

REPORT NO. 17  
HISTORICAL SECTION (G.S.)  
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The 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion in the Low Countries and in Germany  
Final Operations (2 January - 18 February and 24 March - 5 May 1945)

1. The object of this report is to describe the part played by the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, Canadian Infantry Corps, in the operations of the Allied Armies in North-West Europe during the final phases of the late war. The report will deal to a minor extent with the role of the unit as ground troops helping to hold the front line in Belgium during the Ardennes counter-offensive and in the Netherlands during the battle of the Rhineland. It will relate in greater detail the story of the Battalion parachuting east of the Rhine River on 24 Mar 45 and subsequently fighting overland to meet the Red Army on 2 May 45 at the Baltic port of Wismar. First among 21 Army Group to join hands with the Russians, no other unit of the Canadian Army penetrated so deeply into Germany nor progressed so far eastward in that theatre of operations.

2. This report supplements two reports produced by the Historical Officer, Canadian Military Headquarters. [Report No. 138](#) discusses the formation of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion in July 1942 and its initial training in the United States, Canada, and England. [Report No. 139](#) deals exclusively with its participation in the allied invasion across the Channel as part of the airborne armada which descended upon Normandy that memorable morning of 6 Jun 44 and thereafter fought as front-line troops during the summer campaign to expel the Germans from France. This third report is intended to conclude the series. It begins with a brief introductory account telling of further training undertaken in England upon the return of the Battalion from France 6 Sep 44. The main story of final operations is followed by a short account of the repatriation of the unit and its disbandment in Canada 30 Sep 45. The report concludes with a summary of battle casualties suffered and decorations awarded.

3. The first two reports were completed by 7 Jul 46 at Canadian Military Headquarters in London, England, whereas this concluding report has been written a year later at Army Headquarters in Ottawa. Copies of the unit War Diary including original operational maps have been available, however, and have provided the chief source of information. The story of the parachute descent has been checked against a comprehensive report by American observers entitled "Operation VARSITY: The Airborne Crossing of the Rhine River, March 1945". Statements outlining higher strategy have been drawn largely from the published report of the Supreme Commander to the Combined Chiefs of Staff. Much use has also been made of the well-known books written by Field-Marshal Montgomery, Commander-in-Chief 21 Army Group, and by Lt-Gen Lewis H. Brereton, Commanding First Allied Airborne Army.

4. Map references throughout the report refer to the following G.S.G.S. maps:  
England & Wales, 1:63,360, sheet 107.  
Belgium & N.E. France, 1:100,000, sheets 4 and 13.  
Germany, 1:50,000, sheets 16 and 36  
Central Europe, 1:100,000, sheets K.5, K.6, L.5, L.6, M.5, N.2, N.3, N.4, P.1, P.2 and Q.1.

#### RENEWED TRAINING IN ENGLAND (7 Sep - 25 Dec 44)

5. The 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion returned to England from France 6/7 Sep 44 at the time when the Allied Armies were sweeping into Belgium and the Germans were still in full rout from Falaise. The Battalion had received its baptism of fire in dropping from the skies upon Normandy between 0100 hours and 0130 hours on D-day (6 Jun 44). On that day alone the unit had suffered 117 casualties, and in three months of fighting that summer its battle losses totalled 24 officers and 343 other ranks ([Report No. 139](#), Hist Offr, C.M.H.Q., "The 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion in France (6 June - 6 September 1944)" with amendment). Reinforcements had not been sufficient in the later stages to maintain the Battalion War Establishment of 31 officers and 587 other ranks; consequently there were deficiencies of 5 officers and 242 other ranks when the unit returned to England. There internal reorganization was to be undertaken and hopes were high that further airborne operations were in prospect.

6. 1 Cdn Para Bn had trained and fought as the only Canadian element basically part of the 6th British Airborne Division<sup>1</sup>, retaining this status when the entire Division was withdrawn from operations and returning to the United Kingdom with it. The Canadians remained brigaded with 8 and 9 Parachute Battalions to form 3 Parachute Brigade, commanded by Brigadier S.J.L. Hill, D.S.O., M.C. Just prior to this move from the Continent the Battalion's first Commanding Officer, Lt-Col G.F.P. Bradbrooke, received a staff appointment and Maj G.F. Eadie assumed temporary command. Back in England, Maj J.A. Nicklin rejoined the unit on being appointed to command effective 8 Sep 44 with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. The new C.O., an outstanding athlete, had established a reputation across Canada as a former rugby star of the Battalion, he had parachuted with it into France on D-day as second-in-command but later had been evacuated (23 Jun 45) with multiple wounds (H.S. 332-90-380). Major Eadie now became second-in-command, with Majors C.E. Fuller, P.R. Griffin, M.C., J.D. Hanson, M.C., and R. Hilborn as company commanders (W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, September 1944, Appx "B").

7. Once re-established in their old quarters at Carter Barracks, Bulford, Wiltshire, all personnel were given 12 days leave ending 24 Sep 44. General training then began in earnest, with the Battalion restored to full strength by reinforcements from the 1st Canadian Parachute Training Company<sup>2</sup>. During the month of October 1944 each of the three rifle companies was sent in turn to street fighting courses at Southampton and in the Battersea area of London, while the training company attended a similar course at Birmingham (W.Ds., 1 Cdn Para Bn and 1 Cdn Para Trg Coy, October 1944).

8. On 9/10 Oct 44 the entire Battalion participated in a 3 Para Bde scheme termed Exercise "FOG", whose objects were:

- (1) Detail practice for large scale drop on a Bde D.Z.
- (2) Practice movement by night.

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<sup>1</sup>[Report No. 139](#) contains an account of the brief existence of the 1st Centaur Battery, R.C.A., in August 1944. This Canadian unit, however, served only in a temporary capacity.

<sup>2</sup>[Report No. 138](#), Hist Offr, C.M.H.Q., "The 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion: Organization and Training (July 1942 - June 1944)" contains an account of the establishment of this training company, which functioned also in a hold capacity.

- (3) Practice of evacuation of casualties.

(W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, October 1944, Appx 6)

The operation order for the exercise stated "3 Para Bde will seize and hold SHREWTON - a main centre of communication" and detailed the following tasks to 1 Cdn Para Bn:

- (1) Make contact with Glider Elements and conduct them to the Bde Objective.
- (2) Seize and hold feature East of Shrewton.
- (3) Prevent Enemy movement South.

(Ibid)

Poor visibility caused a 24 hour delay, but at 1645 hours on 9 Oct 44 the Battalion emplaned at Walford, Northampton, in aircraft of the 9th Troop Carrying Command, U.S.A.A.F. The unit diarist records:

... takeoff was at 1700 hours. Aircraft over D.Z. at 1849 hours in tight formation. Personnel dropped and every man was clear of the D.Z. in 20 minutes - the maximum laid down by the Brigade Commander. Personnel made their way to the R.V. and then marched cross-country to SHREWTON which was the objective. R.V. was cleared at 2020 hours and objective reached at 2335 hours. Small parties of enemy were encountered and dealt with successfully on the way to the objective and upon arrival there the Battalion took up defensive positions and dug in.

(W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, 9 Oct 44)

1 Cdn Para Trg Coy took part in the role of the enemy, jumping from Stirlings, but unfortunately "Jump was made with 8 casualties caused by a plane flying at 150' while dropping men" (W.D., 1 Cdn Para Trg Coy, 9 Oct 44. Examination of the War Diary, including Part II Orders, does not indicate whether these were fatal casualties). The scheme ended the following morning and a 2½ hour route march brought the troops back to barracks, where officers and men began a thorough study of the tactics employed. "B" Company had a follow-up exercise of its own two days later in which men were dropped from trucks by pairs every 100 yards and ordered to move to the rendezvous, advancing from there towards the objective. This was the village of Cholderton, with the way barred by an enemy platoon provided by "C" Company, but the assaulting troops won through in a mock battle lasting 18 minutes (Ibid, 12 Oct 44). Additional lessons in

tactics were studied in a Brigade Commander's T.E.W.T. (Tactical Exercise Without Troops) held for all officers of 3 Para Bde (ibid, 16 Oct 44).

9. Although these courses and exercises served to enliven routine training, the men were for a time in a very unsettled state, perhaps due to sudden release from the tension of the summer months' fighting. The following entries in the unit War Diary are evidence of this unusual attitude:

20 Oct - ... On evening supper parade great confusion was caused when the men refused to eat. The complaint lay not in the food but in the treatment of the men by the Commanding Officer.

21 Oct - General training during the day. Personnel still not eating. Platoon Commanders spoke to platoons to ascertain complaints and in the afternoon changes in orders heretofore laid down were made but only 60 men ate supper.

22 Oct - (Sunday) ... Personnel still in camp refused to eat again today.

23 Oct - ... Approximately 60 men ate their breakfast. General training in the morning and a lecture from Brigadier Hill who promised there would be an investigation into all grievances. Personnel all ate dinner and supper ...

(ibid, 20 - 23 Oct 44. Appendices 18 and 19 filed with the original copy of the unit War Diary October 1944 contain a letter to the Canadian Liaison Section on this matter and a "Directive re Grievances".

Personnel of 1 Cdn Para Trg Coy also took part in the hunger strike, advancing numerous grievances the chief of which were concerned with dress regulations both around camp and walking out. Refusal to eat was the only sign of dissatisfaction, and no further trouble was encountered after the Brigadier's investigation. All grievances were brought forward at the Brigade Commander's inspection 16 Nov 44, but no drastic action was necessary and training activities soon absorbed the attention of all ranks.

10. During the month of November the short courses on street fighting were concluded and emphasis shifted to weapon training: rifle, sten, bren, Vickers M.M.G., P.I.A.T., mortar, grenade, bangalore, torpedo, mines and booby traps (our own and enemy). The Mortar Platoon continued training with the 3" mortar but stressed drills with the American 60-mm mortar, giving several demonstrations in handling this weapon. The Vickers, P.I.A.T., and Signal Platoons were also busy in their specialized fields, the Intelligence Section held a two-day exercise of their own prepared by the I.O., and the rifle companies had a considerable amount of range work. Route marches increased from 10 to 20 miles and long distance runs from 2 to 3 miles. Recreation included films, concerts, tabloid sports, and a 36-hour pass for all personnel 11/12 Nov 44 with a special train to London.

11. The main training feature of November was Exercise "EVE", a 6 Airborne Div scheme in which 1 Cdn Para Bn as a whole and the Intelligence Section of 1 Cdn Para Trg Coy participated. Personnel travelled by lorry a day's journey to the transit camp, where bad weather once again caused a 24-hour delay. The exercise finally took place 21 Nov 44 and included a daylight parachute jump followed by an assault on enemy positions with preparations for counter attacks (ibid, November 1944). Rehearsals such as Exercises "FOG" and "EVE" doubtless raised as some measure of compensation for exclusion of the Division from the descent on Arnhem in September 1944.

12. From 1 to 10 Dec 44 personnel of the Battalion and the Training Company were on privilege leave, extended 24 hours in certain instances by the G.O.C. as a reward for cleanliness of barracks. During the month three drafts totalling 3 officers and 256 other ranks arrived from Canada to join 1 Cdn Para Trg Coy, whose strength at the beginning of the new year stood at 694 all ranks (W.D., 1 Cdn Para Trg Coy, 1 Jan 45). It was possible now to maintain the Battalion at full strength, vacancies as they occurred being filled with qualified jumpers. Extensive range practice with all types of weapons on establishment kept officers and men fully occupied and keen for action.

13. Finally, on 20 Dec 44, the Commanding Officer warned all ranks that 1 Cdn Para Bn was returning overseas for active duty. The advance party left that day and the unit was placed on six hours' notice, continuing in that state more than three days. A Christmas dinner was served in Carter Barracks on 22 Dec and another in the transit camp on 25 Dec 44. On Christmas Eve the Battalion proceeded by train to Folkestone, embarking there on the S.S. "Canterbury" at 1830 hours Christmas Day for Ostend,

Belgium. (W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, December 1944). Crossing the English Channel by boat must have been a bitter disappointment to training parachutists, but at least they were getting back into a fighting role.

