

Engineer Gallantry at Kapelsche Veer

Background

After Operation MARKET GARDEN, XXX British Armoured Corps retained its hold on gains past the Nijmegen Bridge captured by the 101st US Airborne Division. Despite not linking to the 1st British Airborne Division who had captured the bridge at Arnhem (a bridge too far), they had created a deep wedge into German defences in the Netherlands. After the Battle of the Scheldt and the capture of the key port of Antwerp, the First Canadian Army moved into the northern part of the Salient in November 1944 facing the Germans on three sides.

Lieutenant General Guy Simonds, commanding II Canadian Corps described the Nijmegen Salient as the most important piece of land in the entire 21st Army Group's area as it would allow the Allies to outflank the northern end of the German battle line and break across the Rhine into Germany itself. As winter rolled in, flooding, ice, snow and rain made any further advance extremely difficult but units did not rest. Canadians patrolled actively into German-held areas, German counter-attacks were repelled and training continued for newly arrived reinforcement arriving from Canada. Troops were readied and materiel was stockpiled for the Allied offensive planned for early January.

However, just as the orders for the offensive were being passed to leading formations in mid-December, the Germans launched a massive counterattack into the Ardennes. The 'Battle of the Bulge' forced the British forces to move south to help repel the attack, while the Canadians remained to guard the Salient against attack.

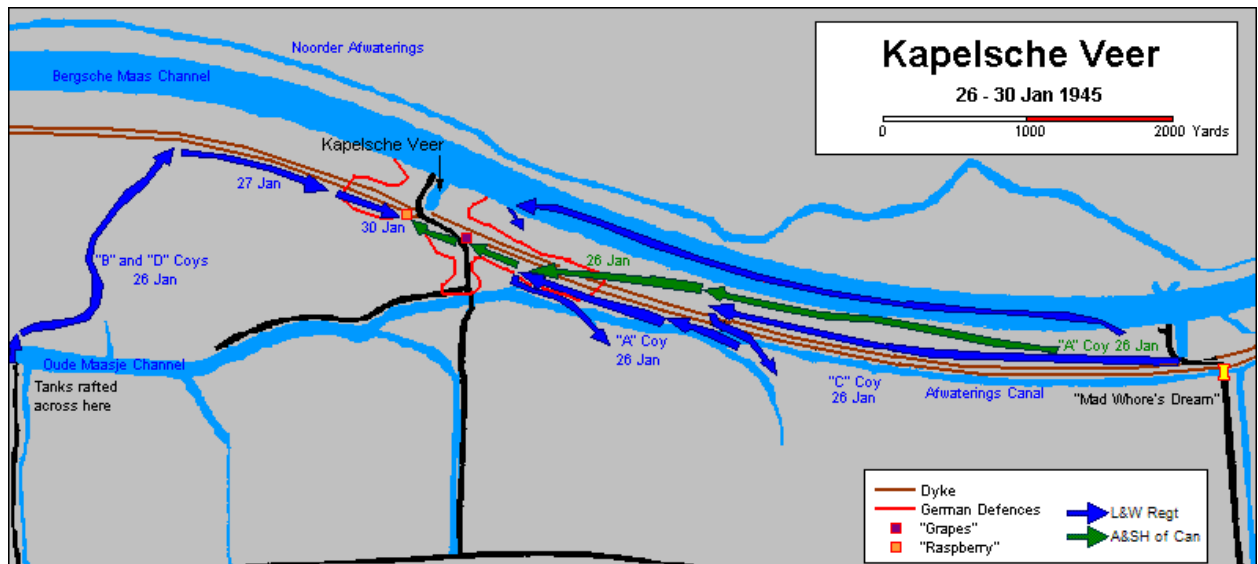
However, there was a small German reinforced company-sized garrison defending a ferry crossing over the Maas at Kapelsche Veer, a small harbour located on the north side of an island in the Maas. The Germans needed it as a possible crossing point should the Ardennes offensive require reinforcement from the north. They built an extremely effective defence on the island that forced the Allies to attack across the open snow-covered ground at great cost.



