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From the Rhine to the Baltic

The Final Operations of The 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion

Part 1 – 24 March to 2 April 1945

R.F. Anderson

Introduction

At the Edmonton re-union of the First Parachute Battalion Association in 1976, some 30 years since the end of the war in Germany, I was afforded the opportunity to meet many old comrades from “B” Company, most of whom I had not seen since 1945, and in the various “Mess Parties” over a period of some three days, I was urged to re-write, and re-print my “Rhine Diary,” which I had sent to several close friends in very rough form, in 1946, without benefit of editing.

I feel compelled to explain that my so called “Platoon Diary” consisted of very rough pencil notes, taken down in a small hard cover booklet. Quite often it was not possible in the circumstances to make daily entries, therefore, it often involved a “catch up” process, which accounts for possible inaccuracies, and even a few missing pages.

On reflection, it is with regret that I did not attempt a “Normandy” Diary. My effort at keeping track started with the “Ardennes,” but I personally feel that the “Rhine Diary” is a more personal effort, and even perhaps has some value in terms of history. I must confess that on leaving Edmonton, and after seeing and living again the *esprit de corps* of the Airborne Brigade, I made a personal resolution to tackle the “Diary,” which may also have some use to the unit historian.

I ask the reader to be aware that it was written some 30 years ago [in 1946], when I was 21 or

22 years of age, and looking back, I suspect that my age bracket was about average for the entire company. The thoughts expressed therefore have to be measured in terms of the academic background and experience of someone that age, which at this point seems incredibly young.

To persons who have questioned me about the experiences of the battalion, the company, and more particularly the platoon, I have had to suggest most strongly that nothing written suggests any “Heroics.” I feel today that the Canadian battalion was a unique unit, and by some process, either designed or accidental, it was a collection of the “best” individuals that Canada could have produced, from British Columbia to Nova Scotia. The standards were very high, in terms of physical fitness, intelligence and initiative. The leadership was perhaps the best one could ask for, all of the officers and most of the senior NCOs had come to the battalion from many famous Canadian regiments, and they were not selected haphazardly.

One of the compelling arguments for putting some of the battalion history on paper, is the fact that it was formed as a special purpose unit and during the war it became “lost” to the Canadian forces since it was absorbed into the 6th British Airborne Division. The ultimate loss of course is the fact that the unit was disbanded after the war, and there is no continuity except through the efforts of the Airborne Regiment at Edmonton.

The narrative of the Rhine offensive is not a chronicle of “heroics,” rather it reflects the day-

to-day footslogging efforts of young men who shared the closest association and respect for one another that one could ever ask for.

The Legion of the Lost Ones

To the memory of those who served
and died in 4 Platoon, "B" Company,
1st Canadian Parachute Battalion

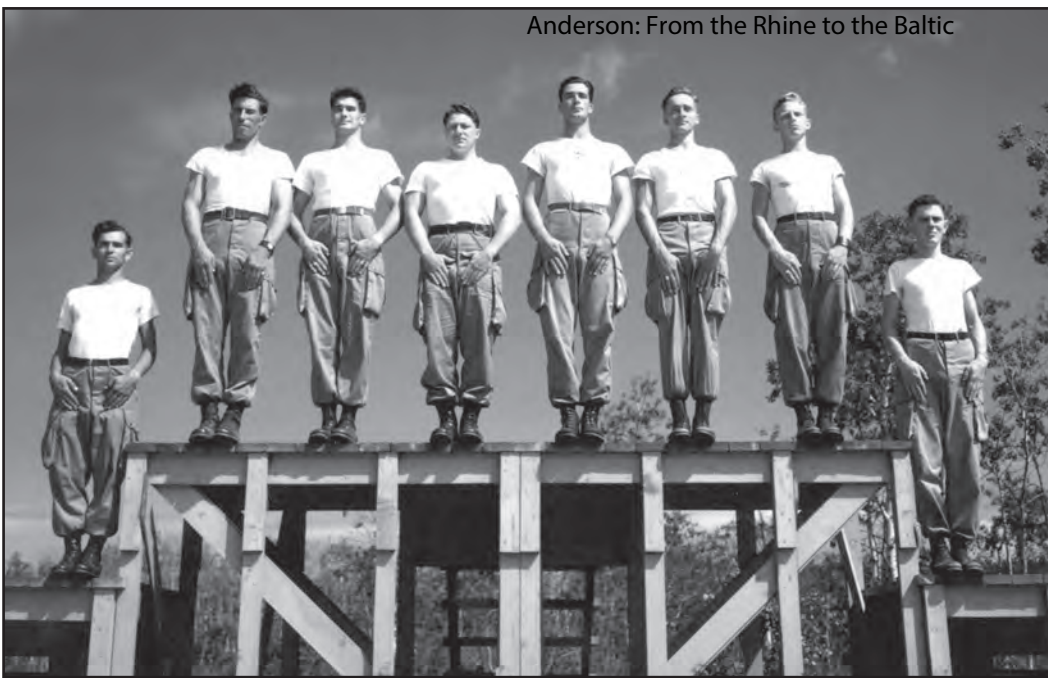
The title is paraphrased from Rudyard Kipling, who had a feeling and insight into the "common soldier" that has never been surpassed by any other author, with perhaps the closest exception being the late Ernie Pyle. It was Kipling who also said that, "single men in Barracks, don't grow into plaster Saints."