## OPERATIONS IN THE ARDENNES

14. The return of the 6th Airborne Division to the Continent at this stage of the war was part of a mass movement of troops urgently required to help stem the Ardennes counter-offensive launched by the Germans on 16 Dec 44 against General Bradley's 12 Army Group. The enemy's general plan was to break through the thin line of defences in a sudden blitz drive to the Meuse River in the Liège-Namur area of Belgium and continue on to Antwerp in order to seize or destroy this great port of supply and split the Allied Armies (General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Report by the Supreme Commander to the Combined Chiefs of Staff on the Operations in Europe of the Allied Expeditionary Force, p. 75). Assembling all available reserves of armour and infantry to meet the threat, General Eisenhower decided to make extensive use of troops from airborne formations.

Reinforcements had to be rushed to the Ardennes. The Supreme Commander immediately called upon the 82nd and 101st (U.S.) Airborne Divisions, which had been through a bitter campaign in Holland and were being refitted and reequipped in the Reims area for future airborne operations. Farthest from their minds was a commitment to return to action ...

The Supreme Commander directed that the movement by air of the 17th (U.S.) Airborne Division begin as soon as weather permits. He also directed that the British 6th Airborne Division be moved to the Continent by water with first priority.

(Lieut-General Lewis H. Brereton, The Brereton Diaries, pp 375-6: entries dated 19 and 20 Dec 44)

15. The enemy's wedge separated the left flank of General Bradley's forces so badly from his right that it was necessary to divide his command on 19 Dec 44, allowing him to give full attention to the southern part of the salient. There the 101st Airborne Division, reinforced by armour, was given the task of holding Bastogne, hub of seven highways and three railways, and maintained there a magnificent defence "although

completely surrounded for 5 days and under constant attack by forces many times superior in strength" (Eisenhower, op cit, pp 76-77). All forces north of the bulge, including the U.S. First and Ninth Armies, were placed under the operational command of Field-Marshal Montgomery, who concentrated the 30th British Corps in a strategic reserve position east of Brussels. The Hun failed to reach even his initial objectives on the Meuse, however, although he made a 45-mile gap and "penetrated over 60 miles westward to within 4 miles of the Meuse near Celles" (ibid, p. 78). The Allied Forces brought the German counter-offensive under control by 26 Dec 44 and shortly thereafter were able to resume the initiative with pincer-like attacks by First Army from the north and Third Army from the south. It was at this stage that the 6th Airborne Division was brought into action as part of the 30th British Corps, which Field-Marshal Montgomery directed against the western edge of the bulge between the major attacking forces.

It had not yet however, been possible to form a reserve American corps available for offensive operations in First Army, and I now decided to commit British troops south and east of the Meuse in order to relieve VII United States Corps for the purpose. My plan was to employ 30 Corps on the right flank of First United States Army, taking over the sector Givet-Hotton. The reliefs were to be completed by 2 January ...

... 30 British Corps attacked on 4 January on a front of two divisions. In the south 6 Airborne Division, which had been hurriedly brought over from the United Kingdom, had some fierce fighting in and around Bure, but secured the area on 5 January, and on the left 53 (British) Division moved forward in touch with VII American Corps ...

(Field-Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, Normandy to the Baltic, pp. 178-9).

16. Proceeding inland by lorry from Ostend, 1 Cdn Para Bn had been billeted first in Belgian villages around Taintignies, south of Tournai, and then approximately 70 miles east at Maredret, near Namur. This week of waiting ended 2 Jan 45 when the unit moved to Rochefort (2076, sheet 13, Belgium & N.E. France, 1:100,000), a Belgian village on a tributary east of the Meuse, and took up battle positions there in the familiar role of infantry of the line. The heavy fighting at Bure (2368) was approximately five miles south of the Battalion front, which remained comparatively quiet. That first day no activity was reported other than the capture of a solitary P.W. identified as a deserter from 304 Regiment, 2 Panzer Division. Minor



changes of position within the area were assumed from day to day without serious trouble, patrols by day and night often reporting no sign of in an advance but reached its objective and the next day sent out a fighting patrol to clear neighbouring woods. This company had had a last-minute change of commanders just before leaving England when Major P.R. Griffin was left behind with a broken wrist, Capt J.A. Clancy taking command as A/Major (W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, 23 Dec 44). Throughout this second period of active service for the Battalion he led "A" Company with the same gallantry which had previously won him the Military Cross<sup>3</sup> in Normandy.

17. Finding the enemy had withdrawn from the Rockefort area after the battle to the south at Bure, the Battalion made a minor change of location on 6 Jan 45 to the village of Aye (2583), just west of Marche (2983), but observation posts set up by the Intelligence Section revealed no signs of enemy activity. Three days later 1 Cdn Para Bn moved east of Marche to relieve the Highland Light Infantry at Champlon Femenne (3182), the companies immediately taking up positions for all-round defence. After a quiet night the Battalion received orders to advance to Roy (3378), which "B" Company attacked at 1100 hours and took unopposed, all enemy having withdrawn. No casualties resulted from this operation, although a reconnaissance patrol previously had been severely mortared by the Germans. Defensive positions were taken up but patrols could not establish contact with the enemy. The following day "B" Company took the neighbouring village of Bande (3476), also without opposition, and handed it over to 9 Para Bn. An entry in the unit war diary reports a gruesome discovery made there. "37 civilians found beaten and shot to death in a cellar at Bande. One man from each P1 in the Bn was taken to Bande and shown the German cruelty" (W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, 12 Jan 45). German aircraft bombed and strafed the area near midnight on 13 Jan 45, but patrols reported all enemy ground troops had fled and there was little to do but search for their abandoned equipment. While awaiting the end of the "Battle of the Bulge" 3 Para Bde held a winter sports meet at Roy on 14 Jan 45, with toboggan races and contests in building snowmen, log sawing and wood chopping (ibid, Appx 10). On 18 Jan 45 the Battalion departed for a rest area at Pondrome (0570), thus ending the first phase of its reintroduction to active operations.

18. By then the junction of First and Third U.S. Armies had enabled Field-Marshal Montgomery to dispense with 30 Brit Corps as a buffer between them.

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<sup>3</sup>Citation is given in part in [Report No. 139](#).

I undertook the withdrawal of all British troops from the Ardennes with the greatest possible speed, in order to regroup for the battle of the Rhineland. Now was the opportunity to proceed with the utmost despatch to carry out our plans, in order to take full advantage of the enemy's failure.

The enemy had been prevented from crossing the Meuse in the nick of time ...

The battle displayed many fine examples of Allied solidarity and team work. In particular, the passage of 30 British Corps across to the South flank of First United States Army, and its subsequent deployment east of the Meuse, was an operation of tremendous complications achieved without serious difficulty.

(Montgomery, op cit, pp. 180 and 182)

Formations of First Canadian Army in Holland, although profoundly affected by the Ardennes counter-offensive, had not been required to assist directly in repelling it. Certain units of the Canadian Forestry Corps<sup>4</sup> which had been cutting timber in the Ardennes Forest since 1 Nov 44 were placed on "Stand To" but soon received orders to withdraw to Brussels (Report No. 151, Historical Section, C.M.H.Q., "The Canadian Forestry Corps, 1944-45", paras 19-24). The 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, therefore, had the honour of being Canada's sole representative unit to close with the enemy in that important battle<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup>Headquarters 8 Canadian Forestry District with under command Nos. 1, 9, 14, 16, 25 and 27 Companies.

<sup>5</sup>56 Bty, 6 Cnd A. Tk Regt, R.C.A., was placed under command 51 (Highland) Div from approximately 25 Dec 44 to 15 Jan 45 but does not appear to have been called upon to play an active part in the Ardennes. This division was then in a reserve role as part of First American Army and 56 Bty acted as Div A. Tk reserve. An updated sitrep of 56 Bty states regarding this period "As Div reserve we have carried out extensive recces in this area but no guns have been deployed" (W.D., 6 Cdn A. Tk Regt, R.C.A., December 1944, Appx #8).

## OPERATIONS IN THE NETHERLANDS

19. With von Rundstedt's striking power expended the task of General Eisenhower now was to regasp the strategic initiative and resume the advance.

In planning our forthcoming spring and summer offensives, I envisaged the operations which would lead to Germany's collapse of falling into three phases: first, the destruction of the enemy forces west of the Rhine and closing to that river; second, the seizure of bridgeheads over the Rhine from which to develop operations into Germany; and third, the destruction of the remaining enemy east of the Rhine and the advance into the heart of the Reich.

(Eisenhower, op cit, p. 81)

Forces were regrouped and the major thrust made from the north, where 21 Army Group planned Operations "VERITABLE" and "GRENADE" to smash the enemy west of the Rhine. For this battle of the Rhineland the 6th Airborne Division left 30 Corps and was assigned a holding role as part of 8 Brit Corps within Second British Army, to whom Field-Marshal Montgomery had given certain responsibilities.

Second Army was to hold a firm front on the Meuse facing east and to assist the Canadian operations by every means possible. At this stage of planning I envisaged Second Army crossing the Meuse to secure Venlo as part of the Veritable plan, though later this was cancelled because it proved unnecessary.

(Montgomery, op cit, p. 184)

20. 1 Cdn Para Bn was permitted to remain in its rest area at Pondrome less than four days before being ordered to proceed to the Netherlands. This brief pause in the winter campaign permitted all ranks to attend both parade and draw clean clothing and enabled the quartermaster to issue rubber boots and leather jerkins in preparation for rigorous field conditions. On 22 Jan 45 the Battalion, travelling all day by lorry, traversed Ninth U.S. Army area to reach the Dutch village of Roggel (7397, sheet 4, Belgium & N.E.

France, 1:100,000. In error the name "Roggel" is not printed on this map). Front-line positions on the west bank of the River Maas<sup>6</sup> were taken over from elements of 15 (S) Inf Div the next morning, with 1 Cdn Para Bn H.Q. established at Haelen (7594) and the rifle companies in three neighbouring villages: "A" Company forward at Buggenum (7794), "B" Company on the right at Broek (7692), and "C" Company on the left at Nunhem (7695) (W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, 23 Jan 45). Across the river the Siegfried Line extended "along a slight lip which overlooked the valley" and continuous trench systems stretched along the east bank connecting the strongly fortified areas of Venlo to the north and Roermond to the south (Montgomery, op cit, p. 187). The enemy held both these strongpoints, but south of the latter had been forced by 12 Corps of Second Army to retreat across the River Roer, which joins the Maas from the southeast at Roermond (ibid, pp. 185-6). Ninth U.S. Army had taken over this Roermond triangle, from which it was intended to launch Operation "GRENADE" on 10 Feb 45. Away to the south, however, the Germans by releasing a huge volume of water from a dam on the upper Roer caused it to overflow its bank along the entire front of Ninth Army. Therefore First Canadian Army was forced to begin Operation "VERITABLE" in the north on 8 Feb 45 without supporting attacks.

21. While stirring events were happening on the right and left of Second Army, 1 Cdn Para Bn had to be content with the holding role demanded of its central position. Enemy shells and rockets fell into the unit area time after time yet caused surprisingly few casualties. Sporadic exchanges of mortar, rifle and L.M.G. fire were a daily occurrence, also without major damage. A standing patrol of "B" Company located near a railway bridge (774933) repeatedly came under heavy enemy fire of all types in the first few days. Soon an enemy observation post was discovered directly across the river at that point and thereafter was given a daily drubbing by machine-gunners and snipers, aided one day by a number of rounds from a Sherman tank. On 1 Feb 45 a German raiding party ventured across the Maas to attack a standing patrol of "A" Company at 0200 hours, wounding two men but losing a prisoner of war. Almost every night the enemy lighted up the front with flares as though expecting attacks himself, and frequently during the day he could be seen digging trenches to improve his defensive position. Royal Engineers passed through the unit lines on 25 Jan and 29 Jan 45 to recce the Maas for a possible crossing, the Battalion affording protective troops, but in view of the changed plan no attempt was made to cross in force in that particular area (Cf para 19 above).

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<sup>6</sup>The River Meuse becomes the Maas in the Netherlands.

22. Active patrolling across the Maas was definitely a major part of 1 Cdn Para Bn's duties, however, in accordance with instructions given to Second Army by the Commander-in-Chief.

A very thorough watch will be kept on the enemy on the east bank of the MEUSE and every opportunity will be taken to harry and alarm him by means of patrols, raids, etc., and to establish bridgeheads where, and when, suitable.

