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S.J. DeGroot

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# Escape of the German Army across the Westerscheldt, September 1944

**S.J. de Groot**

The writing of this article was made possible by Mr. K. Schacht (Steinkirchen), former officer of the *Bundesmarine*, who gave me the unpublished script of Mr. F. Roher.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Roher belonged to the *Kriegsmarine* and took part in operations in the Dutch waters in 1944. He put together a captivating document. Some additional research had to be done to put it in a clear and complete perspective. The fact that a specially formed unit of the *Kriegsmarine* was able, in 15 days, to ferry across the Westerscheldt 100,000 men, 6,000 vehicles, 6,000 horse-drawn wagons and 750 pieces of artillery, undoubtably lengthened the war and the occupation of a large part of the Netherlands. The evacuation across the Wester-Scheldt surely can be found in literature. The role of the *Kriegsmarine*, however, forms a forgotten chapter, even more so because the event was overshadowed by the long battle for the mouth of the Scheldt. Now, 50 years after the event, through examination of the facts gathered by Mr. Roher, we will have to admit this was a remarkable logistical operation that was perfectly executed under the most difficult conditions.

## Background

The Allied landings in Normandy on D-Day were followed by months of bitter fighting. Slowly but surely the German forces were driven out of France, and the German 15th Army was pushed from the area where it had been stationed for the invasion, namely north of the Seine, and into Belgium. This army belonged to Army Group B (Model). Because the retiring Germans nestled themselves stubbornly in the Channel ports and

could not easily be driven out of them, the advancing Allied armies were getting into problems with their logistics. At this point in the war, and in fact up until the end of November when the large port facilities at Antwerp were finally opened, the bulk of Allied units and supplies were still being landed over the D-Day beaches. The few captured Channel ports did not have the capacity to take over this function. It was essential to get the port of Antwerp into operation to ease the logistical situation. On 4 September, Antwerp, with its harbour installations intact, was taken practically without a blow. However, until the banks of the Scheldt estuary could be cleared, the British Army had to be supplied along the road from Bayeux, a distance of 375 km. The American Army had the famous "Red Ball Express" that brought daily 7,000 tons of supplies for Bradley's Army.<sup>2</sup>

It is still a point of contention why the British and Canadian troops after the fall of Antwerp hesitated so long to push northward. Not until 2 October, nearly a month after the capture of Antwerp, did they begin the clearance operations. A very important factor, beside the logistic problems, was the tenacious resistance given by the 15th Army. Their new commander, General G. von Zangen, realised that the largest part of his army was threatened to be trapped between the Scheldt and North Sea on the one side and the liberated part of the Netherlands on the other. Beside the strategically important object of keeping the mouth of the Scheldt closed off as long as possible and therefore preventing the use of the harbour by the Allies, there was now the need to save as many units as possible from the danger of the threatening encirclement. Only via the Breskens-Vlissingen and Terneuzen-



*The short distance across the Westerscheldt is clearly illustrated in this photo taken from Breskens looking across to Vlissingen.*

