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The Walcheren Causeway Revisited

Colonel Guy de Merlis

On a secluded plot of land reclaimed from the sea, the grateful Dutch people of Zeeland have erected a monument dedicated to the 135 soldiers of the Fifth Brigade, Second Canadian Infantry Division killed or wounded in the battle of the Walcheren causeway, October 31st to November 2nd, 1944.

The monument, unveiled by His Royal Highness Prince Bernard, of the Netherlands, on October 31st, 1987, in the presence of a handful of Canadian veterans, commemorates the sacrifice of the members of three regiments: The Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) of Canada, Le Régiment de Maisonneuve, both Montreal units, and the Calgary Highlanders.

In order to appreciate the horrendous situation that the attacking infantrymen faced, one has to visualize the battle ground, a setting most likely unique for Canadian forces in the Second World War.

The objective was to establish a bridgehead on Walcheren Island, across a long causeway, as a diversion for the main Allied attack at the extreme western side of the island. The causeway was an earthen dam, over a kilometre long but less than 60 metres wide. Dead straight, this causeway included, on the right side, an embankment a few metres above the water line, over which sat a railroad; a two-lane highway in the middle; and a cycle path and a row of trees on the left. All this bordered by impassable marshes of mud and water.

In the fall of 1944, what could have been a scenic land in a picturesque country-side,

was a no-man's-land, pock-marked by water-filled shell holes, dislodged cobble stones and an assortment of land mines. Two-thirds of the way, a deep water-filled crater barred the road to armoured vehicles.

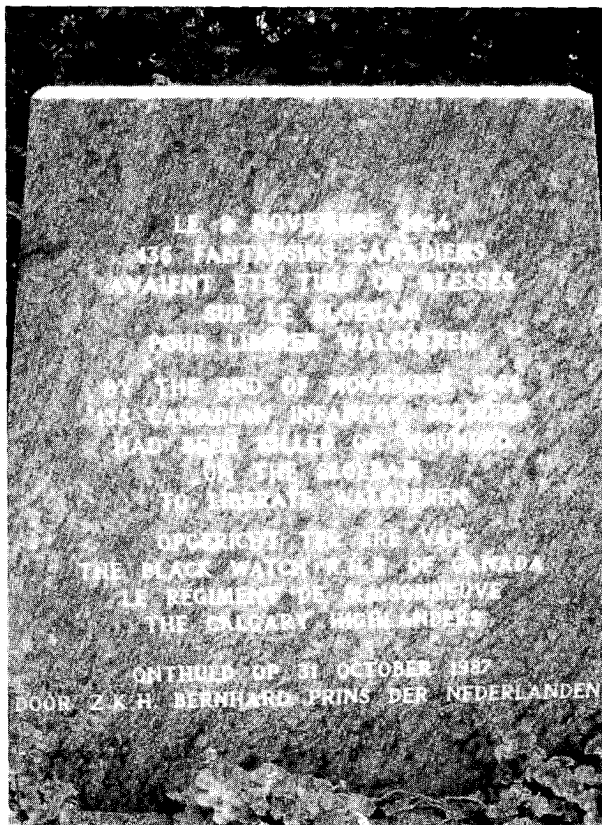
The defensive position had been well-prepared, with a stronghold at the western end of the causeway centred among a number of four-barrelled 20 mm guns and a dug-in tank firing straight down the road. Heavy mortars and artillery guns were well zeroed-in on the causeway. Barbed wire, mangled by the shelling from both sides lay everywhere.

Briefly, the three-day attack proceeded as follows:

Plans for a water crossing had to be discarded when it was found that the water level was too low for the use of assault boats and the muddy bottom impassable for the infantry.

The Black Watch, late on the morning of October 31, was first ordered forward. "C" Company led the advance, behind an artillery barrage. Bravely, the infantry inched its way forward, harassed by artillery and mortar shelling and cut down by fire from the tank and the 20 mm guns at close range. The murderous attack stalled some 25 metres short of the end of the causeway. Their withdrawal was ordered and carried out with the help of a heavy artillery barrage but evacuation of the large number of casualties was delayed until darkness.