(C.-in-C., 21 Army Group Operational Directive M 548 dated 21 Jan 45)

On 29 Jan 45 Lt J.L. Davies with two other ranks crossed the river on a recce patrol which lasted 36 hours, observing the enemy without interference and returning without casualties. Patrols sent across the Maas on 3 Feb 45 met no enemy opposition but the next night one encountered an enemy section so strong that the patrol commander dared not interfere. On 7 Feb 45 a fighting patrol of 30 other ranks commanded by Lt A.J.C. Estling crossed to the east bank and entered the village of Einde, opposite "A" Company location, but encountered no enemy opposition whatsoever. On 10 Feb 45 Lt D.J. Proulx led another recce patrol across the Maas for 36 hours, carrying a 38 wireless set for communication purposes. Two nights later the enemy retaliated by sending a patrol of their own against "B" Company, wounding one man but retiring to their own side before morning. On 13 Feb 45 an enemy patrol consisting of about 6 men was seen crossing towards "A" Company. They were immediately covered by L.M.Gs. which later opened fire and caused the boat to capsize. The enemy heard screaming in the water were believed to have been wounded. "A" Company promptly despatched a patrol of its own across the river but it met stiff opposition and was forced to retire, returning to make another attempt also without success. That night a considerable number of flares were reported and machine gun fire was quite heavy. The next day the River Maas was observed to be rising very rapidly (cf para 20 above) and active patrolling by both sides ceased.

23. As the flood waters rose the enemy fire noticeably decreased and the front held 1 Cdn Para Bn became extremely quiet. Fighting was heavy to the north, however, where First Canadian Army cleared the Reichswald Forest by 13 Feb 45 and the next day reached the Rhine near Emmerich. When the Roer floods had passed their peak, Operation "GRENADE" was launched from the south on 23 Feb 45. The Ninth Army in its sweep northward found Roermond abandoned by the Germans on 1 Mar 45 and pushed on to Venlo, two days later making contact with First Canadian Army. The success of the combined

"VERITABLE-GRENADE" Operations removed all opposition west of the Rhine and inflicted crippling losses on the enemy (Montgomery, op cit, Chap XVI deals at length with the Battle of the Rhineland).

24. The 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion once again had shared in a major engagement, fulfilling a very useful function in helping to hold a vital part of the front line in the centre until the Allies could deliver smashing blows from the left and right. As soon as the former had broken through and while the latter was held poised, relief for the unit was forthcoming. Rumours of a possible return to England began on 15 Feb 45 when all personnel of the Battalion were asked for sizes of dress shirts and boots. The next day they heard that American forces would relieve the unit, whose future employment was a matter of considerable conjecture. On 18 Feb 45 the American advance party arrived at 1000 hours and the Canadian advance party departed two hours later. The next day the main body of U.S. troops arrived at 1300 hours to take up positions, 1 Cdn Para Bn leaving at once to embus at Roggel for a staging camp at Zeveneecken, Belgium. Personnel of the rifle companies sailed from Ostend 21 Feb 45 while Bn H.Q. and H.Q. Coy flew from Nivelles the following day. By 23 Feb 45 they were together again in their old quarters at Carter Barracks, Bulford.

25. Thus ended the second period of active service on Europe's battlefields by 1 Cdn Para Bn. To three months of fighting in Normandy the unit had added to its credit almost two additional months of campaigning at the front in the Low Countries and now was spoiling to make another parachute descent like that of D-day.

#### ALLIED PLANS FOR CROSSING THE RHINE

26. Once the Germans had been defeated west of the Rhine, the Allies were in a strong position to assault the river and seize the vital Ruhr industrial region.

The plan of campaign for crossing the Rhine and establishing a strong force on the far bank was, thanks to the success of the operations west of the river, basically the same as that envisaged in our long-term planning in January, and even before D-day. Its fundamental features were the launching of a main attack to the north of the Ruhr, supported by a strong secondary thrust from bridgeheads in the Frankfurt area, directed initially on Kassel to complete the envelopment of the

Ruhr. Subsequently, offensives would strike out from the bridgeheads to any remaining organized forces and complete their destruction.

(Eisenhower, op cit, pp. 96-97)

Since an attack could not be made on the Ruhr frontally, it was necessary to by-pass it and, although the south had several assaulting sites, the most suitable terrain for mobile operations lay to the north.

27. Operation "PLUNDER", the name given to this great assault across the Rhine north of Ruhr, was conducted by 21 Army Group with three Allied Armies under command. The plan in outline was to cross the Rhine on a front of two armies between Rees (0752, sheet P.1, Central Europe, 1:100,000) and Rheinberg (2128, sheet Q.1) with Ninth U.S. Army on the right and Second Army on the left.

They were to capture the communications centre of Wesel and then to expand their initial lodgement area on the east bank southward to a distance sufficient to secure the roads through Wesel from enemy ground action, northward to enable the river to be bridged at Emmerich, and eastward and north-eastward to secure a firm bridgehead of adequate size from which further offensive operations could be developed.

(Ibid, p. 97)

In the first stage of operations the principal task of Second Army was to capture Wesel (2240), while that of Ninth Army was to secure the right flank. First Canadian Army, which had no active part in the assault, was made responsible for the absolute security of the Nijmegen bridgehead and of the entire northern flank from Emmerich to the sea. The second stage of operations involved the extension of the bridgehead eastwards and northwards.

28. To assist the advance of Second Army, the First Allied Airborne Army was to drop XVIII U.S. Airborne Corps, comprising the U.S. 17th and British 6th Airborne Divisions, approximately five miles north and northwest of Wesel to seize the key terrain in that area.

The tasks of XVIII United States Airborne Corps were to disrupt the hostile defences north of Wesel, to deepen the bridgehead, and to facilitate the crossing of the river by Second Army and its

link-up with Ninth American Army. It was then to prepare for further offensive action to the east on orders from Second Army.

(Montgomery, op cit, p. 203)

This airborne crossing of the Rhine to be made in conjunction with Operation "PLUNDER" was given the code-name "VARSITY". Lt-Gen Sir Miles Dempsey, who as Commander of Second Army was responsible for planning and executing the main thrust, met the airborne chiefs on 20 Feb 45 to present his desired scheme for airborne support.

He said he considered it absolutely essential to have airborne assistance in crossing the Rhine.

The airborne mission was to be twofold:

- (1) Seize the commanding ground from which artillery fire controlled the whole area.
- (2) Block possible arrival of enemy reinforcements from each of Wesel.

(Brereton, op cit, p. 397)

Parachute descents hitherto had always heralded the main attack, but to provide an additional element of surprise General Dempsey persuaded the Commander-in-Chief to adopt a novel tactical variation in timing.

It was decided to drop the airborne troops east of the Rhine after (sic) the assault across the river had taken place. There were two main reasons for this decision: daylight was desirable for the employment of airborne troops and, secondly, it would be impossible to make full use of our artillery for the ground assault if airborne troops were dropped in the target area before we had crossed the river. In deciding the landing and dropping zones for the airborne forces, the principles employed were that they should drop within range of artillery sited on the west bank of the Rhine, in order to obtain immediate artillery support, and that the link-up with the ground troops should be effected on the first day of the operation.

(Montgomery, op cit, p. 203)



29. The tasks assigned to the Allied air forces were three in number and all were achieved with a high degree of success. Primarily, "On 21 February 1945, both the allied strategic and tactical air forces commenced their intensive campaign not only to isolate the immediate battle area but to cut off northwest Germany from effective ground and air reinforcements" (American observers' report, "Operation VARSITY: The Airborne Crossing of the River Rhine, March 1945": Narrative of Operation VARSITY). As the target date for the assault approached, their attacks upon communications in the battle area were intensified to an even greater degree.

In addition, during the 72 hours preceding the assault, a number of attacks were made upon enemy barracks and camps in the vicinity of the planned bridgehead ... Apart from the casualties inflicted in such attacks, it cannot be doubted that they produced a serious moral effect upon the enemy, who, after enduring three days of unremitting hell from the air was in no condition to meet the frontal attack when it was launched.

In all, during the 4 days, 21-24 March, American and British air forces, based in Britain, western Europe and Italy, flew over 42,000 sorties against Germany.

(Eisenhower, op cit, p. 99)

Secondly, Allied photographic reconnaissance aircraft provided the armies with extremely full and accurate intelligence information regarding flak areas, ground defences, and terrain suitability for drop and landing zones. Lastly, the Allied air forces were responsible for the safe delivery of XVIII Airborne Corps to the battlefield. The chief threat of interference lay in jet aircraft, in which the enemy had a superiority of production. This was neutralized by heavy bombing of jet airfields to destroy the planes on the ground, to crater the extra-long runways they required, and to blow up hoarded supplies of fuel. In addition, on the actual day of the assault two major diversionary raids over Berlin and certain oil and rail targets kept enemy fighters occupied elsewhere. On that day the Allied air forces flew some 8,000 aircraft and 1,300 glider sorties while sighting fewer than 100 enemy planes in the air. The culmination of all these efforts in the air is described by General Eisenhower in these words:

As a result of this protection by fighter aircraft, coupled with the measures taken against enemy airfields, not one transport was molested by hostile aircraft. Some losses were sustained from

A.A. fire over the target, but the total of 46 planes destroyed (3.98 percent of those employed) was remarkably low considering the fact that, to ensure accuracy of dropping and landing, no evasive action was taken.

(ibid, p. 100)

30. Use of airborne troops, air support, artillery and amphibious equipment on the maximum scale was considered to be essential to ensure a successful passage of the main forces of infantry and armour across the river. By seizing unexpected opportunities, however, 12 Army Group accomplished two prior Rhine crossings in the south without formal preparations and with negligible losses. Seizure of the railway bridge at Remagen on 7 Mar 45 was a factor of great significance in upsetting the enemy's defensive scheme and in forwarding the plans of the Allies for encircling the Ruhr. A surprise night crossing south of the Rhine just as the Allies were about to launch their carefully-prepared power drive in the north impressed upon both sides the fact that a bridgehead there would inevitably result in the collapse of Germany's powers of resistance.

31. Intelligence reports revealed that 21 Army Group was faced on the east bank by the German First Parachute Army, with the 2nd Parachute Corps in the north, the 86th Corps in the centre, and the 63rd Corps in the south. In Army Reserve the 47th Panzer Corps lay up behind the paratroops in the north, thereby indicating "the area of greatest enemy apprehension" ([Report No. 152](#), Hist Sec C.M.H.Q., "The Concluding Phase: The Advance into North-West Germany and the Final Liberation of the Netherlands, 23 Mar - 5 May 45").

32. The land assault by 21 Army Group was timed to begin at 2100 hours 23 March (D-1), the initial parachute drop at 1000 hours 24 Mar 45 (P hour). Almost 3,000 guns were massed along the Rhine to support the ground and air onslaught.

The offensive was heralded, at 2000 hours on 23 March, with a great artillery barrage of an hour's duration, directed against the east bank of the Rhine and extending through the zone where the airborne forces were to be dropped and landed on the next day.

(Eisenhower, op cit, p. 100)

The airborne operation necessitated an elaborate counter-flak fire plan synchronized with close air co-operation. Its complications were greatly increased by the decision to time the air assault some 12 hours after the ground attack.

It was arranged that artillery would deal with enemy anti-aircraft guns within range, and that the Royal Air Force should undertake the neutralization of guns beyond this area which could engage the troop carriers and gliders. Very detailed arrangements were necessary for the control of artillery fire during the passage of the airborne fleets.

(Montgomery, op cit, p. 203)

Prior to P hour fired, medium, heavy and superheavy artillery firing over the heads of the attacking ground forces laid down a devastating barrage extending through the landing zones and dropping zones. Its schedule was as follows:

<u>Time</u>	<u>Type of Target</u>
P-2 hrs to P-1 hr	Counter-battery and softening bombardment.
P-30 mins to P-15 mins	Anti-flak bombardment.
P-15 mins to P hr	Counter-battery and softening bombardment.

(W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, March 1945, Appx "F": 1 Cdn Para Bn O.O. No. 1, Appx "C")

33. "In order to conceal the ground build-up, Field-Marshal Montgomery screened his activity by the extensive use of smoke on a fifty-mile front" (American observers' report, op cit). No comparable cloak could hide from the enemy the fact that a large scale air operation was intended, however, as military men could easily interpret the pattern of Allied air attacks and various other factors together with information obtained through Intelligence channels. A well-known Berlin radio commentator announced on 22 Mar 45:

Allied airborne landings on a large scale to establish bridgeheads east of the Rhine must be expected. We are prepared.