There were no "plaster Saints" in 4 Platoon, and while many men have since the war gone on to great successes in the business and academic community, I am not aware of any who have chosen the way of the "cloth."

Looking back to the days at "Bulford Barracks" in England, the home of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, I have stated to other writers and historians that in my view the unit was a collection of unique individuals. They were all aggressive, in top physical form, and able to "think," which is all too rare in the common soldier. I have always felt that I was in a better position than many others to come to this assessment, since I was slightly older than most, and, more important, I had joined the battalion after serving in both the Militia in Canada, and in other units in the 4th Division of the wartime Canadian army.

It was my good fortune, or fate, to have passed a selection test to join the battalion. My main qualification was expertise in mines and explosives, and it appeared that the battalion required someone with this kind of background. To be assigned to "B" Company was something of a triumph, as this company of men "stood out" from the rest. This is probably prejudiced, but that is how I always felt.

Four Platoon was unlike any other collection of men. When I say men, I have to realize that most were in



Left: Canadian airborne jump instructors pose for a photograph during a break in training.

Below: Three Canadian paratroopers pose in front of a C-47 transport prior to a training jump.



CFJIC ZK 354

the age group of 18 or 19 years. Really just mere boys, who at another time, in another place would be in high school, stealing apples, and chasing girls. But here was a group of men, from all provinces in Canada, easily identifiable by their speech patterns, but welded into a bond and partnership that could never be duplicated.

The question that struck me at the time, and since the war, was: “what motivated these kids” to be jumpers, and to join a battalion that most citizens felt was a “suicide” outfit. I have long since concluded that national pride, sense of duty to country, and “Mom’s apple pie” theories could be thrown out the window. If anything it was an “individual choice,” a sense of self pride, accomplishment, and a desire to be one of an “elite group” that motivated nearly everyone.

Today, with 18-year-olds sky diving it hardly seems much of an accomplishment. But in 1941 parachuting was in its infancy, and the use of airborne troops had only been successfully used on a small scale by the Germans, and most Allied commanders had little or no conception of employment of these elite troops.

Subsequent events proved that it was a “trial and error” process, in which thousands of lives were lost, many needlessly.

The Canadian Parachute Battalion, first formed in Camp Shilo, Manitoba, and with the first element being trained at Fort Benning, USA, managed to assemble an “elite” cadre of leaders, all the officers being drawn from other distinguished Canadian regiments, and either by

design or just good fortune, these officers, and many of the senior NCOs stood far above the normal “Infantry” qualifications. Above all they seemed to have leadership qualities that eventually paid off when the going got tough.

In England the parachute battalion was perhaps the only unit in the Canadian army with its own built in reserve to draw from. All during the stay in England, there was in existence a Training Unit, with a full complement of manpower, the members of which all had the ultimate objective of filling a vacancy in the active battalion. Once a rifleman in the active battalion, you were excused all kitchen and other fatigue duties. The men of the battalion therefore had some reason to feel somewhat superior and this was apparent in their general deportment.