The Lead-Up

Kapelsche Veer was in the I British Corps area west of II Canadian Corps. At that time, I British Corps was part of First Canadian Army with 4th Canadian Armoured Division under command. Initially, the corps commander, Lieutenant General John Crocker, wanted to neutralize Kapelsche Veer with artillery fire but later wanted it taken by force. Polish and Canadian troops tried on 30 December at a cost of 46 Canadian dead and the Poles tried again on 7 January 1945 with 120 casualties (Operation MOUSE). Number 47 Royal Marine Commando tried again on 13 and 14 January and failed (Operation HORSE). General Crocker then upgraded the task to a divisional operation with the order "clear all enemy from Kapelsche Veer" assigned to Lieutenant-General Chris Vokes' 4th Canadian Armoured Division. The effort was called Operation ELEPHANT, another upgrade from the names of the previous operations. Most readers will recall Chris Vokes, an engineer officer, commanded a brigade in Sicily and a division in Italy before being transferred to Northwest Europe.

Many historians have described the Kapelsche Veer action as the 'battle that should not have occurred'. Indeed, the official Canadian Army history describes Operation ELEPHANT as one of the “strangest episodes of the campaign.” One the one hand was the question as to why Crocker wanted to possess the island. Next, aside from the German need to hold Kapelsche Veer as a possible attack route supporting the Ardennes offensive, the famous Fallschirmjäger Generalleutnant Kurt Student also wanted to use the position as a place to give his young paratroopers battle experience.



The Canadian Plan: Note 9th Fd Sqn's "Mad Whore's Dream" on the far right and their rafting site on the left map.

The Canadian Plan

The island is low lying and about 8 kilometres long and 1600 metres across at its widest point. Dykes along the southern side sloped at 45° reaching six meters in height and nine meters in width protect the island from the strong river currents and floods. It was connected to the south bank by a bridge at the east end that the defenders had demolished. The small harbour at Kapelsche Veer had a ferry dock from which to reach the north shore. A roadway ran along the tops of the dykes.

Vokes was never in favour of the attack. He considered it a waste of young lives and had supported Crocker's initial plan to neutralize the island with artillery. Reasons for Crocker's change of mind have been the fruit of discussion among historians from quite some time. In an effort to have the attack called off, Vokes asked for 28 Peterborough canoes so his infantry could silently paddle across the river to achieve necessary surprise. Assuming this request would be denied as being impractical, he was surprised when the canoes were flown directly to him from Canada. He was locked into the fight and there was no way to get out of it. Vokes' plan saw two flanking attacks from each end of the island and a waterborne attack against the village from the rear. Two battalions of the 10th Canadian Brigade, the Lincoln & Welland Regiment and the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, would carry the brunt of the fighting supported by the division's reconnaissance regiment, the South Alberta Horse.



Soldiers of the Lincoln & Welland Regiment's canoe commando train for the assault on Kapelsche Veer (DND Photo)

The attack opened at 0745 hours on 26 January under cover of heavy smoke and flame. The Argyll & Sutherland Highlands assault from the east used an ingeniously repaired bridge called 'The Mad Whore's Dream'. The Lincoln &

Welland Regiment used the cover behind “The Dream” to launch their ‘canoe commando’ of 60 men to assault on each side of Kapelsche Veer from the north. From the west, two more companies of the Lincoln & Welland Regiment crossed the river in storm boats and Buffalo tracked landing vehicles. There was also a Class 40 raft to move tanks across to the island.

The first day did not go well. There was ice in the river and German fire forced the canoes to the shore at a considerable loss. The commando was withdrawn from action. Then, fierce German counter-attacks forced most troops off the island and by nightfall, only a weakened company remained in place. Casualties were high. One company lost all its officers. Over the next five days, a series of small advances, heavy artillery bombardment, German counter-attacks and heavy casualties on both sides finally led to victory. The few tanks that made it to the island had little manoeuvre room but were able to provide some support. In fact, one historian commented that infantry and tank cooperation was reminiscent of Ortona. The action was described by the 10th Brigade's historian as "sheer misery" before all the enemy south of the Maas had been defeated. Student rotated his paratroops throughout the battle and the Germans fought at full strength while Canadian forces suffered. The Germans fought tenaciously until the end. In all, the Germans had lost 145 killed, 64 wounded and 34 prisoners.

