. On the way there we passed another collection of German prisoners in a wired-in compound. Outside the wire netting was a young civilian woman with her arm thrust through a gap in the netting holding a German soldier by the hand and weeping profusely. The soldier sat impassively, eyes averted from his paramour towards his captors. Passing through Y troop we found that one of its marines had been wounded by an air burst shell and when we reached HW troop found that one marine had been killed by such a shell.

The RAP was established in a German bunker captured by 48 Cdo on the

inner side of the dunes not far from W13. Hardly had this been done than word was brought back from 48 Cdo that its medical officer, Captain David Winser, an Oxford rowing blue and a poet who had won the Newdigate prize, had been killed. He had been with troops in the form-up position as they prepared for the second assault on W13 when the position was mortared killing Captain Winser and one of his RAMC stretcher bearers, two other officers and two marines. Others were wounded. I went ahead and contacted 48 Cdo which had now remounted its second attack on W13. The attack was successful and battery W13 was captured. The somewhat fortuitous forward move of 47 Cdo's RAP had placed it suitably to deal with 48 Cdo casualties occurring at W13. Some of these were dealt with at the RAP and then transferred to the 10th Canadian Field Dressing Station (FDS) near the Westkapelle gap, others were transferred directly to the FDS. The trail of casualties, walking, or borne through the dunes on stretchers had begun—although at this stage the length of the evacuation route was relatively short.

47 Cdo was due to move through 48 Cdo in the morning (2nd November) so, later that night, I contacted Lieut.-Col. Phillips. He would hold an 'O' (Officer) group at 0700 hours in the morning. At this it was arranged that the RAP would move with the commando HQ. The move began at 1000 hours along the seaward side of the dunes and then on to the higher part of the ridge. The ridge was being shelled and mortared, probably from the battery beyond Zoutelande and a number of casualties were treated and evacuated to the FDS. Groups of prisoners were being brought back by 48 Cdo. At 1230 hours 47 Cdo passed through Zoutelande, captured by 48 Cdo, and was now in the lead and entering the sector, extending southward to the outskirts of Flushing which it was our task to clear.

During the afternoon the commando continued to advance along the dunes now widening out, with their corrugated ridges 200 feet above the sea. Q and X troops were leading with A, B and Y behind. Q troop alone then took the lead and continued to advance without meeting opposition until it reached a position west of Groot Valkenisse (Fig 12). There one or two defended bunkers were encountered. In capturing one of them and its occupants Sergeant Puddick was killed by a sniper and the officer leading, Lieut. Thompson, shot in the neck. The advance continued until the troop reached the line of the anti-tank obstacles, the concrete 'dragon's teeth' (Figs 3e, 12). There Q troop came under heavier fire from an enemy position just visible on the landward side of the ridge beyond the anti-tank obstructions. This was in the so-called (by the Germans) 'Carmen' area, a strong point which, as it turned out, was manned by Grenadier Regiment 1019. (With an oddly inappropriate analogy the Germans had attached the names of operas to the different sectors of the coastal defences).

Two sections of Q troop were ordered to 'right flank' with a view to capturing the enemy position. They moved forward reaching a point west of Klein Valkenisse and halted in a hollow while Major Vincent the troop commander went on alone to reconnoître. At this stage the medical section was following up and machine gun fire and the explosion of mortar bombs were heard ahead. Shortly Lieut. Adams one of the Q troop section officers came over the dunes urgently seeking help and indicating that 'half of the troop has been wiped out' by a mortar attack which had accurately pinpointed the troop's position. Along with the Intelligence Officer, Lieut. Gower, I went forward and