The situation of having all this special reserve to draw from was an unusual advantage when, in late 1944-45, fighting units of the Canadian army were in a desperate way for reinforcements, and units were being cannibalized to complete establishments in many regiments. Thus we had the critical political situation back in Canada, where the government passed an order to

ship the so-called “zombies” overseas for line duty in a crisis which nearly brought down the government.

Now to return to 4 Platoon, which was a small 26-man group of 4 sections and a headquarters, which perhaps could be looked upon as typical and representing a cross-section of the battalion. The men came from all parts of the Dominion. I think it can be stated fairly that from before D-Day to the end of the war in Europe, we did not have a “dead beat” in the unit. Again we were in the unusual position that if a man did not measure up in any way, there were always a dozen men in the reserve unit, waiting and hoping they could join the active unit.

When the subject comes up among friends, even today, I am inclined when the question is put to be quite honest in saying that the battalion had some rough moments, but it must be borne in mind that the unit was utilized for a short period of time, then withdrawn. I compare that circumstance to the histories I have read of infantry units in Italy and France and the Continent, where the average soldier knew he was “in” to the bitter end with no hope for returning to England, unless with a serious wound or for some other serious reason. Admittedly the “hedgerows” in France were rough, the winter in Belgium was punishing, the forced marches through Germany were tough, but I am conscious of the times the “footsloggers” put in the mud and snow in Italy, and the flooded plains of Holland, with very high casualty rates.

I state this only give some proper perspective, and I take nothing away from the battalion. But it was a unique organization, with special tasks, and each task was exceptionally well done.

Saturday, March 24th, 1945

Awakened from a somewhat restless sleep at 0400 hours by the sounds of movement of men and vehicles. The first impulse is to look out the window to see if the Met. people had been right. Sure enough, dark, cold and bleak, but no rain or high wind, with certainty the thought strikes that the mission is on.

Seven whole days in this staging area for the entire Battalion, it seems like an eternity, but now it's only six hours until “Drop” time, and even coming out of a sleep, one's mind races to

work some satisfaction in knowing that all the waiting, all the lectures, all the planning, and table exercises will now surely be reality.

The “Staging Area” for the Battalion has not been uncomfortable, it has been a collection of Nissen huts and wood frame buildings, not as we have been accustomed to at Bulford. But the “security” has been incredibly close, every garbage truck searched in and out of this camp, no phone calls, all mail censored. One suspects that the “High Command” are taking no risks of security leaks, since the Lecture Halls on the site are loaded with maps, and tables and drawings of the objective.

There is considerable comfort in having spent the past days in briefings, at all levels, not only are we in the picture of the total operation, but at platoon and section level we have studied aerial photos, and table topography of the terrain of our smallest objective. One cannot escape the impression that the “planners” of this operation have learned from past mistakes, and a supreme effort is being made to bring this operation off, with maximum efficiency and the least confusion.

After packing my own gear, I visited with the men in the Platoon. Everyone is noticeably excited and perhaps a little nervous. Most men are cracking jokes, while at the same time checking equipment, ammo, grenades, and small arms. It suddenly occurs to me that for perhaps 50 per cent of this group, none had seen action in Normandy, and perhaps a further 20 per cent did not join us until after the Ardennes. Therefore, it might be said that for many, it is a totally new experience. One re-assuring factor, and a comfort to me, is that I have complete confidence in the leadership and experience of the Section Sergeants, and every man, I am convinced, is in top mental and physical form. If ever a fighting unit was ready for anything, this had to be it. My personal concern, is that I can measure up, and not let anyone down.

From the day we entered this staging area, it has been impressed on us, in every briefing, that this Rhine Crossing is the final and most decisive phase of the war. It contains the elements of a full break-out into the heartland of Germany, and an early and fast close to the war in Europe. Our battalion objective is to capture the town

of Wesel, and of course seize and contain the bridgehead. It is estimated that we will be relieved by waterborne forces at the close of the first day, that remains to be seen, there are always risks and the unexpected. Many “old sweats” have memories of Ardennes, which was badly planned, conceived and executed. [For more on this episode, see Anderson’s article “1st Canadian Parachute Battalion in the Ardennes: A Personal Account, 23 December 1944 to 26 February 1945” in the Autumn 1999 issue of *Canadian Military History*.]