*(Photo by Donald I. Grant, NAC PA 142253)*

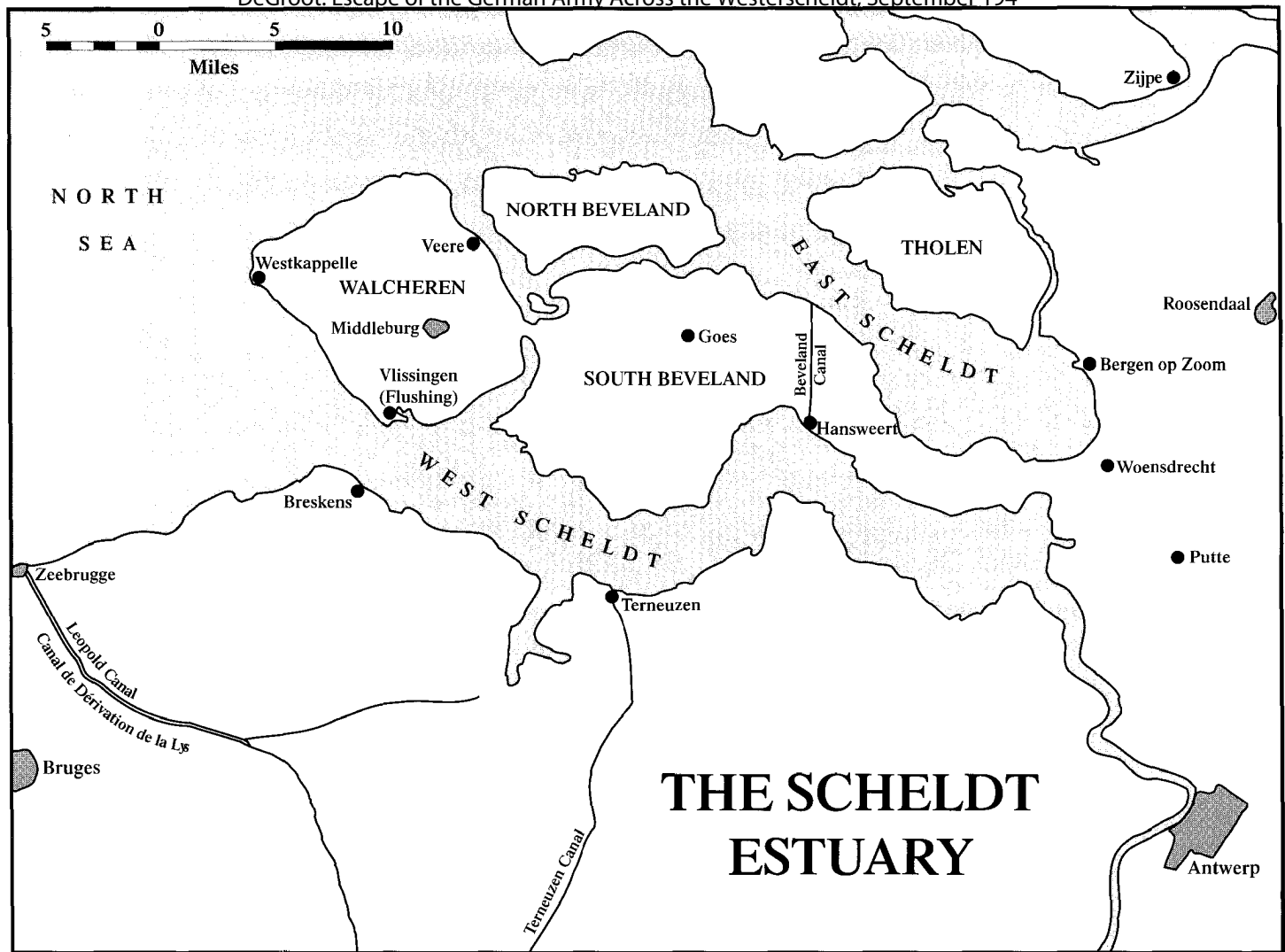
Hansweert crossings of the Scheldt, and from there across Walcheren and South Beveland, could they reach North Brabant. This made defence of the strip of land just north of Antwerp near Woensdrecht vitally important. This was the only route to the mainland for German troops who had been evacuated across the Westerscheldt.<sup>3</sup> Von Zangen requested the help of the German Navy in the Netherlands to ferry his troops across the Westerscheldt. It is at this point that Rohrer's account starts.

### **Sonderstab Knuth**

It was on 4 September 1944 that the Commander-in-Chief of the German Navy, Vice-Admiral G. Kleikamp, warned the staff of Army Group B that Antwerp could only be held for another five days.<sup>4</sup> But on the same day as this warning British troops took the city. It was not clear to the German High Command where the 15th Army was; it was presumably pushed up against the coast between Nieuwpoort and Breskens. On 6 September the Commander-in-Chief West, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt,

warned Admiral Kleikamp, to take care of the ferrying of the 15th Army across the Scheldt. The 1st *Sicherungsdivision* of the *Kriegsmarine*, with headquarters in Utrecht, received the order to execute this task with the greatest haste. There were no plans ready for an evacuation of about 120,000 men with all their equipment, vehicles and artillery. The day before, the order had been given to destroy all harbours, harbour installations, locks and canals. This order was rescinded and the commander of the 1st *Sicherungsdivision*, *Kapitän zur See* Knuth, was charged with the evacuation operation.