(Gunther Weber, quoted in Brereton, op cit, p. 403)

The point is that until the actual descent began the Germans did not know just where and when battle would be joined. "Captured documents reveal the fact that the German High Command expected the Airborne landing farther north at EMMERICH and had concentrated considerable flak in this area" (American observers' report, op cit).

#### 1 CDN PARA BN IN OPERATION "VARSITY"

34. Upon XVIII Airborne Corps being designated as task force for Operation "VARSITY",<sup>7</sup> orders had been issued for the 17th U.S. Airborne Division to concentrate in France and the 6th British Airborne Division in England. Soon after arrival there personnel of 1 Cdn Para Bn were informed by their Commanding Officer of the reason for the unit returning to the United Kingdom (W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, 23 Feb 45). Training for the forthcoming operation did not begin, however, until after all ranks returned from seven days' leave ending 7 Mar 45. The Battalion was then up to full strength in officers and other ranks with the exception of a deficiency of 14 sergeants covered off by a surplus of junior N.C.Os. Major P.R. Griffin resumed command of "A" Company from Capt J.A. Clancy: other senior regimental officers remained unchanged. Apart from the paymaster, the officers ranged in age from 22 to 30 years: the C.O. was 30, the youngest company commander 26; the padre and M.O. were 29 and 27 respectively and were qualified parachutists (ibid, March 1945: Field Return for 9 Mar 45).

35. Training of personnel began with Ts.O.E.T. (tests of elementary training) on all weapons, followed by field-firing exercises and battle drill. Lack of time, the need for equipment elsewhere, and the necessity of keeping accidents to a minimum in the final stages prohibited divisional or brigade manoeuvres. There was no opportunity to hold even a single practice descent, which meant that the majority of men in the Battalion had not jumped since Exercise "EVE" in November 1944 (See para 11 above). Events moved very rapidly indeed. On 19 Mar 45 large packs had to be handed in for shipment overseas and thereafter all personnel were confined to barracks for the remainder of the unit's stay in England. The next morning the

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<sup>7</sup>A list of the principal commanders of the airborne forces is given in Appendix "A" to this report.

Division moved off by lorry to East Anglia. H.Q. 3 Para Bde, 8 Para Bn, 1 Cdn Para Bn, and a detachment of 224 Para Field Ambulance were accommodated in Hill Hall Transit Camp (L936189), sheet 107, England and Wales, 1:63,360) and were to emplane together at the airfield of Chipping Ongar (9921) (American observers' report, op cit: 6 Airborne Division Base Administrative Instruction, 14 Mar 45, Appx "A").

36. For the past three days the Intelligence Section had been preparing plasticine models and enlargements of maps and air photographs for use in briefing the Battalion at the camp. This commenced 21 Mar 45 with Lt-Col Nicklin giving a general briefing to all personnel of the unit followed by special briefing of officers. Two whole days were devoted to detailed briefings by company and platoon commanders. For this purpose the unit was allotted one hut to show Corps, Divisional, and Brigade plans plus two huts for the Battalion plan.

37. The general tasks allotted to XVIII Airborne Corps in co-operation with 12 Brit Corps on the ground have already been described in this report (See para 28 above). That of 6 Airborne Div was to "seize, clear and hold the SCHNEPPENBERG feature (1646, sheet 16, Germany, 1:50,000) and the village of HAMMINKELN (2048) together with designated bridges over R. ISSEL ..." (American observers' report, op cit: 6 Airborne Div Operation Order No. 7 dated 12 Mar 45).<sup>8</sup> These three bridges, all east of Hamminkeln, were to be prepared for demolition but not blown unless recapture by the enemy became certain. Formations of the Division were: 3 Para Bde, 5 Para Bde, 6 Airdg Bde, 22 Indep Para Coy, and 6 Airborne Armd Recce Regt, together with units of artillery, engineers, signals, and the services. The task of 3 Para Bde, scheduled to drop first and operate on the divisional left, was to clear and hold an area on the western edge of the Diersfordt woods which contain the Schneppenberg feature and to establish patrols through these woods (ibid). 8 Para Bn would seize the northern and 9 Para Bn the southern parts of the Brigade area with 1 Cdn Para Bn in the centre. H.Q. 3 Para Bde would initially be established in the dropping zone to the north, then with 8 Para Bn, but on completion of the brigade task would move into 1 Cdn Para Bn area. 1 Cdn Para Bn was to drop just north of the woods (1547) in order to seize, clear, and hold an area along the western edge including slightly more than half a mile of a main road running north-south. The Battalion objective was a group of houses (156472) in the southern section of this area (W.D., 1 Cdn Para

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<sup>8</sup>Extracts from 1 Cdn Para Bn Operation Order No. 1 issued 17 Mar 45 are given in Appx "B" to this report. Map references are to sheets 16 and 36, Germany, 1:50,000. Originals are found as appendices to the unit War Diary for March 1945.

Bn, March 1945, Appx "F": 1 Cdn Para Bn O.O. No. 1 dated 17 Mar 45). "C" Company was first to clear the road junction and corner of the woods in the northern sector. "A" Company would then pass through "C" Company in order to clear and hold the area of the houses where Bn H.Q. would later be established. "B" Company was to move south-west through the woods to provide flank protection, to seize and hold the cross-roads about which the houses were grouped, and to consolidate the southern sector. All companies would then carry out extensive local patrolling for their own protection and in order to attempt to establish contact with British and American troops.

38. Everything possible was done to make all ranks thoroughly acquainted with this plan. During intervals between briefing personnel played volleyball, softball, basketball, touch football, and sundry improvised sports. Sun bathing was also a popular pastime, the weather remaining warm. On 23 Mar 45 the Battalion had a full day beginning with reveille at 0400 hours. In the morning all ranks embussed and moved with full G1098 (war scales of equipment) to Chipping Ongar airfield in order to fit parachutes and stow away kit bags and weapons in designated aircraft. Returning to camp at noon, the Battalion completed briefing arrangements and held church services for Roman Catholics and Protestants at 1800 hours. As reveille the next morning was to be at 0200 hours, the Brigade Commander ordered all personnel to be in bed by 2000 hours, the hour when the artillery barrage over the Rhine began. The unit diarist recorded on the eve of the battle "Morale - top-notch" (W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, 23 Mar 45).

39. The weather on 24 Mar 45 turned out as predicted by the forecasters. "Unlimited visibility existed over our bases in the United Kingdom, on the continent and over the target area, although a considerable smoke haze persisted over the latter throughout the operation" (American observers' report, op cit). A message sent out by Field-Marshal Montgomery shortly before 1700 hours, 23 March, announced to all concerned that Operation "PLUNDER/VARSITY" would be mounted as planned. All airborne and troop carrier forces were alerted at once. Second British Army launched its assault over the Rhine at 2100 hours that night and Ninth U.S. Army at 0300 hours the following morning.

While the ground troops pushed on in the early hours of 24 March the airborne forces were forming up. 17 United States Airborne Division took off from bases in France, while 6 Airborne Division was lifted from England. Escorted by aircraft of Fighter Command and of the British and American Tactical Air Forces, the two mighty air fleets converged near Brussels and made for the Rhine. Over the bridgehead area an air umbrella was maintained by nine hundred fighters, while deeper

into Germany fighter formations kept enemy aircraft away from the battle zone. A great weight of artillery fire from the west bank of the Rhine prepared the way for the airborne drop, and a few minutes before 1000 hours the ground troops saw the aircraft of the first parachute serial arrive. For the next three hours relays of aircraft came into the dropping and landing zone areas in an immensely thrilling and inspiring demonstration of Allied air power; over seventeen hundred aircraft and thirteen hundred gliders were employed to deliver some fourteen thousand troops in the battle area. Our losses were comparatively light for an operation of this magnitude; under four percent of the gliders were destroyed while the total losses in transport aircraft were fifty-five. Immediately following the glider landings, a resupply mission was flown in very low by 250 Liberators of Eighth United States Air Force. The latter were met by heavy flak and fourteen were shot down, but eighty-five percent of their supplies were accurately dropped.

(Montgomery, op cit, pp 205-6)

40. Tugs and gliders assigned to 6 Airborne Div were operated by pilots of the 38th and 46th Groups, R.A.F., but on the other hand "The entire British Parachute lift was carried in 240 C-47s of the IX Troop Carried Command", U.S.A.A.F. (American observer's report, op cit: Narrative of Operation "VARSITY"). 1 Cdn Para Bn was allotted 35 aircraft (C-47s) of 61 U.S.T.C.C., IX Troop Carrier Command, and was scheduled to drop at 1004 hours (ibid, Appx "B": Aircraft and Glider Allotment to Units). This provided for an approximate parachutist strength of 32 officers and 565 other ranks (ibid, Appx "K": Base Organization Plan). Forming part of the van of 6 Airborne Div, 1 Cdn Para Bn dropping third among its units, being preceded by 8 Para Bn and H.Q. 3 Para Bde and followed by 9 Para Bn, detachments of engineers and medicals, and the glider element. The unit war diarist has given a vivid picture of the descent and initial fighting by Canadian paratroops on German soil.

Reveille was at 0200 hrs. Personnel had a good breakfast, embussed on lorries at 0445 hrs and proceeded to airport arriving at 0615 hrs. Personnel put on their parachutes, emplaned and took off at 0730 hrs. The flight from England to D.Z. in Germany lasted approx 2 hrs and 10 mins. The flight across was quiet and uneventful. Unit jumped at 0955 hrs and was widely spread due to the high speed of the aircraft when crossing the D.Z. Aircraft did not slow down or lift their tails. Flak was fairly heavy over the D.Z. and several A./C. were seen to go down in flames. On landing, most of the Bn encountered severe M.G. and sniper fire, which accounted for most of the casualties.

There was very little artillery fire. Most of the casualties were on the D.Z. proper, which was covered by mutually supporting German positions. A good many were dropped EAST of the D.Z. because of the speed of the planes, and though enemy fire was not so intense, snipers were fairly active. Coys reached RVs in good time, and the Bn objectives were either captured or killed. C Coy, at the North end of the perimeter, came under severe fire from 100 or 200 yards away, and were constantly repelling probing attacks by numbers of German paratroops. In the centre and South end A and B Coys respectively held the wooded country. B Coy took large numbers of prisoners. Bn prisoners constituted quite a problem because they numbered almost the strength of the Bn. It was fortunate that Germans were killed by the hundreds, otherwise it would have been impossible to corral and guard them in the early hours of the operation. In the late hours of the afternoon enemy artillery fired, quite inaccurately on the Bn perimeter. At 1500 hrs recce elements of the 15th Division linked up with the Bn, and were warmly welcomed. During the night 24/25 three were wounded by enemy shelling. Casualties for D-Day were:

	<u>Killed</u>	<u>Missing</u>	<u>Wounded</u>
Officers	2	1	1
Other Ranks	26	3	34

Among the casualties were Lt-Col J.A. Nicklin, Commanding Officer, killed. Lt J.J. Brunette, killed. Capt J.A. Clancy, missing. Lt J.L. Davies, wounded.