It is still dark outside as we board the trucks for the Airdrome, about a half hour ride from our camp. As the trucks roll on to the tarmac, it is just breaking dawn, and the sight that remains is the long and endless lines of Dakotas lined up, standing out starkly on the runway, with Gliders and other vehicles being positioned. At this point the whole task takes on a “real” perspective, and nerves start to toughen, looking at the faces of the men, everyone is very deep in his own thoughts.

Started the process of picking up chutes at the terminal, lot of guys joking with some of the Staff who will be remaining behind – I have been assigned Stick #73. I will be immediately behind the Captain Sam McGowan who will jump #1, and I will follow. Again there is something of a lift

in having Sam McGowan in our “stick,” not only is he the commander but he has vast experience, a “cool” experienced officer of the highest calibre much admired and respected by everyone on the Battalion. As we line up for equipment check on the tarmac, alongside our aircraft, Major Clayton Fuller drove up to say farewell to the group. He has been the commander of “B” Company since D-Day and as he shakes hands with Sam and others, I thought I detected a tear in his eyes. I feel certain he wanted to finish his career with the company, but he is being sent back to Canada for senior Staff College.

It is precisely 0730 hours as we taxied down the runway, then our aircraft circles to join what must be a very vast armada of divisional aircraft. Routine in the plane is the same as always, the bucket seats are hard as hell, some feign sleep, some really sleep, others tell stories and try a few jokes that do not go down too well. Some of us are a little worried about this Transport Command, it is all American. Our previous experience has told us that the Americans are great for food, and company, but as for navigation and target, many of us would have preferred to be going RAF, who always seemed to be more disciplined and conscious of the total effort.

At about 0955 hours, someone looking out a porthole, shouts, “The Rhine Below.” Looking

Allied troops watch troop-carrying aircraft pass overhead on their way to the drop zones east of the Rhine River.



Canadian War Museum (CWM) 19890223-503



This air photo shows one of the "Varsity" landing zones, 24 March 1945.

in the static lines, count off, then stand in the door as the door is removed, then follows a blast of air. Captain Sam is leaning out, so I have a good view of the ground, red light on, 1000 hours on the nose on top of the DZ. Am conscious of other aircraft in the vicinity, also "firecracker" sounds coming up from below, plus puffs of smoke. More pushing, close right up, kit bags in hand.

Then GREEN ON, "GO, GO, GO." Into the slip stream, drop like a rock. Looking up am conscious of plane climbing out of line of anti-aircraft fire. Chute cracks open, one problem down, keep busy, start letting down kit bag, all the while sub-conscious of small arms fire around me. Couple of holes appear in the canopy. Damn it. Seems too long to be floating up here, must have jumped out 200 feet too high. Can see in periphery, other planes unloading, one or two on fire, heading into the deck.

Land like a rock. The staff at Ringway [parachute training school located near Manchester, England] would never have approved or awarded me any prizes. Stretched out on the ground, somewhat amazed to find nothing broken, and kit bag still intact, unpacked gear and started for the rendezvous (RV) point at the edge of the woods

out the window briefly before "Stand Up" my impression is of a very wide "lake," I have no idea what I expected, but the river was massive, cold and uninviting. That's all I remember, because within seconds someone hollered the customary "stand up and hook up." The Navigator opened his door and said "three minutes to the DZ [drop zone]," then he closed the door. Inside the plane there was disciplined confusion, much shuffling, dragging equipment forward, check safety pins

about 200 yards away. Crouched low, running like hell, conscious of fire coming from somewhere, and of several men lying motionless on the DZ. Also rifle and machine gun fire coming from somewhere. Obviously the area has not been totally secured. At the RV Point, all section sergeants report in, amazed to find that only six or eight men are missing. Moved the platoon off down a trail to our objective, which is a group of outlying farmhouses, made about 100 yards.