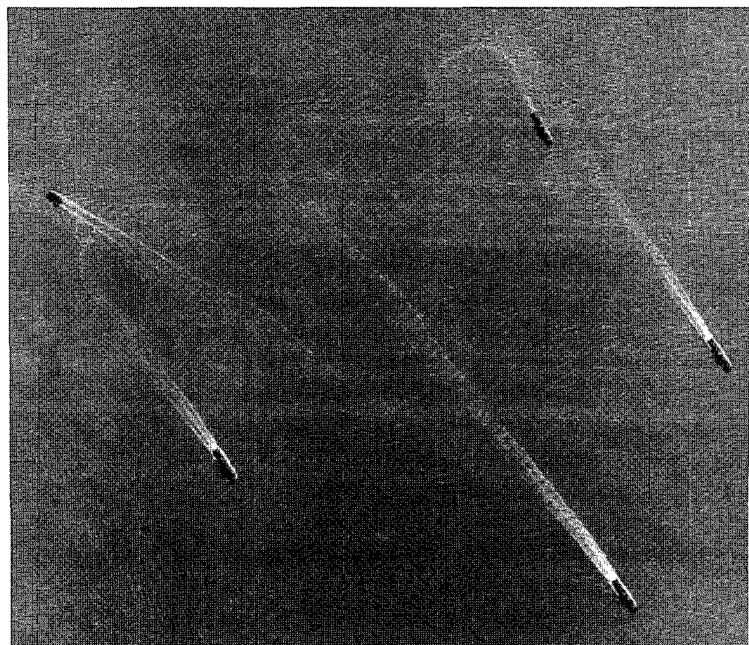
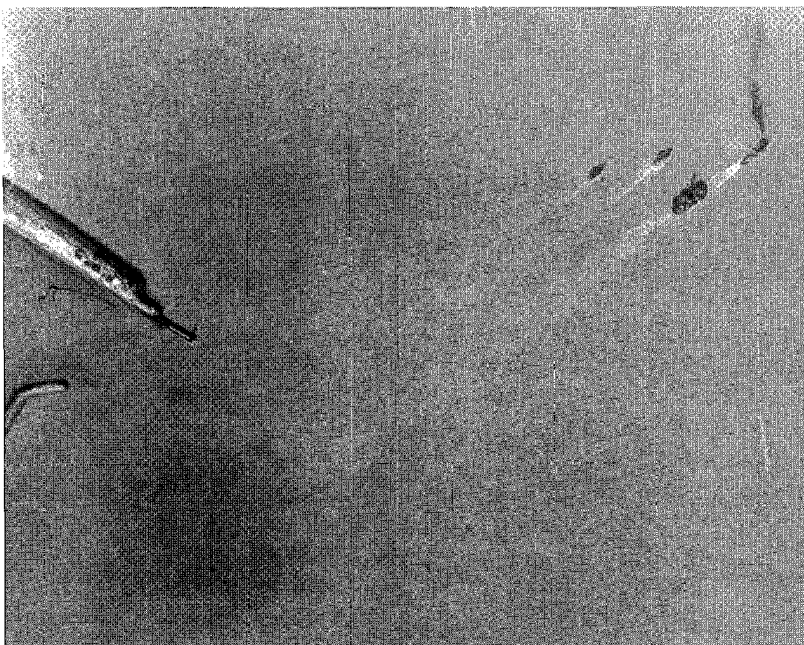
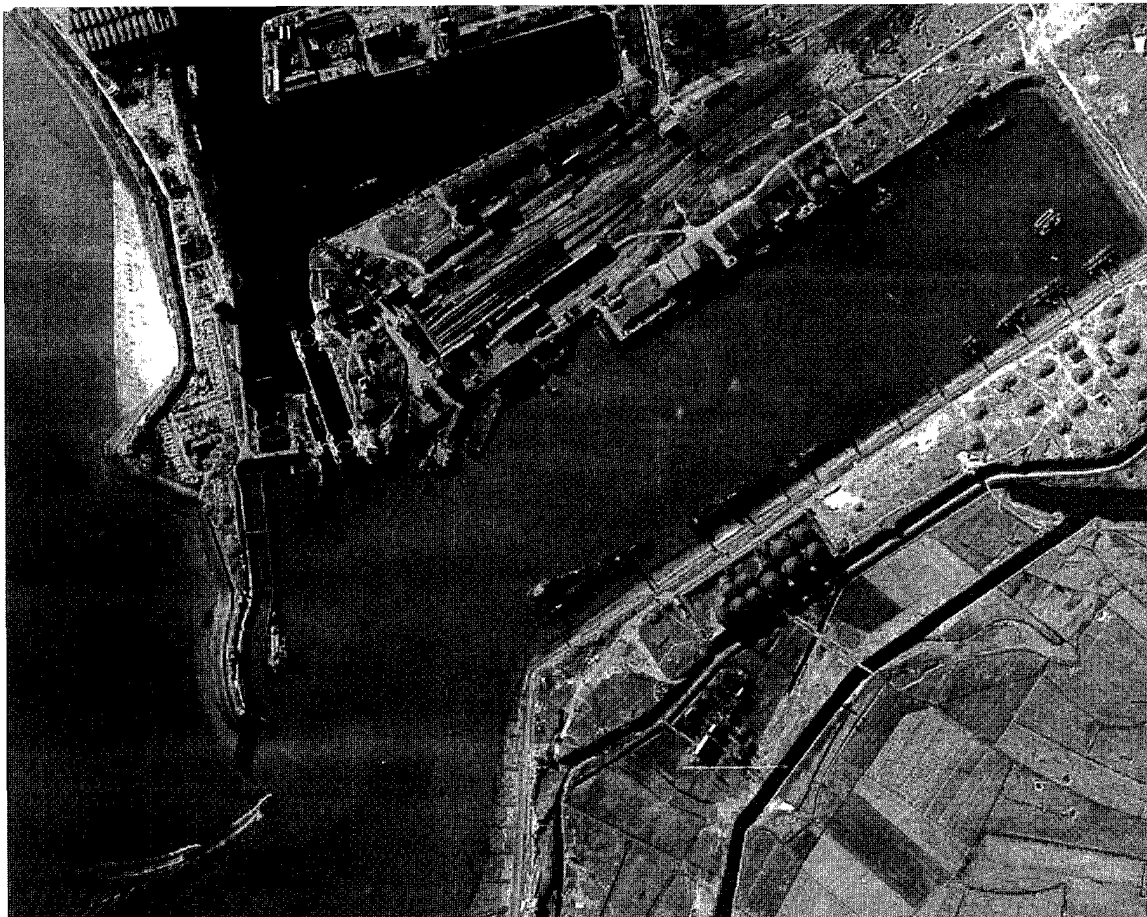
Knuth had only been the commander for a few months. Right away the order was given to direct all surface ships via Dordrecht to the Scheldt. Part of the River Flotilla (*Kapitän zur See* H. Engel) was already on the Scheldt.<sup>5</sup> Engel requisitioned rescue material on a large scale. Knuth formed the "Sonderstab Knuth," consisting of himself, *Kapitänleutnant der Reserve* R.W. Peters and *Oberleutnant zur See der Reserve* G. Kramps. He was ready to move to the theatre of operations on 6 September at 2300 hours. Together with his chauffeur he made