(W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, 24 Mar 45)

41. Reorganization of 1 Cdn Para Bn on the ground was speedily achieved with Major G.F. Eadie assuming command on the C.O. failing to arrive at the rendezvous; it was not until 26 March that the body of Lt-Col Nicklin was found hanging from a tree in his parachute (ibid, 26 Mar 45). "A" Company under Major P.R. Griffin landed in all cases east of the D.Z. but within 30 minutes had collected 70% of its personnel and by 1130 hours cleared its objective, reporting a total loss of 13 casualties. Later that day an enemy attacking force, a troublesome mortar crew, and a German patrol in the woods were successfully eliminated in turn and numerous prisoners captured (ibid, Appx "J"). "B" Company jumped under command of Capt S.W. McGowan vice Maj C.E. Fuller who at the last moment had to remain at the airfield in England. Capt McGowan on landing received a large hole in his helmet and a slight wound but gallantly



carried on until killed in action a few days later. Meeting a very warm reception on the D.Z., 2 officers and 12 other ranks failed to reach the R.V. and several others turned up quite late, one not until D plus 5<sup>9</sup>. Although reduced in strength, the Company took its objective successfully and established patrols to scour the woods. Outstanding work was done by Sgt A.B. Paige,<sup>10</sup> who with six men captured 98 prisoners on D-day (lbid). "C" Company preceded the whole of the Battalion in the jump, meeting considerable small arms fire on the D.Z. Major J.P. Hanson suffered a broken collarbone and had to be evacuated. Capt J.A. Clancy, company second-in-command, was taken prisoner-of-war immediately upon landing and from his interrogation it is apparent that the Germans did not know whether 1 Cdn Para Bn was part of our surplus to the establishment of 6 Airborne Div nor whether it was part of 3 or 5 Para Bde.<sup>11</sup> Although without either of its senior officers, "C" Company put up a good show against strong opposition while under constant shell and mortar fire. Concentrating against the Company a threatening force of men and guns in the nearby woods, the enemy prevented several parties from reaching gliders on the D.Z. and staged a strong counter attack at 0530 hours the next morning. "C" Company were fully prepared and with the aid of well-placed supporting weapons were able to beat them off. One of the 3" mortars co-operating with the P.I.A.Ts. succeeded in knocking out a deadly 88mm self-propelled gun, thus removing a serious threat to the Battalion (lbid).

42. Excellent assistance in the defence was given by specialist platoons of the Support Company under Major R.C. Hilborn, who became Battalion Second-in-Command on the death of the C.O. In close contact with "C" Company, the Vickers Platoon commanded by Lt H.B. Armstrong set itself up astride the main road with two M.M.Gs. on the platoon front and one on either flank. Cpl J.L. Chambers<sup>12</sup> distinguished himself the first day by leading in the rescue of three seriously wounded glider pilots. The next day he himself was wounded with one arm rendered useless yet he insisted upon remaining with his gun until ordered to the R.A.P.; on this being set on fire he returned to his post until the action ended. This platoon

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<sup>9</sup>Only one other rank of "B" Coy refused to jump.

<sup>10</sup>K15499 Sgt Paige, A.B.

<sup>11</sup>W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, March 1945, Appx "J" includes a full account of the personal experiences of Capt (later Major) J.A. Clancy as prisoner-of-war from 24 Mar 45 until he escaped 15 Apr 45 and reached Allied lines 18 Apr 45.

<sup>12</sup>G 50902 Cpl Chambers, J.L., who was mentioned in despatches.

gave particularly strong support in repelling the major enemy counter-attack during the first night and later captured a Messerschmidt pilot forced to parachute into its lines. Initial casualties of the platoon included 2 killed, 2 wounded, and 3 slightly wounded. The Mortar Platoon under Lt G. Lynch landed to the north of the D.Z. and while attempting to reach Bn H.Q. its Bren carrier suffered a direct hit. Outstanding heroism in rescuing its crew led to the award of the Victoria Cross to Cpl Frederick Topham.<sup>13</sup> The mortars rendered valuable service to "C" Company in particular and in two days suffered total casualties of 5 killed and 5 wounded. The P.I.A.T. Platoon with Lt D.O. Belding as O.C. was distributed among the three rifle companies, four weapons with each. These were most useful in clearing houses and in counteracting enemy S.P. guns. Platoon casualties were 1 killed and 5 wounded.<sup>14</sup>

43. Complete consolidation of objectives seized could not have been achieved without the close support rendered by artillery from positions on the west bank of the Rhine immediately after the airborne troops arrived on the ground. This of necessity had to be observed fire, and each airborne battalion was given a trained artillery observer who parachuted with it in order to radio back fire control directions.

The observers adjusted fire visually by day and night and on occasion by sound ... for 48 hours they gave to the airborne divisions something unique in airborne annals - observed close support artillery fire in great mass during the crucial period when the airborne divisional artilleries were seeking to assemble and organize on the ground.

(American observer's report, op cit)

Attached to 1 Cdn Para Bn as Forward Observation Officer, Capt Boss<sup>15</sup> gave effective service in calling down a concentration of artillery fire on enemy infantry and guns in the woods north-west of "C" Company's

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<sup>13</sup>B 39039 Cpl Topham, F.J. (See para 72 for citation).

<sup>14</sup>W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, March 1945, Appx "J" contains narratives of the rifle companies and specialist platoons for the first two days of the battle compiled by Lt J.A. Rosseter, Battalion Intelligence Officer.

<sup>15</sup>The initials and unit of Capt Boss are not available but no R.C.A. officer of that name was in North-West Europe at that time. It is presumed he was an officer of the Royal Artillery whose guns were in close support.

location. Unfortunately, he was wounded during the shelling on the afternoon of D plus 1 and had to be evacuated. Later German artillery fire grew less and less as the Allies extended their foothold and overran the gun sites.

44. Field-Marshal Montgomery has given great credit to the Allied airborne and ground forces "for the impetus and dash they displayed in the operation" (Montgomery, op cit, p. 208). The timing of the airborne attack achieved the element of surprise which had been planned and threw the enemy into confusion, thus accelerating the progress of the assaulting forces. "The Airborne Corps took 3,500 prisoners during the day and cleared all its objectives according to plan" (ibid, p. 206). The 17th U.S. Airborne Division first made contact with the Commands of Second Army about noon and by dark had achieved all objectives. In the afternoon the 17th also linked up with the 6th British Airborne Division, who had taken all its objectives by 1330 hours and had made contact at 1530 hours with the 15th Scottish Division of 12 Corps, Second Army (Brereton, op cit, p. 406). Recce elements of the Scots were far ahead of the main land forces in reaching the Canadian lines, however, as it was not until 0430 hours on D plus 1 that an armoured column of the 15th Scottish Division arrived and it was 0800 hours before the infantry marched in to consolidate the junction of forces (W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, 25 Mar 45). Later the Scots passed through the lines of "C" Company and proceeded northward along the main road (ibid, Appx "J"). Stage one having been successfully completed, efforts now ever directed towards extension of the bridgehead.

... the 6th Airborne Division commenced a swift advance eastward with the 15th Division, while the 17th Airborne Division, after linking with the main forces of Ninth Army, followed suit.

(Eisenhower, op cit, pp 100-1)

45. Enemy shelling slackened off considerably during the second night and by dawn on 26 March 1 Cdn Para Bn was able to detail squads to sweep the D.Z. for unit equipment and casualties. At 1000 hours that morning orders came for the Canadians to move south-east along the roadside and then skirt the eastern edge of the woods to reach the Brigade assembly area (1933463). Remaining there about three hours, the unit at 1500 hours began a long trek across open country to the east following minor roads with frequent changes of direction. After crossing the railway line between Wesel and Hamminkeln, the Battalion paused for a meal in a clump of woods (226453) and then crossed the upper Issel before finding shelter for the night in barns and houses (250473) (W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, 26 Mar 45).

46. Although reveille was at 0530 the next morning, there was no time for breakfast before the advance continued. Traversing open country until crossing the Issel again further east, the Battalion then was able to advance in the protection afforded by stretches of coniferous trees. The Canadians encountered no resistance until 0945 hours, when fire came from nearby woods (304471, sheet 36). The Mortar and Vickers Platoons immediately went into action, aided by artillery fire brought to bear upon the enemy. A squadron of tanks and armoured cars arrived at 1100 hours to assist in bringing about the swift collapse of German opposition. The Battalion took 18 prisoners and by 1315 hours had reached its objective (315478), whereupon companies took up defensive positions and remained static until morning (ibid, 27 Mar 45). Other airborne units had met with similar success in their advances.

North of the Lippe River the airborne divisions made considerable progress, and enemy resistance on their front was progressively weakening; to add to the weight of their thrust an armoured brigade passed through the airborne sector at midnight on 27 March.

(Montgomery, op cit, p. 207)

47. Resuming its advance at 0800 hours 28 Mar 45, 1 Cdn Para Bn passed north of the Wesel Forest and of the village of Erle (4050), thence along a main road leading eastward. No enemy resistance was encountered until just beyond Rhade (445505) where airbursts were fired overhead (482509). That evening "A" and "C" Companies successfully attacked and destroyed these A.A. guns and the Battalion was able to proceed to the village of Lembeck (4951, sheet p. 1, Central Europe, 1:100,000). There the companies took up defensive positions on the outskirts but were not troubled again (W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, 28 Mar 45).

48. For two nights and a day the Canadians rested while the enemy showed no signs of activity. The weather on 29 Mar 45 was cloudy with considerable rain but personnel were made happy with an issue of cigarettes and chocolate from the auxiliary services officer. This short rest in Lembeck was very welcome after the week's fighting and before the long chase across Germany swung into full speed (ibid, 29 Mar 45). With both stages of Operation "VARSITY" successfully completed, the door into Germany had been battered down and the Allies had crossed the threshold.

#### THE ADVANCE TO THE EIBE

49. Through every Rhine bridgehead Allied forces had poured into Germany to complete the encirclement of the Ruhr. By 1 Apr 45 this had been achieved and the American Armies immediately began operations to eliminate the enemy forces trapped within (Eisenhower, op cit, p. 104). Once the Ruhr was no longer a threat, the Supreme Commander saw three main avenues by which the Allies could thrust deeper into Germany.

- (1) In the north, a route lay across the North German Plain toward the Baltic and Berlin ...
- (2) In central Germany, a route was open to us through the gap in the enemy's line created by the trapping of Army Group B in the Ruhr ...
- (3) In the south, an axis of advance was available through Nürnberg and Regensburg, by the Danube Valley into Austria, where the Russians were already threatening Vienna ...

Weighing the relative advantages which would accrue from an advance in strength in either north, centre, or south, I decided that an offensive first in the centre would prove the most effective.

(Ibid, pp. 105-6)

50. This decision necessitated modification of the plans of Field-Marshal Montgomery, who on 28 Mar 45 had directed Second and Ninth Armies to drive hard for the line of the River Elbe so as to gain quick possession of the plains of northern Germany.

This is the time to take risks and to go 'flat out' for the ELBE.

If we reach the ELBE quickly, we win the war.

(C.-in-C., 21 Army Group, Operational Directive M 563 dated 28 Mar 45)

To take part in this drive 8 Corps had been brought up from reserve and placed on the right of Second Army. The Supreme Commander's decision, however, called for Ninth U.S. Army including the 17th U.S. Airborne

Division to be removed from 21 Army Group on 4 Apr 45 in order to form the left wing of the American offensive, thus reducing the striking power in the north.

The aim of 21 Army Group remained to reach the line of the Elbe in our sector ... Now that the Allies would not be so relatively strong in the northern sector, it was to be anticipated that these tasks would take longer than I had previously hoped, and Second Army would require to watch for the security of its southern flank. I decided to establish an intermediate phase in our advance to the Elbe on the line of the Weser, Aller and Leine rivers ...

It had also been intended, prior to the change in the overall Allied plan, to employ XVIII United States Airborne Corps on the right of 8 Corps, to capture Munster. This Corps, however, ceased to be operational on 30 March, and it was left to XIII Corps, under Ninth Army, to reduce Munster on 3 April. Of the British elements in XVIII Airborne Corps, 6 Airborne Division had passed to 8 Corps on 29 March ...

(Montgomery, op cit, pp. 210-211)

Other formations under command of 8 Corps were 15 (S) Inf Div and 11 Armd Div.

51. The new plan was issued to 21 Army Group on 5 Apr 45 (C.-in-C., 21 Army Group, Directive M 567 dated 5 Apr 45). Second Army now had 30 Corps on the left, 12 Corps in the centre, and 8 Corps on the right, where enemy resistance proved to be lightest although the Germans did a thorough job of demolishing bridges over a network of waterways. 8 Corps nevertheless was able to cross the Dortmund-Ems canal without undue difficulty and to clear Osnabruck. On 5 Apr 45, the 6th Airborne Division captured Minden on the Weser and seized a bridgehead over the river. On 7 Apr 45, 8 Corps advanced north from the Weser and by 10 April had established bridgeheads over the Aller. Thereafter hard fighting took place around Uelzen, south-east of Hamburg, before advance elements reached the Elbe on 19 April, and several days were required to mop up the enemy. Eventually "By 24 April the west bank of the river had been cleared throughout the Corps sector" (Montgomery, op cit, p. 212). About the same time 12 Corps closed to the Elbe just south of Hamburg and later 30 Corps, having paused to take Bremen, crossed the Weser to reach the Elbe estuary below Hamburg (Ibid, pp. 212-213).