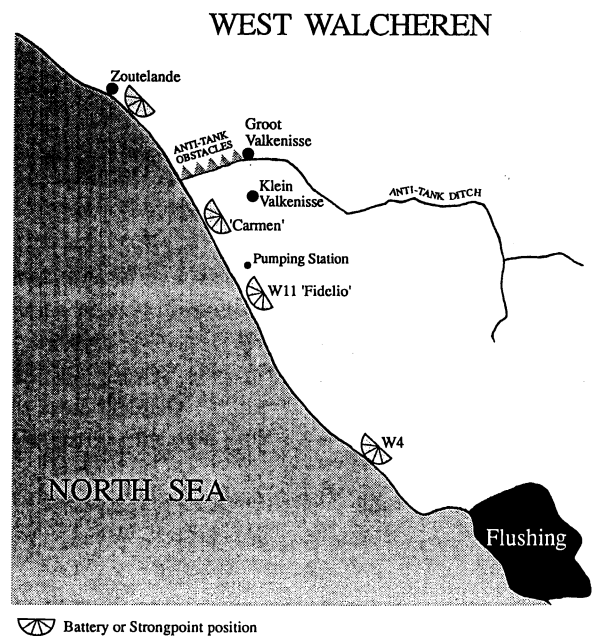


FIGURE 12
West Walcheren with major battery sites, 1944.

Gower went to collect stretcher bearers from X troop through whom we had to pass.

Major casualties

Reaching the Q troop location a tragic sight was revealed. There in a hollow were the remnants of Q troop. The waiting marines had been hit by an intensive concentration of accurate mortar fire. Eleven marines including Company Sergeant Major Spear lay dead and eleven had been wounded. Some of the wounded seemed dazed. The clothing of two of the dead was on fire, another had been killed when a grenade which he had been carrying on his belt had been hit and had exploded, the eye of another had been avulsed by a piece of shrapnel, frothy blood surrounding the chest wound of another testified to the chest injury which had killed him. The sand was stained with blood. The survivors had mostly suffered shrapnel wounds of the limbs; they included the troop medical orderly. Some of the wounded had managed to move out of the hollow, others still lay there. The mortaring was continuing and as L/Cpl Sillett, the X troop medical orderly, and Captain McCormick, the X troop commander, arrived to help both were wounded by shrapnel. Lieut. Gower arrived with some stretcher bearers. The number of these was limited and only the most seriously wounded could be carried. Any who could walk at all had to do so. Any medical care was of a most perfunctory nature. The prime need was evacuation. The dead were left.

As the injured were being evacuated it was clear that Major Vincent was missing. It was thought that he had gone ahead and had been wounded. As I went forward alone to look for him a strange thing happened. A solitary German

soldier wearing a long greatcoat, flapping at his knees as he walked, suddenly came over a sand dune some distance in front of me. He made no attempt to take cover nor did he appear to have any obvious hostile intent. It was fortunate that he happened to meet only a medical officer. Otherwise his strange foray into enemy territory would have been unlikely to have gone further than the crest of the sand dune over which he appeared. A medical officer in this position is in something of a dilemma. The handgun I carried was for self-defence and I had to decide what constituted self-defence. I decided that if it was his intention to take me prisoner I would resist and that if he showed any hostile intent I would shoot. He showed no evidence of doing either of these things however and as he drew nearer I realised that there was something strange about this man. He was looking at the ground, he did not appear to be armed and totally ignored my presence. As he drew level he was muttering to himself and he passed by a few feet away without letting his eyes rest on me. His mental state was clearly disturbed and he walked on into the captivity which he may have been seeking. He seemed to exemplify classically Siegfried Sassoon's description of those who suffered from the so-called 'shell shock' of the First World War: '. . . the shock and strain have caused their stammering and disconnected talk'.

The mortaring was still continuing. The mortars could be heard firing nearby from a position so close that the trajectory of the mortar bombs was very high and the descending bombs could be seen coming. This was the only time I ever saw mortar bombs giving prior notice of their arrival. One did arrive very close but fortunately landed on one side of a wooden barrier which crossed the dunes just in front. The barrier took the full force of the explosion and, as I took cover, only a showering with sand and a blow on the chest from a piece of the barrier resulted.