the 250 kilometre long drive to Middelburg during the night. It was a difficult trip through dark streets, with many detours because of blown up bridges and danger from the air. They reached Middelburg 0500 hours the next morning. The local commander supplied them with an escort and they went ahead to the headquarters of General von Zanger in the village bunker. The commander of the 15th Army Corps had arrived there the night before. The 15th Army itself was situated between Zeebrugge, Terneuzen and Breskens. The troops would be gradually withdrawn with Breskens as the last bridgehead. This bridgehead had to be held as long as possible in order to deny the Allies access to the Scheldt. Von Zanger insisted in principle on bringing across as many men as possible. Knuth and his staff went to Vlissingen where the 32nd Minesweeper Flotilla (consisting of transformed fishing boats) and the Outpost Boatgroup "Windhuk" were to be stationed. In

Vlissingen they formed the staff responsible for the evacuation. The staff was soon joined by the ships from "Windhuk," the Vp 2004, Vp 2007 and Vp 2011, and two *Artillerietrager* of the 1st *Artillerietrager* Flotilla.<sup>6</sup> Shortly, Knuth and his staff were joined by the commanding officer of the 32nd Flotilla, *Korvettenkapitän* Jacobi, the commander of the Sea Defence Southern Netherlands, *Kapitän zur See* F. Aschmann, and the Vlissingen harbour commander, *Korvettenkapitän der Reserve* R. Wurdeman.

It was evident that in the preceding days, more or less chaotic, some scattered units and their arms were brought across the Scheldt. This had taken place using the ferries *Queen Wilhelmina* and *Queen Emma*, requisitioned Dutch fishing boats and the *Kriegfischkutters* (KFKs) of the 32nd Flotilla. Troops were ferried across at two locations, Breskens-Vlissingen and Terneuzen-Hansweert. It was estimated that, up



**Allied photo-reconnaissance clearly revealed the extent of  
German movements during the month of September.**

**Top:** Two German vessels race into the harbour at Vlissingen after completing the crossing from Breskens on 11 September. Numerous other vessels are visible tied up in the main harbour. At this stage there is little bomb damage evident in the port. (WLU Air Photo Collection 164/3045)

**Above left:** A convoy of vessels clears the harbour at Breskens, just visible on the left, 11 September 1944. (WLU Air Photo Collection 159/3237)

**Above right:** The ships making the passage between Breskens and Vlissingen made ideal targets for air attack due to the clear weather and their highly visible wakes. (WLU Air Photo Collection 159/4239)



