

4-26-2012

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Recommended Citation

Matthews, W.H.V. (1994) "Assault on Calais: 25 September–1 October 1944," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 3: Iss. 2, Article 13.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol3/iss2/13>

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Assault on Calais

25 September - 1 October 1944

by Major W.H.V. Matthews, MC and Bar, Officer Commanding,
"A" Company, 1st Canadian Scottish Regiment to Historical
Officer, 19 October 1944

Channel Ports of BOULOGNE and CALAIS, the first determined resistance was offered to the rapid advance along the coast. There was no question of the garrisons joining in the general retreat; rather they prepared for a siege in order to deny the Allies the use of these valuable prizes as long as possible. Although their avowed decision was to fight to the death, still this heroic mood existed almost exclusively in the hearts of those who exercised command, and was not the prevailing characteristic of either garrison. The capture of BOULOGNE (17-22 September 1944) confirmed that fact.

Despite certain similarities of circumstance, the capture of CALAIS presented a very different problem from that of BOULOGNE. Whereas the latter fortress had based its defence on the prominent features which enclosed it, CALAIS could show no comparable eminence of land, and its defence was in fact dependent on water obstacles and low, marshy ground. Inundation had greatly added to the difficulty of attacking the city.

Only on the west side was the terrain judged to be favourable, owing to a prominent feature, BELLE VUE RIDGE, which, from its highest point at NOIRES MOTTES, runs eastward towards the flooded ground around the city. This area was in enemy hands. On the east and south the ground was considered to be too low and marshy to permit a successful initial attack. The enemy moreover possessed complete command of these approaches.

Nor could the problem be solved with the reduction of the outer defences alone, as was

substantially the case at BOULOGNE. Within the city itself were many canals, well-defended, which divided it into islands, and imposed further obstacles.

The enemy had positioned himself in the following areas around the city: ESCALLES - NOIRES MOTTES; BELLE VUE RIDGE; VIEUX COQUELLES' LES BARAQUES; and at the eastern and southeastern approaches. The garrison was made up of Army, Navy and Air Force personnel, as in BOULOGNE, and was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Schroeder, himself a naval officer. Its strength was at first judged to be from 4,500 to 5,500. The surprising total of PW from BOULOGNE (nearly 10,000) caused a later revision of this estimate which brought it to around 7,000. This was fairly accurate.

Throughout the siege and attack on BOULOGNE the investment of CALAIS had been left principally to 7th Canadian Recce Regiment, with the Toronto Scottish Regiment (Machine Gun) on the east flank. Initially, 7th Canadian Recce Regiment gave its attention to CAP GRIS NEZ, for which it was responsible, finally leaving light mobile forces to contain that area when it moved to a position southwest of CALAIS on 18 September 1944. With the fall of BOULOGNE 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade moved to its left flank, facing CALAIS, and 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade took over the siege of CAP GRIS NEZ. The eastern sector of the CALAIS perimeter was taken over by the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa (MG) from the Toronto Scottish Regiment (MG).



Left: German coastal battery at Cap Blanc Nez west of Calais. This photograph puts into perspective the size of the bomb craters on the ground, the size and depth of which can be deceiving when seen on aerial photographs.

CFPU PMR 84-12



7th and 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade Groups were to make the assault from the southwest, first wresting from the enemy the desirable high ground. They were to be supported by armour, artillery and heavy bombing. The inter-brigade boundary, all inclusive to 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade, commencing its attack with two battalions up, was to capture BELLE VUE, COQUELLES and CALAIS. 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade on the left had the task of capturing the ESCALLES and NOIRES MOTTES area, likewise advancing on a two-battalion front; its third battalion was to be in reserve. The taking of the ESCALLES feature, which overlooked CALAIS, was essential for the success of 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade.

The air plan envisaged heavy bombing on the CALAIS area, the target circumference decreasing each time as our troops advanced. For the artillery fire plan the same method was adopted as used so successfully at BOULOGNE, i.e. a generous allotment of concentrations, both pin-point and linear, (A linear concentration is usually known as a stonk or straight cone.) on all potential sources of opposition.

On the morning of 25 September 1944 the operation began. Royal Winnipeg Rifles on the right advanced towards COQUELLES and Regina Rifles on the left on BELLE VUE RIDGE. 1st Canadian Scottish Regiment were to go through later to the coast area to destroy the strongpoints there.

While the first objectives were being attacked, 1st Canadian Scottish Regiment remained in the vicinity of BONNINGUES-LES-CALAIS, awaiting orders to move forward. Late in the afternoon the battalion rode up in Kangaroos to PEUPLINGUE, and proceeded from there to the wooded area on BELLE VUE RIDGE. From the height "A" and "C" Company Commanders surveyed the ground to the north just before dark.