Summery - The Cost

From start to finish, the battle lasted five weeks. In all, four attacks were made by Polish, British and Canadians troops.

- The first unsuccessful attack by the Polish 1st Armoured Division was during the night of 30 December 1944.
- The second failed attack by the Polish 1st Armoured Division was in the night of 7 January 1945.
- The third unsuccessful attack by 47 Royal Marine Commando with Norwegian troops was during the night of 13 January 1945.
- The fourth attack by the 4th Canadian Armoured Division took place from 26 January 1945 until 31 January 1945 and forced the remaining German defenders to withdraw or surrender.

In total there were nearly 1200 soldiers killed or wounded during the four attacks.

The Role of the RCE

The 9th Field Squadron was instrumental in the success of Operation ELEPHANT. Their tasks were:

- 2 Troop: Build an improvised class 18 bridge at the eastern end of the island;
- 1 and 3 Troops: Repair all craters, clear the roads and crossing of mines and construct LVT ramps.



2 Troop worked for five days before the attack to rebuild the demolished bridge at the eastern end of the island. The site was a mere 500 meters from the Germans and the approach road was under observation for over a mile. The demolished bridge was a tangle of bent twisted metal, but a 40-foot span was considered salvageable. After careful reconnaissance, a plan was submitted calling for one heavy trestle for the far side, three bays of Floating Bridge Equipment (FBE) stringer deck, a 40' SS Bailey span and 40 feet of existing deck. Before work could be started the twisted steel and other debris had to be removed and the remainder of the rolling centre portion jacked up on the rollers and anchored into position.

Stores were floated downstream on an FBE raft, and at night along the road on a manhandled trailer. Approximately 2½ tons could be loaded in the trailer and since there was only room for about 15 men to push and pull on the ice-covered roads, it was a heartbreaking task. The work area was concealed by a dyke but the Sappers had to be extremely quiet to avoid enemy mortar fire.

The Germans appeared unaware of the work on the bridge and by the night of 24 January, it was ready for traffic. The result was a cobbled together structure that looked anything but sturdy but in true Sapper fashion, the Sappers dubbed it the “Mad Whore’s Dream”. All that mattered was that the bridge was in place when the operation began. According to who wrote the South Alberta Regiment’s history,

"The engineers held their breath as the first vehicle, a half-track loaded with smoke containers, crossed the "Mad Whore's Dream." it "hit the steep ramp at about 30 MPH and came down with a tremendous crash," but as "nothing gave way" the relieved sappers exhaled and declared their rickety span to be structurally sound." Two Stuart tanks crossed next but found little room to manoeuvre on the narrow dyke roads. That same afternoon, V-1 Flying Rocket landed right in front of the 9th Field Squadron's orderly room, killing one and injuring thirty persons from 1 Troop and HQ. A troop from the 8th Field Squadron was called in as reinforcements.

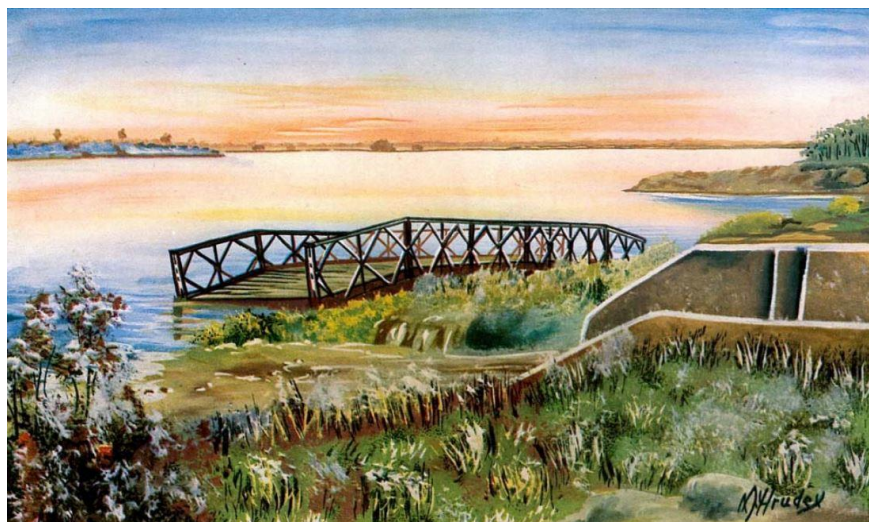
During this time 1 and 3 Troops were working night and day filling and bypassing craters, clearing mines and cutting entrance ramps for the Buffalos. To get tanks into firing positions on the near shore, 3 Troop built a 60-foot Double-Single Bailey bridge on the night of 24 January. Equipment was towed down by a Jeep pulling a sled they had constructed. Most of the parts (panel pins, rollers and bracing) were frozen or packed with ice. 1 Troop made a track for LVTs the old ferry site at Sharlo.