When we are joined by Captain Sam McGowan, he is bleeding badly from a wound in the head and he has difficulty seeing, but he is completely mobile. Had a big argument with him to put a shell dressing over the wound. Clamped his helmet over it and pushed us on, his concern was not to delay the attack.

At the fence line on the edge of the farm, have lined up the Platoon in some kind of attack order. Then with fire coming from the Farm, we are off and running, firing wildly from the hip, covered by Bren fire. We overrun bunkers, toss grenades into the houses and barns, generally raise hell and take a few prisoners. The whole episode in looking back could not have taken 30 minutes in all. Seems too easy. I found the largest bunker outside the farm perimeter, set up a kind of headquarters and put a guard over the prisoners, who are scared to death. One or two of them are Medics, and I tried to get them to look at Captain Sam's head.

Before I could stop Captain Sam, he was off and running to join the Company Headquarters group. The platoon sections are scattered in a semi-circle, surrounding our objective. It is now just a mop-up situation, the Bren Gun crews are extremely busy picking off enemy troops who are caught and running wildly in all directions. Quigley and Polosnik are hard pressed to keep enough ammunition supplied.

Within an hour, the area is totally clear, and I have ordered the sections to send out patrols to clear the surrounding woods and roads. Sergeant Page is the first one back and he brings in about 90 prisoners, can't afford men to take them back, so we have them stripped and sitting on the ground. The German Medics, once they found we weren't going to kill them, have been extremely useful, patching our own wounded as well as their own.

Stragglers still coming in from the DZ, some dazed, lost and wounded, from all companies. Patrols still out and not reported, but finally word comes by radio that a patrol led by Corporal Flynn has run into a strong point somewhere up the road, and he has been wounded. I grabbed two of the German medics, some First Aid packs and started up the road toward Flynn. Found him in a ditch, his men have moved up and taken out the machine gun, and captured a few more

prisoners. The German medic shot Flynn full of morphine. He took a few slugs in the lower leg. This is the second time for him. I found some men to get a barn door frame, and we put the prisoners to work carrying Flynn back to headquarters and the battalion medics.

Back in the HQ bunker, some concern about a counterattack, the timing would be about right, but personally I don't think the Germans are left with enough to mount anything. Firing still on the perimeter, but for the next hour I take time to try and prepare casualties and ammo reports from the sections to send a runner to Bn. HQ. I have sent a report estimating that we have lost about 15 men from the platoon, wounded, missing or killed. Have no idea about the company as a whole. At about 1400 hours, a battalion runner drops into the bunker, tells us for the first time that the battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Jeff Nicklin, has been killed in the drop. Again he fell into a tree on the DZ, and he was killed by machine gun fire before he could cut loose. Captain Doug Candy, the Chaplain, and a few men have gone out to the DZ to cut him down. This news is a bit of a shock. Jeff Nicklin was one who almost seemed indestructible, 6'3" tall, football hero back home, a stern disciplinarian, physical fitness was his specialty. He would never ask any man to do anything he could not do himself, and probably better.

Further word comes that Lieutenant Jack Brunette of 5 Platoon, with Art Stammer's group, has been killed. Strange, another big guy, ex-football hero with Montreal, he was well liked by Art and all his men. These casualties are a little stunning, but they should not have been unexpected. Still no total picture on casualties, many of my own men still unaccounted for, but one consolation is that we have more than taken the objective as planned, and total casualties do not appear more than feared.

At about 1500 hours try and open a few Compo rations and get some chow. Then hear planes coming in very low, and looking toward the river between buildings, can see large Sunderland Flying Boats, all white, coming right over us, dropping parachutes. Men start to scramble, hoping for food and cigarettes, and also ammo. It all seems somewhat wasted, since we have been told that by late nightfall the waterborne troops should be ashore to relieve us. But perhaps it



One of the first British tanks, a duplex-drive Sherman, to reach the airborne bridgehead. Here Private F.M. Estok of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion greets British tank commander Lieutenant J.E. Foley.

was planned this way, in case something went wrong.

Sure enough, it is about 1630 hours, and we hear the unmistakable sound of track vehicles coming up the road from the direction of the river. Within minutes, there is the start of some cheering, as Recce vehicles followed by Bren Gun carriers and tanks move into sight, and these are the leading elements of the British 15th Division.