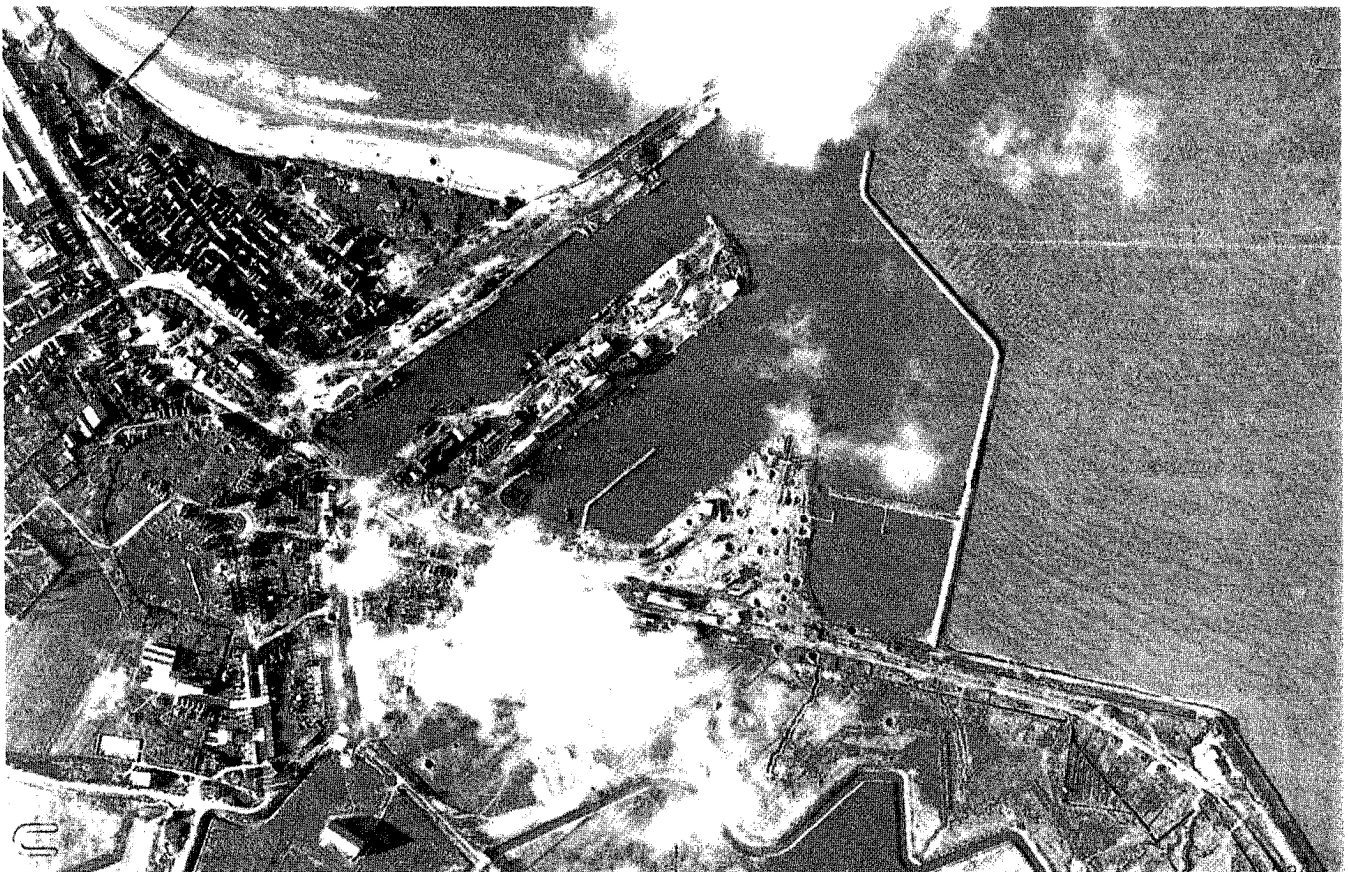


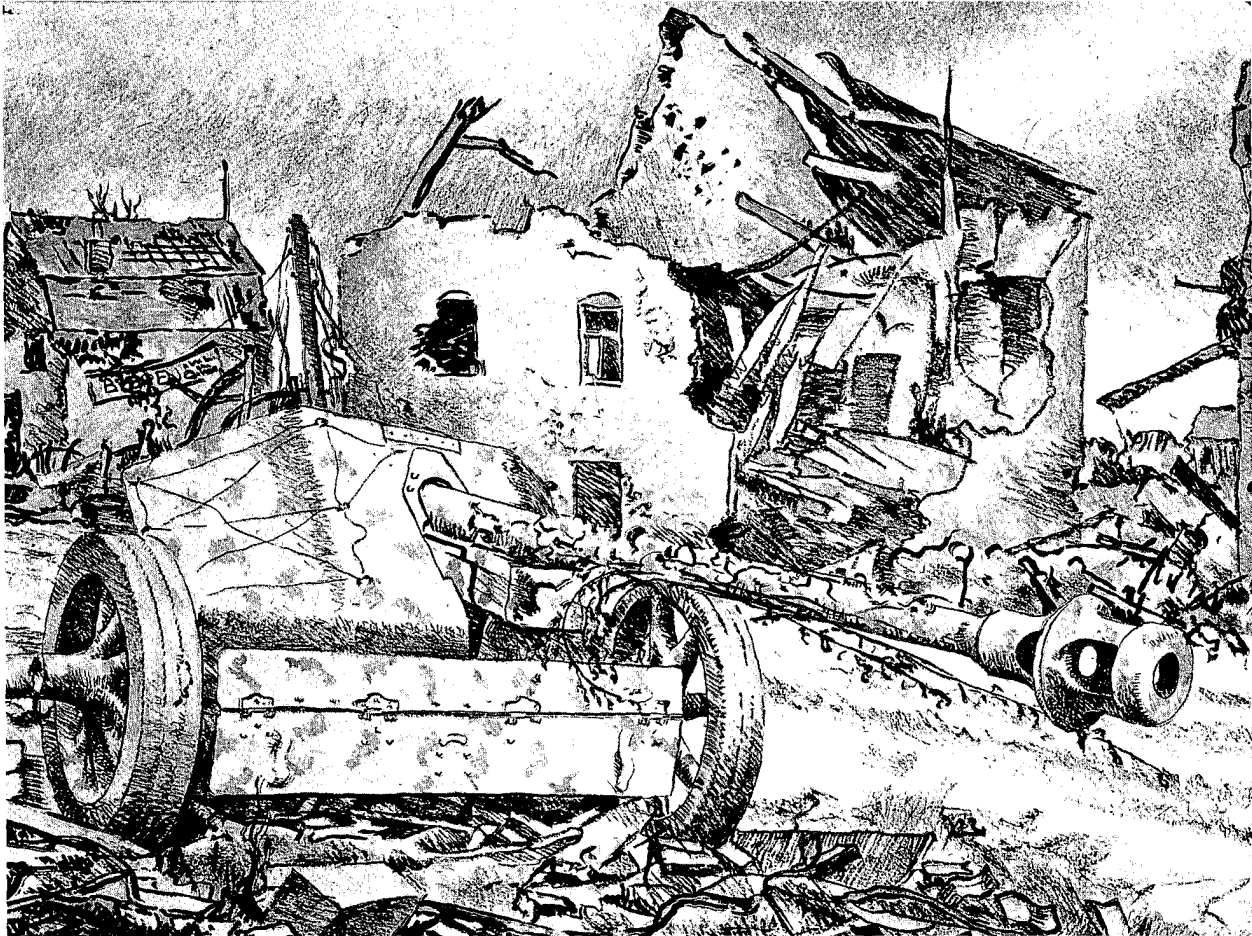
**Above:** The outer harbour of Ternuezen filled with shipping on 13 September.

(WLU Air Photo Collection 174/4001)

**Below:** Towards the end of the evacuation, heavy bomb damage is visible in Breskens, 22 September. In spite of this, Allied air power did little to hinder the German retreat.

(WLU Air Photo Collection 192/4002)





*"Scheldt Crossing" by D.A. Colville*

*(Canadian War Museum CN 12205)*

to 7 September, 25,000 men were ferried across. This left 100,000 men still on the south side of the Scheldt. The operation began with 60 ships but this was quickly increased to 75. As well, the original Dutch crews were replaced with German personnel. There was doubt about the full cooperation of the Dutch, and the fact that the vessels would be in service around the clock.<sup>7</sup>

Because the situation at the embarkation points threatened to get out of hand, Knuth asked Kleikamp to take the necessary steps to ferry the constant stream of soldiers as effectively as possible and transport them to the east. Assembly points, road commanders and interception units had to be installed. Two officers of the 32nd Flotilla's staff were used to regulate the boarding, *Oberleutnant zur See der Reserve* Lessing in Breskens and an adjutant-boatsman at Terneuzen. At the opposite shore

these functions were performed by the Vlissingen harbour commander and officers of the 32nd Flotilla, and at Hansweert by *Korvettenkapitän* Stein.

