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Account of Operations in the Boulogne Area

by Lieutenant-Colonel J.E. Anderson, Officer Commanding,
North Shore Regiment, Given to Historical Officer,
27 September 1944

I

It had been appreciated from the first that the assault on the BOULOGNE fortress would have to do more than destroy the main belt of defences. Situated as they were in a semicircle on the high ground around BOULOGNE, these defences certainly represented the chief obstacles, but any attack on them would be seriously prejudiced by the presence of equally strong positions north of BOULOGNE—especially at LA TRESORERIE. This village was the site of a three-gun coastal battery of 305 mm guns and was of course heavily fortified. The strongpoint, while not part of the BOULOGNE fortress, could effectively intervene in its defence by reason of its powerful armament and its favourable position on commanding ground. It offered particularly strong support to FORT DE LA CRECHE, the northernmost anchor of the defensive system. It is doubtful in fact if the fort could have been captured so quickly had not LA TRESORERIE been previously eliminated.

North Shore Regiment was therefore committed to an attack on this strongpoint before the main assault was launched against the BOULOGNE defences proper. It was understood also that the battalion would continue its more or less independent action to remove all opposition from the rectangle roughly enclosed by LA TRESORERIE, WIMILLE and WIMEREUX.

The battalion, located in the vicinity of MANINGHEN-HENNE, due east of its

objectives, prepared to study the situation some days prior to the operation. Owing to the skilful manner in which all enemy positions had been made mutually supporting, a further complication came to light. LA TRESORERIE was itself supported by enemy positions on a feature just to the north, the PAS DE GAY. This hill overlooked the approaches to LA TRESORERIE and its capture was rightly interpreted by the CO as being the key to a successful attack.

When therefore on 14 September 1944 a patrol worked itself onto the PAS DE GAY the CO at once ordered the position reinforced and consolidated. It was touch and go for one night but ultimately the hill was successfully taken. The PAS DE GAY was found to form part of the extensive system of observation posts throughout the area and was an excellent vantage point. It contained a junction box of 210 wires, linking all the posts, and in enemy hands it might well have disrupted an attack on LA TRESORERIE.

Other patrols set about cleaning up all enemy positions outside the wire which encircled the principal fortification, so as to leave no troublesome outposts. The wire itself was carefully studied, the scout platoon leader even taking bearings on its depth.

II

At 0930 hours, 17 September 1944, the attack on LA TRESORERIE was begun, after 30 minutes of artillery preparation. The heavy bombing programme which preceded



The German coastal battery of three 305 mm guns near La Trésorerie north of Boulogne.

WLU Air Photo 165/3005

the main assault on BOULOGNE was still in progress. "A" Company on the right and "B" Company on the left crossed the road between WACQUINGHEN and MANINGHEN-HENNE, which was the startline, and advanced westward, crossing the BOULOGNE-CALAIS highway. The ground beyond the highway was heavily mined and wired. The wire was breached by bangalore torpedoes, but the anti-personnel mines caused fairly heavy losses. Two platoons of "D" Company on the PAS DE GAY had dug in on the south slope to give fire support to the assaulting companies. The remainder of "D" Company was in WACQUINGHEN; "C" Company was in MANINGHEN-HENNE.

The enemy had been surprised by the cross-country direction of the attack, which he had evidently expected to come in along the main highway. The two forward companies were able to rush the outer defences on the northeast side before coming under fire. The 20 mm flak guns on the perimeter were not even manned.

When they had got onto the east side of the objective "A" and "B" Companies were discovered and subjected to a storm of

airburst-20 mm flak from LA TRESORERIE itself and 75 mm from WIMILLE. The 20 mm fire Lieutenant-Colonel Anderson described as most effective against infantry, invariably pinning them down. The advance was stopped, all movement being impossible. Enemy defensive fire tasks were brought down over the main road, with such accuracy it was hard not to admire. WACQUINGHEN, in which advanced Battalion HQ was located, was also shelled during the afternoon.

To assist the forward companies an effort was made to bring up the Flails and Crocodiles. But such profuse armour-piercing shot met them that they were unable to move up the hill and had to remain back behind its cover. Thus no lanes could be beaten through the minefields. The Wasps were not used and two were lost by mine explosions. A troop of M 10s, however, firing by observation at about 1,800 yards range from MANINGHEN-HENNE, gave excellent direct support, taking on the 20 mm flak pillboxes which ringed the objective.

At dusk "A" Company pushed forward to the northernmost gun-casement and after much grenade throwing succeeded in In the

capturing about half of it. In the other half was the power plant, which the enemy continued to operate, so that the attackers had the luxury of electric light and radio. Company HQ had established itself in a house nearby but had to vacate it during the night when it was set afire by German tracer shells. "B" Company in the darkness dug in and improved its positions; strong patrols reconnoitred the casemates and captured the battery hospital. The enemy evidently had no stomach for night patrols and was easily panicked by them.