Plans had already been made to launch a second attack, this time by the Calgary



The memorial to the men of the Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade, Walcheren Island.

Photo by L. Copp

Highlanders. At midnight, "B" Company moved up the narrow causeway, followed by "C" Company. It was the same scenario. The concentration of fire caused so many casualties that the two companies had to fall back. But at dawn, November 1, "D" and "B" Companies were injected anew into the hellish shooting gallery. The gallant Calgarians reached the strongpoint at the end of the causeway, overcame the defenders and sent back a number of prisoners.

In mid-morning, both "D" and "B" Companies, by sheer will, had succeeded in gaining a perilous foot-hold on under the banks of Walcheren on both sides of the causeway. The enemy enjoyed, however, the advantage of protected firing positions and continually harassed the Calgarians from the top of the dykes. Threatened with capture by a German counterattack, and many officers numbering among the mounting casualties, the Calgarians were pulled back. By late

afternoon the two forward companies had retraced their steps, by leaps and bounds, through the defensive position established by the other two companies on the causeway, a move hardly less hazardous than the original move.

At this time the Maisonneuves were held in reserve in a small village some 500 metres east of the causeway. Our thoughts were concerned with the imminent pull-out of the Second Division to a rest area, far away in Lierre, Belgium, when at 2100 hours, Lieutenant Charles Forbes and the author, the two remaining platoon commanders of "D" Company, now reduced to 40 men, including eight Belgian volunteers, were called to an Orders Group.

Regardless of the unsuccessful attacks launched by the other two battalions of 5th Brigade, a renewed effort was to be made to gain a bridgehead on Walcheren. The attack, by "D" Company, to be followed by "B" Company, was scheduled for 0400 hours on November 2nd and, with an hour, the Maisonneuves were to be relieved by the 1st Battalion of the Glasgow Highlanders, 52nd (Lowland) Division.

Promptly at 0400 hours, preceded by a thunderous barrage by some 72 guns, Forbes' 18 Platoon, and mine, the 16th, moved up the causeway. It was like entering a giant blast furnace stoked with fireworks. The enemy was not taken by surprise, his fire power not diminished, nor indeed his will to resist.

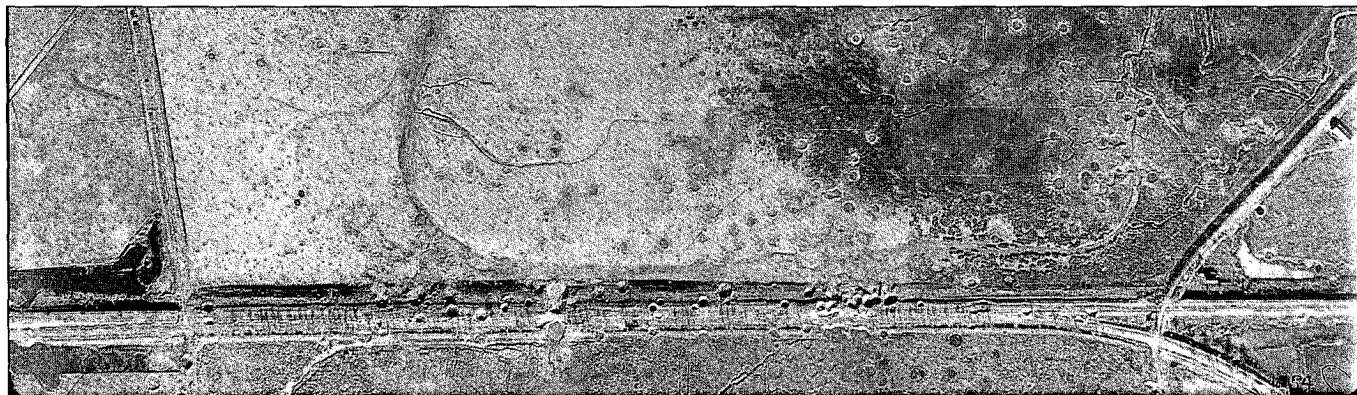
The Maisies ran forward, falling to the ground more by stumbling on the broken-up cobblestones than by a wish to find shelter in the water-filled shell holes. Moving shadows ahead of us were targeted until it was realized that, unknown to us, some Calgarians were still caught on the causeway. This moment of panic passed and we resumed our progress. For us, a zigzagging escape forward seemed our best protection. Indeed, so desperate was this thrust that it took the survivors some 500 metres past the western entrance to the causeway. this was realized when we reached a lateral road passing under the railway viaduct. Lieutenant Forbes and his

handful of men took position north of the underpass. I deployed a dozen men along the same road, facing south. Our best protection was a water-filled ditch.