As order was brought to the operation, the 15th Army started to select essential material for the crossing. Also, the motor vehicles were repacked so as to make the most efficient use of space. A defensive line was created between Breskens and Terneuzen (Nieuwvliet, Oostburg, Ijzendijke, Boekhoude, Assenede, Sas van Gent, Axel). Assembly points and dressing stations were arranged. The transportation of the wounded, first on ordinary ships, was continued on hospital ships.

*Sonderstab* Knuth took as their headquarters the commando-bunker of the Vlissingen Navy Commander. In the meantime,

the communication material arrived from Utrecht under the command of *Kapitänleutnant* N. Godehart. In addition to providing communications between the ships and the staff on shore and higher echelons, this unit of the 1st *Sicherungsdivision* also took care of the battle information (B. Dienst). To lessen the risk of air attacks, the communication vehicles were set up in Veere.<sup>8</sup>

The work of the staff charged with the crossing entailed, however, much more. It was essential to bring the units across with all their vehicles, so that these units could be on the road to the east to escape the threatened closure of South Beveland. Much heavy material, namely heavy trucks and artillery, were moved by ship directly to their temporary end position. Preparations had to be made for the installation of mines and obstructions near Doel. Besides this, they had to regularly sweep for mines at the crossing locations. To the south of the Scheldt they formed a special group from the 344th Infantry Division to make order and keep it. Unofficial crossings were stopped.