During the night carrying parties crawled up to "A" and "B" Companies to bring them food and ammunition. Wireless communication with them had ceased, until extra batteries arrived with the relief parties. 18 set communication had been very spotty. All in all it was a very unpleasant night.

The next morning, 18 September 1944, "A" Company completed the capture of its casemate and cleaned out a smaller gun position with PIATs. "B" Company on the left pushed ahead again, making much use of phosphorus bombs, and the second large gun position surrendered. The third fell a little later.

The final task was the clearing of the fortified observation posts northwest of the hilltop. This was carried out by "B" Company. During the afternoon the position was shelled from three sides—from WIMILLE, WIMEREUX and CAP GRIS NEZ. But there was no further trouble with mines.

The cost had not been light. Both companies had gone into the attack at strength; at its conclusion "A" Company numbered about 70 men and "B" 60 men. They had taken around 450 PW. Throughout the rest of the operation these two companies remained on LA TRESORERIE hill.

Stronger fortifications could hardly have existed. The casemates had been unshaken by heavy bombing. Each one contained a complete electric plant and diesel engine, which were kept in running order by a few prisoners who were retained for the purpose. The quarters, well heated and lit, were most comfortable. The garrison was nearly all German; most of them were marines. Perhaps because of the superior facilities of their quarters they looked cleaner and more soldierly than the usual prisoners. Their ammunition supply was in no way depleted.

Two views of the No.2 casemate at Battery Lindemann. It is believed that the damage to the gun was caused by the premature explosion of a round of ammunition. The chainmail screen draped over the gun served to protect its crew from shrapnel. Note the huge crater in front of the "Jake gun" caused by the near miss of an aerial bomb.

CFPU PMR 94-257 & 94-256



There was ample stock of food, which might have lasted three months. The battery also possessed a dug-in, well-equipped hospital.

III

The next phase was the capture of WIMILLE, which was undertaken the following day, 19 September 1944. "C" Company, leaving MANINGHEN-HENNE, advanced westwards along the road running parallel to the WIMEREUX River. Meeting heavy opposition from the eastern side of WIMILLE the company circled left to the south and remained there for the night. Next morning, with the assistance of supporting fire by M10s, the town was attacked and captured. Then AUVRINGHEN was cleared of enemy. From this whole area about 465 PW were taken.

IV

There remained now only the coast town of WIMEREUX. In preparation for the attack, Battalion HQ was moved to WIMILLE. WIMEREUX was understood to be empty of civilians, but the CO believed many still remained there. He was therefore loath to employ the two AGRAs made available to him, and accepted instead only one field regiment for support. "C" and "D" Companies were to be directed on the town and an early start was hoped for. This was impossible, however, since "D" Company had to move into position from its location on the PAS DE GAY and zero hour could thus be set no earlier than 1200 hours, 21 September 1944.

As the attack began, "A" and "B" Companies manned the western flak positions on LA TRESORERIE hill and fired these light German weapons into WIMEREUX. They made a terrific noise and served to bolster the slight artillery support, without, however, smashing the town so extensively.

"D" Company moved from the PAS DE GAY parallel to the railway, crossing it at a point north of WIMEREUX, and then proceeded south towards WIMEREUX Farm.

Here they were pinned down in the valley by machine-gun fire from the high railway embankment along the eastern edge of the town. But on the left "C" Company was advancing from AUVRINGHEN through GAZEMETZ and soon took out the fire, capturing about 100 PW. Heavier fire came also from FORT DE LA CRECHE, to the southwest, but did not hold up the advance, for "C" Company entered WIMEREUX near the railway station. "D" Company, now released, crossed the river further east and came into the town near the railway bridge. Effective close support was given again by M10s positioned in AUBENGUE.

The capture of WIMEREUX was completed on 22 September 1944. The garrison commander, a colonel, had escaped by making his way along the beach to FORT DE LA CRECHE, where he was soon taken prisoner anyway. The rest surrendered. The town's principal defences faced seawards and were so extensive that Lieutenant-Colonel Anderson considered them impregnable. The armament was of various sorts: in addition to the numerous 20 mm flak guns, North Shore Regiment even came on an aged French "75" with wooden wheels, and several huge mortars of the spigot type. The usual well-equipped hospital, which even contained a radio station, was also there.

The town was thronged with civilians, which confirmed the CO's belief and made him glad that they had been able to capture it without the devastating effect of so much artillery. The troops were warmly greeted.

Lieutenant-Colonel Anderson was of the opinion that the prime factor contributing to the success of the operation was the fact that adequate time had been given to the battalion to acquaint itself thoroughly with the nature of the task before it.



The town of Wimereux captured by the North Shore Regiment on 21/22 September 1944. The high railway embankment is evident just behind the town.

WLU Air Photo 165/3002