With the coming of darkness, orders come down to remain dug-in for the night, 100 percent alert, not much sleep for anyone, but there is some solid comfort in knowing that we are no longer alone on this side of the Rhine. Lots of paper work to catch up on, runners from company and battalion keep coming in and out. One late rush order from battalion, which in retrospect seems humorous, is that they want names of platoon members to be cited for bravery. This is a “shocker,” what the hell to do. Best thing was to gather section sergeants, discuss the propositions, decided by consensus that I would submit four names for Military Medals on the day’s action. The story is that the battalion has been given a quota to fill. Never heard of such a thing, but have to go along with orders. Last thing at night, is to get regiment to come down and escort prisoners out of our area. They are taken to a temporary cage in the rear somewhere. Stand-to is set for 0500 hours, firing going on all night, nothing heavy lands on our position.

At the conclusion of the first day, I think it would be a fair comment to suggest that everyone was both exhausted and personally pleased to

have survived. Exhaustion came from the effects, not only of the “fighting,” but the tension that has been building for days. There was also some feeling that the success of the mission perhaps did in fact mean a rapid end to the war, and home and family could perhaps take on some meaning and reality. This “high” feeling was of course mixed with feelings of personal loss. We had no idea of total dead, but it had been gradually confirmed through the day that many friends were indeed killed. It was also suspected that many who were missing would perhaps later turn up, as was so often the case in a drop that might be widely scattered.

March 25th

Battalion orders come down early, that we are to move out with 4 Platoon to take over positions occupied by 5 Platoon, who were cut up badly in the drop, including loss of their officer, Jack Brunette. Men are in good spirits, the only complaint is lack of hot food. I joined with Art Stammers, the platoon sergeant and an old friend, and we did a tour of his positions together and made the transfer of men. Also had a good chance to look over at least part of the DZ, now covered with debris, parachutes, and especially broken up gliders. Art Stammers group has salvaged some ammo and guns from the gliders, and I notice that burial parties are moving about, identifying and gathering bodies. Chaplain Doug Candy is the busiest man in the group.

Art Stammers showed me a very queer sight, where a glider, loaded with men, had the misfortune to land directly on top of a German command position. Both the glider men and the Germans had all been killed. At about 1400 hours some large shelling starts to come into the area, these are fairly long range guns, but they have our range. It is some comfort to know that the armour is out front somewhere, but at last light we are ordered to stand to all night 100 percent.

March 26th

An “O” Group is called at company at 0700 hours, we are told that the battalion will move forward to new positions. This turns out to be a very

short march and on stopping we found ourselves occupying an area of dilapidated farm houses, just to the immediate rear of the fighting zone. Now at about noon we meet up with company quartermaster Laing, and what a welcome sight to see our trucks. He, of course, has brought hot food, and what is more urgent, ammo and other supplies. By 1400 hours we get the first bad break in the weather, it starts to rain. It is bad for most of the sections who are dug in, but personally I have set up a headquarters in one of the barns.

At 1930 hours have put all sections on alert, we are moving up again to relieve some American units of the Airborne Division who apparently dropped on our flank. Rain makes the march miserable, but I think all of us could recall worse times. On the way up the narrow roadway we are traveling, we pass a number of fields with both American and British gliders, some intact, many broken up, but the worst sight is to see men dead in their harness still hanging from trees. The roadside and area we are traversing shows signs of much fighting, just by the body count.

Dug in for the night at the roadside, we have all been put on warning that we will be attacking in the morning.

March 27th

Orders from meeting of all company commanders tells us that we will be attacking at 0400 hours. "B" Company will lead the battalion in the attack on a village named Burch. Advanced and took the town without much difficulty, so the order is to move onto the second objective, through a wooded area on the far edge of town.

Four Platoon is leading the company. Rain has lifted, but it is very foggy at ground level. Quite suddenly firing breaks out just ahead, very quickly learned that Doc. Warnock and his section have run into opposition, and what is more upsetting it looks like a Tiger Tank patrolling the narrow roadway. The platoon has taken cover at the ditches, as the tank comes full force down the roadway, with all guns blazing, all of this most frightening in the ground fog.