## The Day-by-Day Story

### 7 and 8 September

The bad weather made the crossing much tougher and the organisation of the *Sonderstab* was not yet felt.

### 9 September

The need for the larger ferries was quite clear. Besides vehicles and other material, these ships could take 300 to 400 men across per trip from Breskens to Vlissingen. Units of the 36th Minesweeper Flotilla also took part in the evacuation. Anti-aircraft defences had to be improved. The ferries were equipped with 2 cm anti-aircraft guns (the *Queen Wilhelmina* with four guns and the *Queen Emma* with two). The *Artillerietrager*s travelling with the ferries were responsible for their air defences. In principle they sailed day and night when there was no danger from the air. It was here that the B Dienst in Veere played a very important role. This day they took across heavy motorized artillery (17 cm). This took place on the route Terneuzen-

Hansweert. There were eight to ten KFKs and six motorboats of the Rhine flotilla active here, also a *Siebel-fahre* (a type of landing ship vehicle transport) and five or six navy lighters (*Marine-Fahrprahme*). This route was much longer than the Breskens-Vlissingen route, so there were only two crossing a night possible (and often only one). The inner harbour of Terneuzen proved to be an ideal place for the loading of heavy railway artillery (21 cm). The fact that this material, once loaded, could be shipped directly through the South Beveland canal northwards, made this loading point very valuable. The improvement of order among the troops around Terneuzen was charged to the 17th Luftwaffe Field Division.

### 10 September

The weather improved and 5,000 soldiers were taken across. The outpost boats could transport 300 soldiers or 15 cars a ship, while the anti-aircraft guns could be fully used. New reinforcements arrived in Vlissingen – namely eight KFKs of the 36th Minesweeper Flotilla.

### 11 September

More soldiers than the day before could be ferried across. Two *Raumboote* (fast shallow-water minesweepers), the *R-83* and *R-85*, took part in the operation from this day. The first heavy air attacks took place on Breskens. The air defences were constantly strengthened, supplied from the material of the 15th Army. The air attacks caused 120 dead and wounded, beside a heavy loss of materials. The place of embarkation, Breskens, was out of commission for ten hours. But thanks to building materials from the destroyed houses in the area, the boardings were not delayed any longer.

### 12 September

At 0400 hours the crossing was again in full swing. More and more dug-outs for the men were built. In Breskens they took care that the 800-metre-long street leading to the boarding place was not packed full with vehicles when there were no ships to take them aboard. Slowly the front line around Breskens and Terneuzen was shortening. The largest number of ships – 75 – was now available for the evacuation. The 2nd *Artillerietrager* Flotilla (*Kapitänleutnant* von



Haxhausen) joined the ships on the Scheldt. They were placed as floating batteries. It was also the first time that 10,000 men with their equipment were ferried across in a single day.

On this day it was Terneuzen's turn to be bombarded. Because the telephone connection was put out of commission, *Kapitänleutnant der Reserve* W. Peters received the order to go and check. With the *R-83* they left the harbour of Vlissingen and found that Terneuzen was afire. The loading dock in the outer harbour was destroyed and three lighters sunk. The much more valuable inner harbour was still intact. Personal losses were small, but it took 24 hours before everything was functional again. The units left on the south side of the Scheldt started to worry whether they would be able to reach the other side and leave South Beveland. The possible loss of Woensdrecht was the cause of this fear. The ferry *Queen Emma* received a direct hit on the rear deck. The number of air attacks on the retiring troops was increasing constantly.

#### 14 September

The B-Dienst at Veere was successful in the interception of messages regarding impending air attacks. The early warnings allowed ships to leave the harbours. This day more than 10,000 men were ferried across. A new route came into use, Ellewoutsdijk-Hansweert. It was along this route that most of the infantry was brought across.

#### 15 September

While the crossing was in full swing a heavy air attack took place on Vlissingen. However, due to the earlier precautions, the attack had minimal effect. The number of casualties among the troops was small.

#### 16 September

The dead of the previous day's attack, among them the Navy Officer who coordinated the technical supplies, *Leutnant* Ubben, were buried without the interference of air attack. More than 10,000 men were brought across Terneuzen and this again got the attention of the Allied air forces, but the ferrying carried on.

#### 17 September

This day the dykes of the isle of Walcheren were bombed to let in the sea water. Terneuzen came under fire by Allied artillery. Preparations were made for the laying of a mine barricade near Doel.

#### 18 September

Only the 64th Infantry Division was still on the south side of the Scheldt. This Division would stay behind to hold Breskens as long as possible. It was not until October that these units were ferried to Walcheren, but by then the Island was encircled. At Terneuzen only one demolition group stayed behind, all other men were ferried to Hansweert.

The hospital ships with clear Red Cross markings did their work without much ado. Doctors did their best to save the wounded from the fate of prisoners of war. They were transported along the Dutch inland waterways to Wesel and Emden. There were two hospital ships attacked by fighter-bombers, one was sunk between Veere and Dordrecht and the other was set afire and grounded near Zijpe.