For a while, as dawn rose and we shivered from cold and exhaustion, in waist-deep water, the war was abnormally quiet. The peace was

would not commit more troops to the relief operation that there were Canadians desperately hanging on the perilous bridgehead.

The word was passed to Lieutenant Forbes. It was a "sauve-qui-peut" - every man for himself. The race, in reverse this time was



Air photograph of the Walcheren causeway taken two days after the battle. The Canadians were attacking from east to west (right to left) against well-prepared German defences. The barren nature of the causeway is evident from this photo, with only shell craters and shattered trees to offer protection (the shadows of the trees are visible crossing the causeway). The two large craters blown by German engineers to deny the causeway to vehicles are visible just to the left of centre.

WLU Air Photo 235/4012

short-lived. From an opening in the dyke, some 500 metres south, a 20 mm gun on a mobile platform opened fire down the road and through the viaduct. I told Private J.C. Carrière, accompanied by a Belgian volunteer, to wade up the ditch, with the PIAT, to see if he could silence the gun. On their second try, they were successful and Private Carrière thus earned the Military Medal.

A new threat arose, this time from the north. A German tank was rumbling down the road heading for the viaduct. Thoughts of becoming a prisoner of war flashed through my mind until, miraculously, a rocket-firing Typhoon appeared on the scene. While the tank was not destroyed, it quickly reversed direction.

The promised relief by the British was not in sight. What was to be a one-hour excursion on Walcheren stretched to ten before we got word to withdraw regardless, at 1400 hours. We later learned that the British brigade commander of a force trained as mountain troops but who received its baptism of fire below sea level, had taken the view that he

carried out in broad daylight, along the railroad bank from which the enemy could lob grenades and snipers, across the open field, had a clear view of moving targets. There were more Canadian casualties helping each other in the rearward flight.

I ensured that the last acknowledged member of my depleted platoon had passed by. One man, Private Fortier, was left behind because of his serious wounds. He was possibly cared for by the Germans before their capitulation, for he died later, having been evacuated to England. Lieutenant Forbes and his handful of men left later in the afternoon, suffering through the same gauntlet of fire. At the western end of the causeway, a platoon of British soldiers was deployed around the crater.

My mind numbed and physically exhausted, I finally reached the far end of this miserable causeway where our company quartermaster was mercifully greeting the survivors. I emptied the cupful of rum he handed me. I do not recall anything about the delayed move to the rest area at Lierre.



The German view down the Walcheren causeway towards Beveland. Photo taken in 1946.

Photo by Captain G.F. Noble, CFPU PMR 82-078

In the Fall of 1987, I returned to Walcheren for the unveiling of the monument, the guest of the local historical societies. The scene had changed considerably. There was no causeway to speak of, the sloe having been reclaimed. In lieu, a large four-lane highway, divided by a bicycle path. The shredded trees had been replaced. It was a pastoral scene worthy of a post card.

On Walcheren itself, the lateral road had been truncated and only runs south because the viaduct under the railway track no longer exists.

There is another monument, close to the Canadian one. It commemorates the memory of the French soldiers who fell in battle, in May of 1940. Then, the French army was retreating from the Germans and thus defended the causeway. And yes, the attackers could not dislodge them.

In the half century since that operation, many questions have been raised concerning the justification for such an attack, the tactics employed, the sensitivity displayed, and the nature of allied cooperation. Such an autopsy, however, is best left to the historians.

What is indisputable is the valour displayed by the combatants of the Fifth Brigade in face of the horror they confronted in a military operation that had no name and, at the time, little fame.

Colonel Guy de Merlis served as a platoon commander with Le Régiment de Maisonneuve during the Second World War. He is currently the Honorary Colonel for Le Régiment de Hull.