52. Advancing over 200 miles with relatively light strength for so wide a sector, Second Army had thus lined itself up on the Elbe in very good time. The War Diary of 1 Cdn Para Bn relates many interesting experiences and incidents which occurred during this swift dash into northern Germany. Earlier aspects in which the Canadian paratroops for the first time rode into battle on tanks and described by Patrick Forbes in his book 6th Guards Tank Brigade (Sampson, Low, Marston & Co., Ltd.).

53. On 30 March 1 Cdn Para Bn embussed in R.A.S.C. lorries at Lembeck and at 0915 hours moved off northward to Coesfeld (6072, sheet P. 1, Central Europe, 1:100,000), which R.A.F. bombers had completely wrecked. There the Canadians met Nos 1 and 3 Squadrons of the 4th Battalion Grenadier Guards, 6th Guards Tank Brigade, who had been delayed an hour in getting through the rubble in the town and by 1000 hours were "preparing to make a lightning dash to capture a vital bridge over the River Ems at Graven, thirty-five miles distant" (Forbes, P., 6th Guards Tank Brigade, pp 144-6). Paratroops of "A" and "B" Companies were ordered to debus and climb on the tanks of these two squadrons, a company to each squadron. "In both cases the leading troop carried no Infantry so that their guns could be fired immediately opposition was encountered" (ibid). At first a series of delays were encountered as both squadrons attempted to race along winding roads. No. 3 on the left had to clear booby-trapped trees felled where the road crossed a small range of hills. Then, on receiving a warning from a Frenchman who had appointed himself as guide, lightly-armoured Honey tanks had to be sent ahead to shoot up a Hitler Jugend Barracks. The crew of the leading one was practically wiped out, whereupon "The paratroopers immediately jumped off the tanks and aided by the unorthodox but extremely effective manoeuvres of the Frenchman, disposed of the Hitler Jugend" (ibid). Following the main road meanwhile, "No. 1 Squadron was fired on by bazookas in Billerbecke (6975) but with the Canadians acting as terriers and the tanks as guns, the bazookamen stood no chance" (ibid). It was now a race against nightfall. Both squadrons pushed on at top speed, but No. 3 ran into another road block at Barfelt (6881), which with the aid of the local priest they were able to pass but too late to proceed further that night. No. 1 Squadron consequently raced on alone and found Altenburg (8183, sheet P. 2) full of surrender signs and like a deserted town.

The deafening roar of the Churchill engines reverberated through the narrow streets and the only sign of life came from the groups of paratroopers huddled together on the back of the tanks. As they emerged on the eastern side of the town the light was fading, but they could just pick out the chimneys of Graven (9088) five miles away in the valley below.

There was a steep tarmac road leading down into the valley, and the tanks rushed hell for leather down it. As the leading troop was reaching the bottom, someone suddenly noticed a long column of enemy lorries fleeing for all they were worth along a road leading away to the north. In a flash the turrets of the whole Squadron revolved round to the left and Besa fire streamed into the retreating Germans. But there was no time to stop. The tanks sped on through one village, then another, dealing on the way with an enemy staff car, fleeing bicyclists, and many other targets which the gunners could not resist. They never slowed down until they had reached the suburbs of Graven, 500 yards from the bridge, where the paratroopers jumped off to rush forward and take it. In less than ten minutes it was in their hands - or so they thought - because only one bridge was marked on the map. But there were in actual fact two, and the one they had taken led to an island in the middle of the Ems. Twenty minutes later, there was a blinding flash followed by a loud explosion and the real bridge, 300 yards upstream, crashed into the water. They had been truly, if slightly prematurely, April-fooled! But, to a small extent, the column got their own back on the Germans that night. For just after the bridge was blown, a passenger train came steaming into Graven carrying German soldiers on leave from the Russian front. The Canadians allowed them to kiss their wives and then promptly marched them off to spend their leave in a prisoner-of-war cage. No one got much sleep that night because at about 3 o'clock in the morning the Germans blew up a huge ammunition dump on the other side of the river, and the fires and explosions did not die down for many hours.

(Ibid)

This map error was most unfortunate as the second bridge could have been taken with little trouble, but in capturing the town "A" Company did great execution. Canadian losses during the day included Capt McGowan killed in action and five other ranks wounded; at night, however, heavy enemy shelling brought further casualties (W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, 30 Mar 45).

54. Rain returned the next day and the morning was spent impatiently waiting for a Bailey Bridge to be built across the Ems River. During the afternoon 1 Cdn Para Bn, together again, crossed on foot and passed through 8 and 9 Para Bns to halt on the west bank of the Dortmund-Ems Canal (977909). Once more heavy enemy shelling caused several casualties during the night (Ibid, 31 Mar 45).



55. In teaming rain the next morning the Battalion crossed the canal on a blown bridge passable only on foot, and with "C" Company leading proceeded to attack Ladbergen (0093). The village was defended by one 40-mm and two 22-mm A.A. guns supported by a platoon of infantry, most of whom were killed. Several Bn H.Q. officers who had "carried hay-boxes of compo food" across the canal later arrived at Ladbergen "in an exhausted condition, only to find the troops eating fried chicken, eggs, vegetables and various preserved fruits" (ibid, 1 Apr 45). The Battalion rested there over 36 hours while enemy H.Q. at Iburg (2195) less than 12 miles east remained blissfully unaware the invaders were even across the Dortmund-Ems Canal, for a German despatch rider captured 2 April bore a message to the local commander at Ladbergen informing him not to expect further reinforcements (ibid, 2 Apr 45).

56. Taking to the road again on 3 Apr 45 and preceded by 8 and 9 Para Bns, the Canadians drove in lorries 40 miles to Wissingen (3207, sheet N. 2). Rain poured down but the enemy showed no signs of opposition. Early the next morning, however, the Battalion transport officer was ambushed while retracing part of the route and his driver was killed. Many such pockets of resistance had to be left for others to mop up and prisoners usually had to be passed back without interrogation due to lack of time. 8 Para Bn riding on tanks led the way via Lubbecke (6012, sheet N. 3), causing great havoc until finally becoming pinned down on the outskirts of Minden (8010). It was decided to attack after dark.

The Bn entered MINDEN (8010) at 2345 hrs, and after a long wait it was found by a scouting party to be empty. The Bn took over the town, and all was finally reported clear at 0230 hrs, 5 Apr 45. Bn H.Q. set up in the Victoria Hotel, the best in town, and lived in grand style for the rest of the night. A peculiar feature of the day was that MINDEN was an objective of a unit of the 9th American Army, on our right. But our Bde Comd, Brig Hill, D.S.O., M.C. pushed on, and took it before they had a chance to do anything about it. The Americans had laid on 350 Fortresses to bomb HINDEN if it hadn't surrendered by 2000 hrs, but they called it all off when they found our tps in the town.

(ibid, 4 Apr 45, Note that incidents refer mainly to 5 Apr 45)

The Americans took over Minden in the morning and 1 Cdn Para Bn moved to Kutenhausen (7915), which was occupied after a sharp skirmish. Billeted in houses there, personnel were issued with their large packs

in anticipation of several days' rest (ibid, 5 Apr 45). However, this respite lasted only one day, during which 3 officers and 100 other ranks arrived as much-needed reinforcements from England (ibid, 6 Apr 45).

57. On 7 April the unit marched across the Weser to Lahde (8520), where "A" and "B" Companies climbed aboard the tanks of their old friends 4 Bn Gren Gds, while the remainder of the Battalion's fighting troops continued on foot. The enemy offered no resistance that day but it was well after dark before resting places were reached at Wolpinghausen (0225) and Altenhagen (0827) (ibid, 7 Apr 45). The next day "C" Company together with the Vickers and Mortars replaced "A" and "B" Companies on the tanks and No. 1 Squadron carrying the Canadians captured Wunsdorf (1427, sheet N. 4). Thereupon the Reconnaissance Regiment of 6th Guards Tank Brigade went about two miles ahead of the tanks to take intact a bridge over a minor tributary of the Leine which flowed down to Hanover, which an American armoured division was attempting to encircle. After seizing this bridge at Luthe (1827) the armoured cars found themselves cut off by a German tank or two, an S.P. gun, and supporting infantry which had been overlooked. Help was urgently required.

No. 1 Squadron immediately went into the attack with the Canadians. One of the Canadian sergeants was overheard giving out his orders: 'I guess we gotta get this bridge and if we hit anything, don't you guys sit around. Let's go.' They certainly did not sit around and the Germans reluctantly retreated. In so doing, however, they overran the armoured cars and the occupants had to hide in the woods until the tanks arrived. Happily no lives were lost as the result of the incident, but it was a perfect example of how the Germans used a couple of tanks and a few Infantry to slow down for a short time the advance across Germany.

(Forbes, op cit)

Further opposition was encountered at Ricklingen (2027) when "A" Company in leading the attack on a bridge across the Leine (201270) met fire from machine guns and a Ferdinand S.P. gun. Four casualties resulted but the objective was taken intact.

The bridge was found to be prepared for demolition, but R.E.'s cut the explosives away and rendered the bridge safe. American troops of the Ninth Army took over just before dark, and the Bn moved back to billeting area in Luthe.

(W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, 8 Apr 45)

58. This day of intense activity was followed by one of rest in Luthe, after which 1 Cdn Para Bn advanced northward by lorry to recross the Leine at Neustadt (1735) and then marched east from Metel (2340) to Brelingen (3241). A stay of 3½ days in billets there allowed time for bath parades and church services, although the Battalion was kept busy with petty troubles of the local populace until Military Government officials arrived (Ibid, 9-13 Apr 45). On 14 April the unit marched to the suburbs of Celle (5548), where several suspected "werewolves" were captured. The next day a long advance by lorry was intended but a halt for the night had to be made at Eschede (6962). The 6th Airlanding Brigade had met heavy fighting around Uelzen (9089, sheet M. 5) which prevented the Canadians from occupying their designated area to the south-east. A German aircraft aiding this delaying action dropped a bomb on "B" Company, killing two and wounding two. On 16 April the Battalion could advance only as far as Nettelkamp (9179), which 6 Airlgd Bdg had just left (Ibid, 14-16 Apr 45).

59. Reveille on 17 April was at 0200 hours for a night advance accompanied for the first time by a mobile radar section whose function was to locate tanks, guns, mortars, etc. Pausing briefly about four miles east of Uelzen at Hanstedt II (9788), the Battalion was joined at 0700 hours by tanks and embussed to move on Ratzlingen (9790).

9 Bn was already in the town and having some trouble. The enemy withdraw, having suffered some casualties, and our Bn mounted an attack on RIESTEDT (9593), to which the enemy had withdrawn. The Bn attacked, dismounted over open ground with tanks and artillery giving fire support. As the Bn moved forward the tanks moved with them, and the enemy left behind in REISTEDT three S.P. guns and a number of dead soldiers. REISTEDT was taken by 1330 hrs. The Bn dug in and placed anti-tank guns, expecting a counter attack with armour. This failed to materialize.

(Ibid, 17 Apr 45)

Exchanges of shelling and mortar fire occupied the balance of that day and the next, with occasional skirmishing by patrols. The Battalion took 117 prisoners in a period of 24 hours. "During the night, Capt Clancy, who had been taken prisoner on 24 Mar on the D.Z., turned up having escaped from a marching

column of P.Ws. He took command of "A" Coy (ibid, 18 Apr 45). Soon all enemy activity ceased and the Battalion marched back to Hanstedt II for a brief stay (ibid, 19-20 Apr 45).

60. On 21 Apr 45, 1 Cdn Para Bn moved north-west by lorry via Uelzen to billets in a rest location south of Luneburg at Kolkhagen (7710), remaining there approximately nine days. This relief from active fighting permitted the Brigade Commander and Battalion C.C. to inspect the unit, the M.O. to bring personnel up to date with vaccinations and inoculations, the padres to conduct services, and the Y.M.C.A. to show films. While the rifle companies undertook drill and P.T. with games, the Mortar and Vickets Platoons entered a Brigade competitive shoot (ibid, 21-29 Apr 45).

61. At this stage British and American forces were closing in along almost the entire length of the Elbe, which after the Rhine is considered to be the most important river in Germany.