#### 19 September

*R-83* and *R-85* sailed under the protection of darkness to Terneuzen to pick up the demolition group. Early in the morning they were taken aboard under enemy fire and sailed back to Vlissingen. Troops continued to be ferried across from Breskens to Vlissingen. These combat troops displayed good discipline.

The completion of the mine barricade at Doel suffered delay because the rubber closure rings of the mines had to be replaced, for there was leakage. It took two days for this to occur, after which the mines were set.

#### 20 September

The crossing of the 15th Army was completed and reported to Vice-Admiral Kleikamp. He gave the order for *Sonderstab* Knuth to return to Utrecht.

## 21 September

Knuth and his people began the return trip. They made a short stop at the staff of the 15th Army in Dordrecht and the 1st *Artillerietrager* Flotilla after which they reached Utrecht at 2315 hours. A small welcome party was held and the *Sonderstab* was eliminated without any fanfare. In retrospect, Knuth could look back on a very successful operation. Thanks to his activity, 100,000 men, 6,000 vehicles, 6,000 horse-drawn wagons and 750 artillery pieces (from 2 cm cannon to 21 cm railway guns) were ferried across to fight again. In total, nine divisions were brought across – the 59th, 70th, 245th, 331st, 344th, 346th, 711th and 712nd Infantry Divisions and the 17th Luftwaffe Field Division.

## 24 September

The officers who took part in the operation were decorated. In recognition for his efforts, Knuth received the *Ritterkreuz des Eisernen Kreuzes*.

## Concluding Remarks

On the same day that *Sonderstab* Knuth completed its task, 21 September, the Royal Navy, formed Force "T" at Brugge to ferry Allied troops across the Westerscheldt. The long awaited closure of South Beveland finally took place with the breakthrough of the Canadian troops at Woensdrecht on 4 October. This closed off the only land escape route. There still followed a bitter battle for the Breskens pocket and the isles of Walcheren and South Beveland before the channel to Antwerp could be opened for shipping. The 15th Army stayed in the Netherlands for a few more months and was then set in for the defence of the Rhine. In December they took positions around Koblenz. This could have been avoided if the Allies had pushed on to Woensdrecht right away and cut off the escape route of the Germans.

## Notes

This article was originally published in *Mars et Historia*, 29th year, number 2, April/June 1995. It was translated from Dutch by William Jeronimus.

1. A complete text of Franz Rohrer's study, titled "Hilfskriegsschiffe und Kleinbootsverbände der Kriegsmarine im Kampf um die Rückführung einer Armee. Eine nach Augenzeugenberichten zusammenfassende Schilderung über die Rückführungsoperation der Deutschen 15 Armee über die Schelde im September 1944," (Hamburg, April 1970) is deposited in the library of the Institute for Maritime History at The Hague.
2. Chester Wilmot, *The Struggle for Europe* (London, 1952).
3. R.W. Thompson, *The Eighty-Five Days: The Story of the Battle of the Scheldt* (London, 1957); S.W. Roskill, *The War at Sea, 1939-1945, Volume 3 - The Offensive, Part II* (London, 1961), pp.142-154.
4. J. den Hollander en H. Sakkers, *Walcheren een fotografisch document. Duitse oorlogsfotografie 1940-1944* (Middleburg, 1991), pp.176-177.
5. For an impression of what ships were used, see Hollander en Sakkers, pp.225, 227-232.
6. *Artillerietrager* were auxiliary anti-aircraft ships loaded with a maximum number of cannons.
7. Composition of ships on 7 September 1944:
  - Ferries *Queen Wilhelmina* and *Queen Emma*
  - 6 small ships of the harbour-security flotilla Vlissingen (supplied with light artillery)
  - 5 ships of the Rhine flotilla
  - 5 ships of the River minesweeper flotilla, all supplied with light anti-aircraft guns
  - 3 small harbour ferries
  - 35 ships of the 32nd Minesweeper Flotilla.
8. For additional information on the communications and intelligence services of the German Navy (B-Dienst), see H. Bonatz, *Die Deutsche Marin-Funkaufklärung, 1914-1945* (1970), pp.99-106.

S.J. de Groot was born in Amsterdam and did his National Service in the Field Artillery, 1956-58. He is the senior scientist at the Netherlands Institute for Fisheries Research, IJmuiden and has written many articles dealing with his profession as well as naval and military history.

### "Stick to the Guns!"

A Short History of the 10th Field Battery, Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery, St. Catharines, Ontario. Softcover, 150 pages, 13 illustrations, 19 maps. Author Colin K. Duquemin, 56 Highland Avenue, St. Catharines, ON, L2R 4J1. \$17.45 total cost.