The 40-foot Bailey span on the Mad Whore's Dream

On 26 January, two Sherman tanks (Class 35) crossed over the Mad Whore whose Class 18 classification was a clear understatement. That same day, the squadron received orders to build a Class 40 FBE raft at the western end of the island to get more tanks across using the old Sharlo ferry site.

Assembling materials and building the raft was very difficult, the more so as the water was partially frozen with chunks of floating ice between 2 and 5 inches thick. As well, trap doors, drain plugs and connectors were covered with frozen ice and mud. The arrival of a German patrol, driven off by the Lincoln & Welland Regiment, followed by a sudden snowstorm on the night of 26/27 January further delayed the work. The first tank crashed into the raft and damaged the ramp causing yet again another delay. Nonetheless, the Sappers got three tanks over on the 28th and more tanks came over during the night and the following days.



FBE Ferry at Sharlo

There were no roads on the island. The tracks on the dykes were soggy with mud and ice. 1 Troop was assigned the task of providing a tank approach from both sides, eventually to join up in the centre. The route was recced with great difficulty in daylight. That night a D-6 dozer was ferried across the canal at the Scharlo site 2 Troop and started gouging out a road on the south side of the dyke. Enemy patrols and mortar fire slowed the work, but did not stop it. Later, a D-7 dozer cross the "Mad Whores Dream" to and started from the other end. A thaw set in the next day and dozers, tanks and LVTs took turns getting stuck and pulling each other out of the mud. For several days after the battle had ended, this work continued until a track was made right across the island over which all vehicles and casualties could be evacuated.

The night of the 28th was particularly difficult. 2 Troop took four hours to ferry one tank across. The canal was freezing quickly and ice flows began to freeze together almost forming a solid mass at one time. The shifting tide did not help matters. The raft operators could not see the other side of the canal, 450 feet away, through the falling snow. The four engines were at full throttle and the raft moved slowly with a considerable ice pack frozen to it. The crew chopped, pushed and pulled at the thick blocks of ice jammed between the frail pontoons and fouling the propellers. Each time an LVT passed, it the raft called it over to circle the raft to loosen up the pack. A Buffalo hit the raft in the darkness and it the crew feared the whole thing would break apart and sink. After three hours and close to the far shore, a Buffalo pulled the ice-laden raft to the shore where the tank disembarked through three feet of packed ice.

The next day presented improved positions and 2 Troop extended the raft to carry two tanks at a time so that ARVs could bring the casualties out with them. It was 80' long with 20' dropping ramps and floated on seven pontoon piers. The problem involved in getting an ARV towing a knocked out Sherman from a soft mud bank onto the steep slippery deck of a raft were such that they cannot be described in printable English.

Engineer Gallantry

Four awards for gallantry were awarded to the 9th Field Squadron:

- Sergeant Mervin George Durham, MM, 9th Field Squadron
- Lieutenant Arthur Paul Beaven, MC, 9th Field Squadron
- Corporal Maurice Duruisseau, MM, 9th Field Squadron
- Lance-Sergeant Robert Henry Dunkeld, MM, 9th Field Squadron