

### **Planning the Scheldt Battle**

Enough has been said already to obviate any long discussion here of the terrain over which the Battle of the Scheldt was fought. It has been made quite evident that opening Antwerp involved clearing the Germans from the Breskens Pocket and from Walcheren. The Pocket was entirely low-lying land, much of it reclaimed from the sea and none of it more than a few feet above sea level; on a map where heights are shown by contours at 10-metre intervals, there are no contours whatever within the Pocket. Quite apart from the Leopold Canal along its front, the German position was protected by large areas of inundation on both its eastern and western flanks; and all the approaches, and the Pocket itself, were intersected by ditches and canals. The roads were almost all built on dykes, and the fields were saturated. Off the roads, movement even by infantry was difficult; movement by vehicles was impossible.

As for Walcheren, much of it was actually below sea level, the only areas of somewhat higher ground being on the northern, western and south-eastern rims of the island. Any attack from the sea would have to overcome a formidable array of coastal batteries along the western beaches; while the sole land approach to Walcheren was a narrow causeway connecting the island with the peninsula of South Beveland, which is itself connected to the mainland north of Antwerp by an isthmus. At the eastern end of this isthmus is the village of Woensdrecht, whose position was rendered the more important by the fact that it stands slightly higher than the surrounding country. South Beveland itself was intersected from north to south by a wide canal near its eastern end. It is evident that, even to an assailant possessing complete control of the sea and the air, an attack upon these areas was a formidable proposition.

On 19 September the Plans, Section at Headquarters First Canadian Army produced an elaborate appreciation of the problem of capturing Walcheren and South Beveland.<sup>56</sup> It was based on the assumption that the whole of the south shore of the West Scheldt from Antwerp to the sea had been cleared. This paper discarded at the outset the possibility of capturing Walcheren by a combined operation directed against its western beaches, "because this could only be done after considerable time spent on combined training and preparation". It also assumed that Walcheren would be too difficult to capture without securing beforehand the peninsula of South Beveland. To this in turn a necessary preliminary was the seizure of an area from which operations could be directed from the mainland along South Beveland from the east. The various combinations of courses open to us were considered in detail, and the appreciation concluded that if airborne forces were available the best plan would be to establish a firm base on the mainland, thrust along South Beveland from the east as far as the Beveland Canal, and then drop one parachute brigade beyond the canal to disorganize the enemy and secure the small harbour of Hoedekenskerke, through which the attack could be built up with waterborne forces.

After winning control of designed to secure a bridgehead on Walcheren covering the causeway from South Beveland. We would then build up through this bridgehead by using the causeway or ferrying craft or both. If airborne forces were not available, then the planners recommended, on balance, driving along South Beveland from the mainland with the assistance of waterborne operations to loosen the enemy's resistance. When South Beveland had been cleared, the next stage would be a frontal attack over the causeway to Walcheren "assisted by an assault crossing of the water-gap South of the causeway". The bridgehead thus gained would be enlarged by passing troops over the causeway and by the use of landing craft and amphibians.

The Army planners considered airborne forces "a most important adjunct to this operation" and urged that strong representations should be made to have them available. They also recommended that air attacks by Bomber Command and by the 2nd Tactical Air Force against the German batteries and defences should begin as soon as possible and "continue until the ground forces are able to complete the capture of the islands". All available artillery, apart from the guns of the division having the task of capturing South Beveland and Walcheren, should be brought up to the south shore of the West Scheldt as soon as it was cleared to commence neutralizing the enemy's batteries north of the river.

#### **Lieut.-General Simonds (Commander):**

I consider that the technique for the capture of Walcheren Island should be as follows:

Bombing operations should be undertaken to break the dykes and completely flood all parts of the island below high water level.

Those parts of the island which remain above water should then be systematically attacked by heavy air bombardment, day and night, to destroy defences and wear out the garrison by attrition. RDF\* stations (Radio direction finding (radar) should have an early priority as "point" targets.

Whenever possible, heavy bombers proceeding to or from targets in Western Germany by day or night should be routed over Walcheren so that the garrison can never tell whether the approach of large numbers of aircraft indicates attack or not. This combined with heavy bombing attacks will drive the enemy to cover on approach of large aircraft formations and will help to "cover" an eventual airborne landing.

When it is considered that the morale of the garrison has sufficiently deteriorated, waterborne patrols may be sent to determine the situation.

If found to be ripe, airborne, followed by waterborne, troops should be landed immediately following a bomber raid (when defenders have been driven to ground) and mop up and take the surrender.