Weather conditions had deteriorated sadly and it was a wet and miserable night as "A" and "C" Company Commanders set out to reconnoitre the area of LA GRANDE COUR. The foul weather caused them to lose their way more

than once and a special difficulty arose from the fact that the track shown on the maps as running from BELLE VUE to LA GRANDE COUR simply did not exist. Stumbling through the darkness, the officers commenced to follow a track which they assumed to be the right one, only to find themselves eventually in SANGATTE, well in front of the forward troops. They withdrew hurriedly, for there was abundant evidence of the enemy's presence there. Somewhat discouraged after several more fruitless attempts to locate the farm, they returned to Regina Rifle Battalion HQ. A report had now come in that LA GRANDE COUR was a difficult position, so the idea of using it as a base was abandoned, and it was proposed to establish a foothold in SANGATTE itself around first light.

Near daylight on 26 September "A" Company advanced quickly into SANGATTE and settled itself without much opposition near the church. "C" Company was following some distance behind. One platoon of "A" Company moved to the west to deal with a blockhouse, which they cleared quickly. Major Matthews, taking stock of the area, observed movement on NOIRES MOTTES, around the three cross-channel guns. A few rounds fired in that direction produced a vigorous show of white flags. Captain Gillan, 2 i/c "A" Company, went up to investigate and the garrison of the battery position surrendered to him. The huge 406 mm guns were out of action, and the German gunners, awaiting an opportunity to surrender, were mostly in a state of inebriation. This curious phenomenon in enemy garrison troops had been met with before, in BOULOGNE.

When "C" Company arrived in SANGATTE there commenced a lengthy lead-frogging process eastwards along the coast road towards CALAIS. "C" Company, passing through "A" worked its way up to the road fork. Here they became the target of an inaccurate, but disturbing, enemy flame-thrower, which slowed their advance temporarily. "A" Company, following behind, encountered and cleared a strongpoint. "C" Company then continued its sweeping process up to LE CRAN.

"A" Company now moved ahead, taking out two strongpoints in the sand dunes at the left of the road in LE CRAN. The area up to TROUILLE FARM was cleared and the two platoons of "A" Company advanced into LES BARAQUES. They found the village almost completely flattened by bombing. One went to the church, while the other, turning left, proceeded to attack FORT LAPIN. After a brisk fight, one fort was captured, with some 50-60 PW. It was discovered, however, that the area consisted of not one, but several forts, so that the bulk of the defences had still to be overcome. Before this process, which they had begun so well, could be continued, the order was given to withdraw, since they were too near the target area of a proposed heavy bombing attack. All forward troops were drawn back to TROUILLE FARM while the bombing took place. On the west, 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade had by now completed its task without having employed its reserve battalion.

In the afternoon of the next day, Major Matthews and a FOO went forward to lay plans for the capture of FORT LAPIN, in which tanks and artillery were to be employed. To reach a suitable point of vantage, the recon party had to cross an open stretch across the sand dunes, during which time enemy machine guns raked the area, hitting no one however. The OP officer now found his wireless set out of order and the artillery support consequently not available.

The tanks of 6th Canadian Armoured Regiment meanwhile were near TROUILLE FARM and already blasting the forts from there. As yet they could go no further. Both infantry and armour were waiting to attack. There was an uncomfortable moment as the tanks commenced to move forward, for there was no way to inform them of the hitch in plans. As they drew level, however, they came to a stop, and engaged enemy positions while the targets were indicated to them by shouting. One fort was set on fire by their shells.

At dusk the infantry crossed the road to the north and the armour eased back. A

silent attack was launched on FORT LAPIN. One platoon of "A" Company under a sergeant wriggled into the fort area and took out the nearest strongpoint. Their prisoners announced that the remainder would quit, given some encouragement. The platoon therefore went on to the next fort, while a second passed through it to take out others. The third went on to LES BARAQUES to secure that village.

The plan now envisaged "C" Company following "A", and "B" Company going through on the left into the citadel of CALAIS, using pontoon bridging to cross the water obstacles. Simultaneously "D" Company was to swing through on the right, using collapsible boats, and likewise enter the citadel. In the final phase, the entire battalion was to consolidate within the citadel.

Two platoons of "A" Company in FORT LAPIN soon had captured the whole area, including its commander. The inevitable hospital, with medical officer and patients, also fell into their hands. The third platoon of the company met sterner opposition in LES BARAQUES and was pinned down by fire until "C" Company entered the village, at which time by their combined weight they succeeded in clearing it almost to its eastern edge. On the right "D" Company now worked out to the railway bridge. The majority crossed over unhindered and commenced to form up prior to attacking the citadel. But they suddenly came under severe shelling from "Bastion 11", from the citadel itself and from their right. Thus caught they were pinned to the ground and could not withdraw owing to the intensity of the fire.