German prisoners of war captured during the Rhine operation.

As I came to my senses, I yelled for the PIAT crew to come forward. It seemed to me that if they were on hand they could easily get a flank shot from excellent cover. Mad as hell they do not respond, but in a minute or two I hear a loud explosion immediately ahead, and I can only guess that one or two PIAT crews with a forward section have let loose, and in any event the tank has wheeled around in the roadway, and started to "high tail" it. They must have thought we were had anti-tank guns or something heavier.

In a few minutes I start to get the men re-assembled and reports on casualties. By sheer luck or good fortune, I find that only one man, McFarland has taken a slug through the upper leg. Everyone else is OK. This is incredible luck, since I had felt for certain that the forward sections have been trapped on the roadway and cut up badly. The whole episode has something unreal about it, the confinement, the closeness of the enemy. I can even recall seeing the face of the German tank commander, he was that close, before he buttoned up.

Following the retreating tank, we made time up by running ahead and took our objective.

LAC PA 143947





Airborne soldiers are evacuated by Jeep ambulance during the fighting in the Rhine bridgehead.

This is a height of land overlooking another town, or village, just a cluster of farms and small buildings. Suddenly while digging in, we come under heavy fire from what we can identify as 88 mm SP or tank guns. The fire is incredibly accurate at what appears to be a distance of a quarter mile, and it is rapid and intense. We have called for artillery support, but little hope of that. We think we have spotted gun flashes from a woods, meanwhile the shelling has put everyone to ground, too dangerous to be exposed even to dig a hole.

Since "B" Company, and 4 Platoon is still leading this charge, we are getting the worst of it, but we have been joined by the CO Lieutenant-Colonel Eadie and his Staff. Just a few paces from where I am crouched, CSM Cooper is hit in the chest with shell fragments. We drag him under some cover, and Ernie Jeans who has come up with the Headquarters group as a Medic is attempting to treat the wound, but Cooper is completely open in the chest, breathing from the cavity. Jeans told me that he could do no more, and within seconds, he has passed away. The strange thing about Cooper, and the thought was the first to go through my mind, was that he was a RAF man, not really supposed to be with us. He was a Physical Education Instructor, but by his own choice he wanted to jump and see action with the men he trained and worked with. I know that he is older than most of us, has a wife and children in England. Just a great "Little Limey," now he is lying dead.

Colonel Eadie has called a meeting of command and sections leaders, off to the side of

the road. He says it is a hell of a mess, but we have no choice but to make a frontal attack. It's going to be rough because it is all open ground, and the only support is our own battalion weapons. But obviously, he is being pushed by Brigade to get on and clean up the delay. Just as we are breaking up the meeting, and I am looking over the empty fields, and silently counting our casualties, down the road, and in full view two "Limey" jeeps, with .50 cal. guns mounted fore and aft. I still today have no clear idea who or what they were. I seem to recall seeing Green Berets but they also acted like the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG). In any case I heard the leader ask if he could help, and within a few minutes he agrees to charge up the road, flank the guns or tanks and lead the way for us.

The jeeps took off, guns blazing, and we followed over the open ground. The firing was heavy, but we are not getting cut as badly as I feared. I can see the jeeps darting about the woods, the .50 cal. guns are obviously keeping the tanks busy. When we reach the woods and take the village, the jeeps are gone, so are the German tanks. Never saw them again. The only thing they left was all the buildings on fire, from what I guess was tracer ammo. (Since the War, I have read a great deal about the LRDG, led by a phantom Major, I have often wondered if this could have been the guy and his group.) In any event, the jeep patrol has just saved about half a company of men. Never saw anything like it.

Have set up in some of the town buildings, which are not burning, and in the process we find we are liberating quite a number of Polish, Italian and French prisoners, who have been doing farm labour. Good opportunity for some of our interpreters to try out languages. We are setting up the barns for the night. Shelter is good, but we are back on Compo rations again, cold and very miserable.