On the front of Second Army it was about 300-400 yards wide, with dykes similar in construction and appearance to those which existed in the Rhine valley. There was a number of ferries in the area, but only one bridge - a railway bridge at Lauenburg - and this had been destroyed by the enemy.

(Montgomery, op cit, p. 217)

The German Army was in too great a state of disintegration, however, to take proper advantage of this natural barrier, and the Allies were able to cross without the extensive preparations which the Rhine had demanded.

#### THE ADVANCE TO THE BALTIC

62. On 25 Apr 45 the Allies achieved the object of their major thrust into the centre of Germany when the Americans met the Russians south-east of Berlin near Torgau, thus splitting the enemy in two.

Although it was not conceivable that resistance could long be maintained in the North German Plain, it was possible that some withdrawal might be attempted into Denmark and Norway with a

view to make a last stand in those countries, while 'Fortress Holland' would also continue to hold out behind the water barriers. The prevention of such a withdrawal, by means of a rapid Allied advance to the Baltic, thus became the primary object of our operations in the northern sector.

(Eisenhower, op cit, p. 113)

The reason for the extreme haste with which this manoeuvre was conducted, obviously to the great surprise of the Russians, has been explained by General Eisenhower.

Rumors of an impending local capitulation in the north also reached the Allies in mid-April. Field Marshal Busch, commanding the Hamburg area, was stated to be anti-Nazi and willing to surrender, but unable to do so until the Western Allies reached the Baltic and cut him off from the possibility of the arrival of die-hard S.S. formations from central Germany. General Lindemann, the commander in Denmark, was also understood to be ready to yield at the same time as Busch, and on 30 April an emissary appeared in Stockholm to confirm this. It was urged that the British Army should make all speed to reach the Baltic before the Russians did so, for the Germans would under no circumstances surrender to the Red Army.

(Ibid, p. 118)

To aid 21 Army Group in performing this task, right flank protection was provided by placing under command XVIII U.S. Airborne Corps consisting of 8 U.S. Inf Div, 7 U.S. Armd Div, and 82 U.S. Airborne Div. Orders issued 22 Apr 45 called for 8 Corps to assault across the Elbe in the area of Lauenburg (8734 sheet L. 5) in order to establish a bridgehead then to thrust northward to capture Lubeck (9490, sheet K. 5). XVIII Airborne Corps was to create a second bridgehead to the right and from it secure the east flank north of the Elbe on the general line Darchau (1121, sheet M. 5) - Schwerin (4365, sheet L. 6) - Wismar (4595, sheet K. 6). The 6th British Airborne Division would remain with 8 Corps until the bridgehead was formed, then be transferred to XVIII Corps. This changeover was effected at 1500 hrs 1 May 45 (Montgomery, op cit, pp. 216-18). Anticipating that contact would be made very shortly with the Russians, Field-Marshal Montgomery directed that,

To avoid confusion, and to prevent expansion into areas occupied by the Red Army, our troops will halt as and where they meet Russian forces. The local commander will decide what adjustments are then necessary in order to deal with any remaining enemy opposition.

When all hostilities have ceased in an area, troops will be disposed in accordance with military requirements, regardless of ultimate zone boundaries ...

(C.-in-C. 21 Army Group Directive M. 574 dated 22 Apr 45)

63. On 29 April, the 15th Scottish Division in amphibious craft led the assault of 8 Corps across the Elbe. 1 Cdn Para Bn did not cross that day but marched as far as Holzen (9020, sheet M. 5). The initial bridgehead was therefore well secured and the Americans were forging theirs when the Canadians crossed at 1635 hrs 30 Apr 45 just west of Lauenburg (8734, sheet L. 5). Advancing eastward without resistance, the Battalion suffered no casualties in seizing its objective, an important road and rail crossing near Boisenberg (013356). Civilians appeared eager to co-operate by reporting several suspected Gestapo agents (W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, 29-30 Apr 45). That night shells fell on "C" Company's positions, presumably fired by American artillery from the west bank of the Elbe in support of the enlargement of their bridgehead.

No casualties were caused, though it was a matter of hours before contact was made with Americans responsible for shelling. It caused a great deal of concern to "C" Coy since there was an amn train on the railroad which was in their area.

(Ibid, 1 May 45)

Contact with the Americans on the left was made at 1000 hours, 1 May, and active patrolling continued to net numbers of prisoners.

64. 2 May 45 has been aptly described by the unit diarist as "a history-making day". It began with the arrival of tanks of the Scots Greys to lift "B" Company and of R.A.S.C. troop carrying vehicles for "A" and "C" Companies. The Battalion embussed at 0500 hrs, intending to reach Wittenberg (2151) at noon but arriving there at 0920 hrs due to lack of opposition.

Brig Hill decided to push on as far as was possible, since it appeared that resistance was fast crumbling.

A refuelling stop would be made at Lutzow (2867) ... where tanks would be filled with all the reserve petrol the T.C.Vs. were carrying. In a wood at Lutzow just before the refuelling point, we came across a German workshop detachment, numbering some 3,000 troops, who had had orders to surrender. The confusion was indescribable in that wood. German civilian women, men, and children were there with the troops, and when the troops were lined up three deep on the road, many had their wives and children with them, to accompany them on the trek back to P.W. cage. This was because the rumor was ripe that the Russian Army was only nine miles away. The civilians and soldiers were terrified of the Russians, and wanted only to be taken by us.

After refuelling the tanks we moved off again at top speed. All resistance had collapsed, because the Germans wanted us to go as far as possible. They reasoned that the more territory we occupied, the less the Russians could occupy. Thousands of German troops lined the roads and crowded the villages, some even cheering us on, though most were a despondent-looking mob.

On reaching Wismar (4595, sheet K. 6) "B" Coy was sent straight through the town to take up positions beyond the railway and astride a main road leading into town from the north. "C" Coy was sent to the east edge of the town to cover bridges and the road leading in from the east. "A" Coy was held in reserve in the area of the Market Place, near Bn H.Q., which was set up in FRUNDT's Hotel on ABC Strasse. All posns were reported covered ... and the situation was well under control. All afternoon and all through the night German refugees and soldiers came through our lines by the thousands ... On the night of 2 May, a Russian officer arrived in a jeep, with his driver. It was quite unofficial, since he had no idea we were in Wismar until he came to our barrier. He had come far in advance of his own columns, and was quite put out to find us sitting on what was the Russians' ultimate objective.

(Ibid, 2 May 45)

65. Traffic congestion constituted a major problem and all refugees had to be ordered into the fields while German prisoners were sent to the rear and hundreds of released Allied prisoners-of-war were directed

to the airport of Luneburg where a ferry service was already in operation. Relations with the Russians were most cordial; the unit War Diary records many examples of friendship and none of friction.

There was considerable visiting being done between officers of the Bn and Russian officers. It turned out that the Bn had several excellent Russian speakers, one of whom was attached permanently to General Bols' staff for the 'high level' work. The General was very pleased with his work.

Maj Hilborn acted as chief liaison officer between the Bn and the Russians, and was wined and dined by them at great length. He brought in several distinguished visitors, who proved to be the most persistent and thirsty drinkers we had ever met ...

The first contact was made between "C" Coy and the Russian Scout Officer on the night of 2/3 May, but the first contact with numbers of troops was by "B" Coy to the North of Wismar, with Lt P.G. Insole doing the handshaking and Vodka-drinking on behalf of the Battalion.

(Ibid, 3 May 45)

66. Once the junction had been effected quite obviously the end of the war was in sight. On the same day that Wismar was occupied Lubeck fell and Hamburg capitulated. The enemy were abandoning the struggle in Italy, in Southern Germany and Austria, and effective 0800 hrs 5 May 45 all Germans opposing 21 Army Group surrendered unconditionally. On 7 May General Jodl signed the act of surrender on behalf of the German High Command and complete capitulation was ratified in Berlin on 9 May 45.

67. V.E. celebrations for 1 Cdn Para Bn included joint festivities with the Russians and with British comrades-in-arms. On 11 May the G.O.C. 6 Airborne Div reviewed 3 Para Bde including 1 Cdn Para Bn, the German people turning out "en masse to watch docilely but sullenly" (Ibid, 11 May 45). Two days later a memorial and thanksgiving service was held in the Nikolaikirche in Wismar. After active operations ceased it was essential to keep the troops busy and contented by providing a variety of entertainment to compensate for "non fraternization".



The problem of recreation was partly solved by the Y.M.C.A., which did invaluable work in providing equipment for softball, football, rugby and other games. Every day those who wished could either go sailing in the luxury boats on the Harbor, or go on a swimming party, for which recreational transport was provided.

(Ibid, 6 May 45)

It was only a matter of a very few days, however, before the Battalion was ordered back to England, personnel emplaning at Luneburg and arriving at their old barracks in Bulford in two parties on 20 May and 21 May 45 (Ibid, 20-21 May 45). This was the third and final return of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion from European battlefields.

#### REPATRIATION AND DISBANDMENT

68. With a magnificent record of two parachute descents into major battles and a total of practically seven months intensive front-line fighting, 1 Cdn Para Bn on its return to England received high words of praise from British, American, and Canadian military leaders. Brigadier James Hill, Commanding the 3rd Parachute Brigade, wrote to Lt-Col G.F. Eadie:

I shall forever remember, with great pride, that I had the honour to have under my command, both in and out of battle, a Canadian Battalion which is regarded by all of us as, as fine a fighting unit as has ever left these shores.

(Ibid, June 1945, Appx 3: Hill to Eadie, 7 Jun 45)

The Battalion had been the first Canadian unit to touch down in Normandy, one of the first to cross the Rhine, and the first to link hands with the Russians on the shores of the Baltic. Now it gained the privilege of being the first Canadian Army unit to be repatriated.

69. On 27 May 45 all ranks were recalled to Bulford from nine days' privilege leave, which they had begun but three days before, and were ordered to prepare for return to Canada. On 31 May the first draft left

for 3 Canadian Repatriation Depot at Cove, Hampshire, thus ending almost two years association with the 6th British Airborne Division. Maj-Gen Bols, Brig Hill, and many members of the divisional and brigade staff were at hand to give the Canadians a royal send-off. Bulford siding was decorated with flags and bunting, including a large parachute badge and gold maple leaf, and as the train pulled away a band played "Auld Lang Syne" (Ibid, 31 May 45). A fortnight later 1 Cdn Para Bn embarked on the Ile de France, which sailed 15 June and docked at Halifax 21 Jun 45. Led by Lt-Col G.F. Eadie, the Battalion paraded that afternoon through the streets of Halifax with the salute taken by Maj-Gen A.E. Walford, C.B.E., M.M., E.D. (Adjutant-General). This was the prelude to "Welcome Home" receptions across Canada as drafts dispersed to their Military Districts and officers and men reached home.

70. Following 30 days' disembarkation leave, all ranks reassembled at Niagara-on-the-Lake. The Battalion did not form part of the Canadian Army Pacific Force nor was it assigned a specific task for the future. With the end of the Japanese War in August 1945, therefore, its personnel were made available for discharge. By General Order 18 dated 17 Jan 46, the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, Canadian Infantry Corps, was disbanded effective 30 Sep 45.

#### CASUALTIES AND DECORATIONS

71. [Report No. 139](#), *op cit*, tabulates the following battle casualties incurred by 1 Cdn Para Bn in France during its first period of action, 6 Jun - 6 Sep 44:

	<u>Offrs</u>	<u>O.Rs.</u>
Killed and Died of Wounds	5 <sup>16</sup>	66
Wounded	16	184
Missing	--	10
P.W.	<u>3</u>	<u>83</u>

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<sup>16</sup>This figure does not include Hon/Capt Geo A. Harris, Canadian Chaplain Service, who was killed in action while serving with the Battalion in France on 7 Jun 44.