Some yards ahead I found Major Vincent. He was lying on the sand face downwards. He had been shot in the head. The bullet had struck the bridge of his nose, passed through his left eye and emerged above his left ear. At this point L/Cpl Thornton, the Y Troop medical orderly, and one who was ever to the front when wounded required help, marine Williams (killed later) and Cpl McKenna arrived with a stretcher. As Vincent was lifted on to the stretcher five German soldiers appeared over the ridge of a sand-dune some distance away and opened fire. They killed Sergeant Webb who was also coming forward to assist. The German soldiers did not advance but taking cover behind a dune ridge continued to fire on the stretcher party as it weaved its way among the dunes taking such avoiding action as it could. As it passed through the 'dragon's teeth' of the anti-tank wall (later found to be mined) it was further targeted with mortars but finally reached the RAP through a smoke screen laid by a 47 Cdo mortar section to give the party cover.

Major Vincent appeared wholly unconscious throughout these proceedings but when I visited him later in hospital as he recovered he surprised me by expressing satisfaction that I had been 'wrong'. Mystified by his meaning I enquired further. He remembered nothing of his rescue except one thing, that as he lay on the ground he was vaguely conscious of me saying to one of those with me, 'It doesn't look as if "Vince" will last very long'. Happily, 50 years later, 'Nelson', as his former colleagues now call him, is still proving me wrong. Later that day one of my medical orderlies had a somewhat similar experience. In the dark evacuating casualties at battery W11, he came upon a marine whom he thought was dead. He commented to the colleague with him, 'It's no use bothering with him'. Back came an angry growl from the 'corpse', a marine not known for the purity of his language, 'Isn't it f★★★'. This particular marine, a bull-terrier type, had the biggest hole in the chest that I ever seen in a man who survived. Despite this he returned to duty some months later.

As I attended Vincent on the dunes little did I realise that near the very spot where he lay wounded a more sinister tragedy had been enacted six weeks previously. A British Halifax bomber on a Dutch resistance mission had been shot down on the South Beveland peninsula. Five of the ten aboard survived. The British pilot and co-pilot managed to get across the Scheldt where they were taken to the house of a Belgian farmer who provided a hiding place for escaping airmen. Unfortunately the Germans got wind of this. The house was surrounded and searched. The pilot escaped but the co-pilot was captured along with the farmer and his son, still a boy, and another farmer from nearby. They were taken to Flushing where the British pilot was separated from the group and sent to a prisoner-of-war camp. The three Belgians, now joined by two Dutchmen from Wissenkerke and Middelburg, were given a token trial and sentenced to death. On 11th September 1944 they were put in a truck which was followed by another truck containing soldiers. On arrival at Klein Valkenisse they were made to climb the dunes. In a hollow below the crest on the seaward side they were made to dig their own graves. They were then tied to stakes with their backs to the sea and all five were shot, the boy along with his father. After the war their bodies were found there along with another 19 year-old boy from Middelburg. Their memorial cross now stands high on the dunes between Klein Valkinesse and the sea.

While Q troop was suffering these casualties—in the words of the CO it had 'disintegrated'—Y troop was moving up. It successfully overcame the opposition in the Carmen area suffering casualties in doing so. The commando was now approaching the formidable Battery W11, area 'Fidelio', recognised to be its main target (Figs 2, 3a, b, 12). W11 consisted of a complex of defensive positions including three field guns in concrete casemates (at least one with a thick concrete 'umbrella' top), three anti-aircraft guns, 9 pillboxes and a number of trenches and weapon pits from which machine gun, rifle and mortar fire could be directed at attackers and grenades thrown. There were also about 25 scattered bunkers providing living accommodation for troops manning the battery, administrative headquarters, ammunition and equipment stores, etc.

The CO decided that the time had come for a full-scale attack on the battery. H-hour was fixed for 1700 hours. When, in advance of this, the HW troop commander had sought permission to register on the battery with his mortars he was ordered to delay because of the danger of hitting the Q troop rescue work which was going on ahead in the direction of W11.

(To be continued in the next issue of *Proceedings*, Vol. 25, No. 4)