"B" Company meanwhile had attempted to cross north of the railway bridge close to the bastion. But the forward platoon was likewise immobilized by fire directly in front of its walls. The rear platoons were still free and were sent to the right to cross the canal by "D" Company's route. This they succeeded in doing and were of course at once in the same unhappy situation. "C" Company had also sent a platoon to follow "D" and it too was pinned.



This air photo shows the northwest environs of Calais attacked by the Canadian Scottish Regiment at the end of September. At the top left can be seen Fort Lapin and Les Baraques where "A" and "C" Companies were established. Between Bastion 11 (top centre) and the Citadel (partly visible at right) was the area where "B" and "D" Companies were trapped.

WLU Air Photo 184/4181

At 0300 hours, 28 Sep, the battalion picture was not a bright one. "A" Company had two platoons in FORT LAPIN, and one platoon and company HQ in LES BARAQUES waiting to go forward. "B" Company had one platoon and its company HQ pinned down to the right of the road before the bastion; its other two platoons were in the same predicament beyond the railway bridge near the citadel. Nearly all of "D" Company was pinned down beyond the bridge. One platoon of "C" Company was in the same area; the other two with company HQ were under very heavy fire in LES BARAQUES. Tactical Battalion HQ was now also located in LES BARAQUES, having moved there from TROUILLE FARM. Even that town was uncomfortable, with machine gun rounds whistling through the streets, and Battalion HQ shortly returned to the farm. "A" Company moved its HQ to FORT LAPIN. In effect only one company—"A" Company—had freedom of movement.

Towards morning "B" and "D" Companies made attempts to extricate themselves without success. Communications had by now fallen down badly. Somewhat later "A" Company cleared the enemy from the strongpoints between FORT LAPIN and the bastion, thus relieving the pressure on "C" Company in LES BARAQUES; patrols from "C" Company succeeded in bringing food to "D" Company near the citadel.

In the evening of 28 Sep, Lieutenant-Colonel Schroeder, the garrison commander, requested a parley at 1000 hours, 29 Sep. Firing ceased. On the following morning, a 24 hours' truce was declared to allow civilians to leave CALAIS. The garrison commander had refused to surrender.

Inasmuch as international conventions permit no regrouping of forward troops during the period of the armistice it was not possible even to withdraw the two companies whose positions were so isolated. Prior to the parlay, however, Queen's Own Rifles of Canada, the reserve battalion of 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade, had already stationed themselves on the eastern perimeter of CALAIS, and plans were now formed to launch an attack

from that sector on 30 Sep, when the armistice had expired. Their intention was to capture or destroy all enemy up to the line of the canal just east of grid line 89. Another massive air attack and an extensive artillery programme were prepared to lend weight to the final blow. While this attack was in progress 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade was to eliminate enemy posts in front of its battalion positions prior to the resumption of the main assault against the city. In this second phase 1st Canadian Scottish Regiment was to capture CALAIS NORD; Royal Winnipeg Rifles and Regina Rifles were to capture CALAIS SUD. At the same time Queen's Own Rifles of Canada and Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa were to clear eastern CALAIS to the line of the next canal.

For 1st Canadian Scottish Regiment this meant that "A" Company, being the only unrestricted sub-unit, should first capture the bastion and that after dark all companies should surge forward into CALAIS.

At 1200 hours, 30 Sep, the attack was begun. "A" Company sent a platoon under Lieutenant Milton to the right into the bastion, aide by Crocodiles. With this support they were successful in breaking into the bastion area and proceeded to clear it. Amongst its earthworks—relics of an older fort—the enemy had constructed dug-in concrete emplacements.

During this time smoke was laid between the bastion and the fort at 854787. When it was observed that the first platoon had achieved partial success on the right, a second platoon, under Lieutenant Chambers, attacked the fort on the left. It was cleared quickly so that Lieutenant Chambers was able to join Lieutenant Milton in the bastion where fighting was still going on. This too was soon captured.

With its fall a succession of white flags appeared in a long line from enemy posts right up to FORT RISBAN. In the bastion "A" Company hoisted its own flag, presented by the Princess Royal, above the swastika, thereby offending many Germans, as it later

appeared. The CO came up and decided to exploit the success thus gained, without waiting for darkness. "C" Company was ordered to advance through "A" Company.

This it did, crossing by the railway bridge to the citadel, and freeing "D" and "B" Companies, who had been pinned there for so long. All three companies now continued to move into CALAIS NORD, which was thoroughly demolished. As a final measure "C" Company crossed the avant port by the bridge at 875789 to clear the quay to the north. At its tip was a fort still in enemy

hands, whose commander, while ready to surrender, insisted on doing so to the CO. This was arranged and at 0300 hours, 1 October 1944, the German commander and his men departed as prisoners of war.

Lieutenant-Colonel Schroeder had already surrendered to Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa, and Regina Rifles and Royal Winnipeg Rifles had occupied CALAIS SUD, Queen's Own Rifles of Canada and Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa had advanced to the line of the canal which was their objective. The capture of CALAIS was complete.