TOTALS	24	343
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The following statistics compiled by Canadian Military Headquarters indicate the total casualties of 1 Cdn Para Bn for the whole of its service in the War of 1939 - 45:

	<u>Offrs</u>	<u>O.Rs.</u>
Killed	8 <sup>17</sup>	86
Died of Wounds	-	26
Wounded	19	267
P.W.	3	78
Wounded P.W.	<u>1</u>	<u>4</u>
TOTALS	31	461

(H.Q.S. 5393 - 31: Tel G.S. 840, Canmilitary to D.H.S., 26 Feb 47)

72. Comparison of these figures suggests that the unit's heaviest fighting took place in France. The Battalion was in action there for a period twice as long as in Germany, and its battle casualties on D-Day in Normandy were more than double those on D-Day of the Rhine crossing (of paras 5 and 40 above). In the descent of 24 Mar 45, however, the paratroops were able to apply against a weakened enemy the full effects of further training and extensive combat experience. For gallantry during that engagement Company Sergeant-Major G.W. Green, M.M., received the Distinguished Conduct Medal and Military Medals were awarded to Sgt Aurelle Bray and Pte J.O. Quigley.<sup>18</sup> It is fitting that this report should conclude with the citation accompanying an award of the Empire's highest decoration for valour.

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<sup>17</sup>This figure does not include Hon/Capt Geo A. Harris, Canadian Chaplain Service, who was killed in action while serving with the Battalion in France on 7 Jun 44.

<sup>18</sup>Appendix "C" to this report lists personnel of 1 Cdn Para Bn awarded decorations during the War 1939-45.

Award of  
THE VICTORIA CROSS

to

B. 39039 Corporal Frederick George Topham  
1st Canadian Parachute Battalion

On 24th March, 1945, Corporal Topham, a medical orderly, parachuted with his Battalion onto a strongly defended area east of the Rhine. At about 1100 hours, whilst treating casualties sustained in the drop, a cry for help came from a wounded man in the open. Two medical orderlies from a Field Ambulance went out to this man in succession but both were killed as they knelt beside the casualty. Without hesitation and on his own initiative Corporal Topham went forward through intense fire to replace the orderlies who had been killed before his eyes. As he worked on the wounded man, he was himself shot through the nose. In spite of severe bleeding and intense pain he never faltered in his task. Having completed immediate first aid, he carried the wounded man steadily and slowly back through continuous fire to the shelter of the woods. During the next two hours Corporal Topham refused all offers of medical help for his own wound. He worked most devotedly throughout this period to bring in wounded, showing complete disregard for the heavy and accurate enemy fire. It was only when all casualties had been cleared that he consented to his own wound being treated. His immediate evacuation was ordered, but he interceded so earnestly on his own behalf that he was eventually allowed to return to duty. On his way back to his company he came across a carrier, which had received a direct hit. Enemy mortar bombs were still dropping around, the carrier itself was burning fiercely and its own mortar ammunition was exploding, an experienced officer on the spot had warned all not to approach the carrier. Corporal Topham, however, immediately went out alone in spite of the blasting ammunition and enemy fire, and rescued the three occupants of the carrier. He brought these men back across the open and, although one died almost immediately afterwards, he arranged for the evacuation of the other two, who undoubtedly owe their lives to him. This non-commissioned officer showed sustained gallantry of the highest order, for six hours, most of the time in great pain. He performed a series of acts of outstanding bravery and his magnificent and selfless courage inspired all those who witnessed it.

73. This report has been written by Capt R.B. Oglesby, narrator in the Historical Section (General Staff), Army Headquarters.

(C.P. Stacey) Colonel  
Director  
Historical Section (G.S.).

PRINCIPAL COMMANDERS OF AIRBORNE FORCES  
OPERATION "VARSITY"

Overall airborne commander -

Lt-Gen Lewis H. Brereton, Comd First Allied Airborne Army.

Airborne task force commander -

Maj-Gen M.B. Ridgeway, Comd XVIII U.S. Airborne Corps.

Deputy commander airborne task force -

Maj-Gen R.N. Gale, O.B.E., M.C. (formerly Comd 6 Airborne Div).

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Commander 17th U.S. Airborne Division -

Maj-Gen Wm.M. Miley.

Commander 6th British Airborne Division -

Maj-Gen E.L. Bols.

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Overall troop carrier commander -

Maj-Gen Paul L. Williams, Comd IX Troop Carrier Command.

Commander British troop carrier commitment -

Air Vice Marshal Scarlett Streatfield.

(American observers' report, op cit)

(EXTRACTS FROM)

OPERATION VARSITY - PLUNDER

1 CDN PARA BN O.O. NO. I

17 March 1945.

Ref Maps: G.S.G.S. GERMANY: 1/250000 Sheets 2A, 3A, K52  
1/100000 Sheets R1, Q1.  
1/25000 Sheets 4204, 4205, 5206, 4304, 4305, 4306.

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D Day - is the day of the op.

H hr - is the time for the assault of 12 Corps.

P hr - is the time of first drop on D.Z.  
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INFM

Enemy

1. Information will be sent out as soon as it becomes available.

Own Tps

2. 12 Corps
  - (a) 15 (S) Div is asltg on a two bde front in the gen areas BISLICH 1442 and MEHR 1248 - HAFFEN 1149 at H hr on D Day. Subsequently 15 (S) Div will capture the brs over the ISSEL WEST of DINGDEN 2253 and relieve 6 Brit Airborne Div in area HAMMINKELN 2048.
  - (b) 1 Cdn Bde is to aslt in the area of GRAV INSEL 1841 H - 2 hrs D Day and capture WESEL 2240.

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6. XVIII U.S. Corps

XVIII U.S. Corps with under Comd :-

6 Brit Airborne Div

17 U.S. Div (Airborne)

is to land at P hr D Day EAST of the R RHINE on 12 Corps front.

7. 6 Brit Airborne Div

6 Brit Airborne Div is to land in the area of SCHNEPPENBERG feature 1646 and the village of HAMMINKELN 2048 with task of seizing the SCHNEPPENBERG feature, the village of HAMMINKELN and brs over the R ISSEL.

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24. INTENTION

1st Cdn Para Bn will seize, clear and hold area rd junc 154478 - corner of wood 155477 - area houses 156472 - track junc 158471. Area houses 156472 will be known as codeword TOM.

25. METHOD

Policy

- (a) SPEED and INITIATIVE on part of all ranks is the order of the day.
- (b) RISKS will be taken.
- (c) The ENEMY will be attacked and destroyed wherever he is found.

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28. D.Z. & L.Z. are the same and will be known as D.Z.-"A". Exact area as per map refs - 158488 - 161485, - 165480, - 155477, - 152485.

29. Line of Flight - WEST - EAST.



30. Height of Drop - 500 ft - Height of D.Z. is 75 ft.

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32. Order of Drop

Units will drop in the following order :-

8 Para Bn - H.Q. 3 Para Vde - 1 Cdn Para Bn

9 Para Bn - Tp 3 Para Sqn R.E. - 224 Para Fd Amb - Glider Element.

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### Tasks

34. "C" Coy

- (a) Immediately on landing will rush, seize, clear and hold area rd junc 154478 (one pl) and area corner of wood 155477 (two pls). Success code word of this objective "HANSON"

35. "A" Coy

- (a) Immediately on landing will rush, seize and clear R.V. area edge of woods map ref 157477.
- (b) On success word "HANSON" being recd "A" Coy on orders of Bn H.Q. "A" Party will move through woods along edge to "C" Coy area, corner of wood 155477.
- (c) "A" Coy will pass through "C" Coy area (2 pls) and move SOUTH in woods along edge of rd towards area houses 156472 with object to clean and hold this area (156742).
- (d) Consolidation - "A" Coy will consolidate area X rds 158473 - houses area 156472 - rd junc 156474 - track and trail X rds 158474.

36. "B" Coy

- (a) Immediately on landing will rush, seize and clear R.V. Area 158477.
- (b) On success code word HANSON being recd "B" Coy on orders of Bn H.Q. "A" Party will move SOUTH WEST along track through woods to F.U.P. area X rds 158473 in anticipation of flank attack on area bldgs 156472.
- (c) One PI "B" Coy will seize clear and hold area X rds houses 156472 on reaching F.U.P.

(d) On area houses 156472 being cleared by either "A" Coy or "B" Coy - "B" Coy will consolidate area 160472 - 159470 - wood and junc 157469 - rd junc 156471.

37. Arty

F.O.O. and party will R.V. area "A" Coy R.V. edge of wood 157477 and move with Bn H.Q. "A" Party. Detailed fire plan to be issued later.

38. Mortars

Immediately on landing will move to R.V. - orchard and rd junc 156479 and prepare for fire tasks on 360° arcs. On success signal TOM will move to area houses 156472.

39. M.M.Gs.

Immediately on landing will move to area orchard and bldgs 155478 and set up for all around tasks. Major Hilborn will be responsible for consolidating M.M.G. tasks depending on existing situation.

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43. Junc Points

- (i) "C" Coy with 15 (S) Div - corner of wood 155477.
- (ii) "B" Coy with 9 Para Bn SOUTH end of clearing 159469.
- (iii) "B" Coy with 9 Para Bn - Track and rd X rds 157465.

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45. Road Blocks

"C" Coy will block rd leading into Bde & Bn area corner of wood 155477. Block will be capable of removal at short notice. One det 3 Para Sqn R.E. to supervise and help in construction.

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ADM

50. Med

Cas on D.Z. will make their way to : -

- (a) unit R.Vs.
- (b) wood 159481
- (c) Main rd WEST of D.Z.

51. 244 Para Fd Amb will be responsible for clearing D.Z. cas.

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Sups

56. Jettison drop sups will be cleared by

- (a) 9 Para Bn and 1 Cdn Para Bn. Dump to be at area track junc 156474.
- (b) "C" & "A" Coys will be co-ordinated in this task by 2 i/c Bn.

57. Rations

Each man will carry :-

One 24 hr pack - to last 48 hours.

Two bars chocolate.

4 oz sweets.

One packet chewing gum.

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INTERCOMN

61. Location of H.Qs.

- (a) H.Q. 6 Airborne Div - Bldgs 189479.
- H.Q. 5 Para Bde - 195495.
- H.Q. 6 Airdg Bde - 204486.
- H.Q. 3 Para Bde - Will initially be est at approx pt 160478. On completion of the glider Idg will move to area 8 Para Bn 168473. On completion of Bde task will move into 1 Cdn Para Bn area.

- (b) Bn H.Q. "A" - Moving with "A" Coy from R.V. area until bn objectives achieved then in area houses 156472.
- (c) Bn H.Q. "B" - Moving with "B" Coy from R.V. area until Bn objectives achieved then in area houses 156472.

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(Sgd) J.A. Nicklin, Lt-Col  
COMMANDING OFFICER  
1 CDN PARA BN

(W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, March 1945, Appx "F")

PERSONNEL OF THE 1ST CANADIAN PARACHUTE BATTALION  
AWARDED DECORATIONS DURING WAR 1939 - 45

VICTORIA CROSS

B-39039	Cpl	TOPHAM	Frederick George
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OFFICER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

	Lt.-Col.	NICKLIN	Jeff Albert
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MEMBER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

	Lieut.	BRUNELLE	Louis Joseph Guy
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MILITARY CROSS

	Capt	CLANCY	John Anthony
	Capt	GRIFFIN	Peter Ryerse
	Lt.(A/Capt)	HANSON	John Philip

DISTINGUISHED CONDUCT MEDAL

B-62282	A/CSM	GREEN	George William
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MILITARY MEDAL

C-2871	Sgt	BRAY	Aurelle
B-3047	Pte	DUCKER	William S.

B-146477	Pte	GEDDES	Russel Alvin
B-62282	Cpl (A/Sgt)	GREEN	George William
B-101038	Sgt	LACASSE	Joseph Aime
B-136859	Sgt	MORGAN	Gordon Harvey
F-25506	Cpl (A/Sgt)	MINARD	Willard Parker
B-28910	Pte	NOVAL	William
G-7194	Pte	QUIGLEY	James Oliver

MENTION IN DESPATCHES

B-130205	Sgt	CAPRARU	George
G-50902	Cpl	CHAMBERS	John L.
B-98228	WO II (CSM)	DUCKETT	Harold Kitchener
	Lieut	DAVIES	Jack Leonard
K-50877	Pte (A/Cpl)	JICKELS	Gordon Harold
K-62419	WO II (CSM)	KEMP	John
	Maj (A/Lt.Col)	NICKLIN	Jeff Albert
H-1089	Pte	PETROW	Maurice Michael
B-133053	L/Cpl	WEATHERSON	Luke Laurier

NOTE: This list was prepared 9 Jul 45 by the Directorate of Records, Army Headquarters, Ottawa.