Through the evening, it is time to take stock, get reports of killed and wounded. Re-supply

the ammo. Also Lieutenant Fleming from 4 Platoon has been sent to company as adjutant, and we have been sent Lieutenant Pete Insole. I have known Pete for quite a while. He is a good guy, will have no difficulty working with the men and being accepted. Some armour and another battalion has passed through us going forward, so we have been told for the first time that we can step down to 50 percent alert tonight. Many of the men will get their first sleep since the drop. The morale is good, again there is some evidence that Resistance may be crumbling, even if it is a vain hope. All the men are in peak form, and even the new men are all "blooded" now, and not a failure in the lot.

March 28th

Orders come early, we are moving up as a Division, but for the first time, the 8th and 9th Battalions will lead, leaving the Canadian Bn. in reserve. We move off the mark at 1100 hrs. for a gruelling march of some 20 miles. Have heard nothing from up front, therefore expect that resistance will be minimal. Reached the village of Rhade and dug in on the perimeter, then moved out again at 0200 hours to take the village of Lembeck. On the approach to the attack point, we are supposed to clear a small wooded area, containing German infantry, heavily dug in. It is raining by this time in torrents, the men are wet and weary after the long march, and each man is carrying a heavy load. This is one of the greatest difficulties of Airborne fighting as ground troops, you simply have no transport, so pack loading has to be cut to absolute minimum.

The wood clearing came off without too much difficulty, some of the sections got into a scrap, and enemy positions were cleared with grenades and small arms. All we had to show when it was over, was a motley collection of prisoners. When the platoon was assembled and started off again for the main objective, we ran into a German platoon on bicycles. They were so startled that they fell off the bikes, into our hands without a shot being fired. The men are glad to have secured the woods. This is always a nerve wracking thing under the best of conditions.

At last, the attack goes forward, and the village is taken without too much difficulty. We are going to hole up in the town for the night. That is welcome news, since the men can get out of the

rain, and even perhaps dry a few things. We make out quite well, using straw from barns but no fires allowed. Some of the men went on the scrounge for food, and surprisingly some German cellars are well stocked, very much unlike anything we found in Belgium or France, where supplies had been looted. Early in the morning, some British infantry are passing through our position, so we can call down a 50 percent stand-to all night.

March 29th

At 1500 hours I awoke suddenly to the thunder of guns, and broken glass coming in on top of us. Everyone grabbed gear and ran outside for cover, only to find that a heavy artillery unit had moved into our yards in the early hours, and they were getting off an early morning "shoot," and the proximity of the blasts had caved in our shelters.

A long stream of German prisoners are coming through our lines this morning. We have men on the road, pushing them along to the rear for interrogation. It is a comfort to have the artillery in our area, the first time we have had close support, but the thought is always present that the Germans could zero in and start a counter-battery fight. Made a tour of the sections with Pete Inspole, he is most interested in some half wrecked tanks and trucks left by the Germans. Pete found one that looked in good shape so he decided to turn over the Motor, and as he did, the tank exploded. Pete got out OK. He is only mad that the fire burned off part of his moustache. No one else is injured, but the lesson remains.

Spent the rest of the day in re-supply, changing socks, bathing feet, drying what can be done. Also went over all the Platoon records with Pete. We are short ten men, and we have decided at the first "O" group to ask for replacements to come up to strength. Found out late in the day that we will stay put for the night, and that is welcome news.

March 30th

As expected, morning orders come down from Division. The score is that the 6th Airborne will attack, 3rd Brigade in lead, Canadians leading the brigade. The only welcome news is that the first part of the march will be on trucks. This is the first transportation we have seen. It brings a sigh



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Soldiers from 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion rest during a break in the fighting. In the foreground from left to right are Company Sergeant-Major J.M. Kemp, Lieutenant A.J. Esling, Captain S. McGowan and Lieutenant V.E. Fleming. Captain McGowan would be killed in action a couple days after this photo was taken.

of relief from all the men, regardless of what may lie at the end. We move up on the trucks about ten miles, then “off load” on to the rear decks of Churchill tanks of the 6th Guards Armoured Brigade. “A” Company is in the lead, the intent of the exercise is to advance at all speed, take out any resistance quickly, and try and take all the bridges over the “Dortmund-Ems” canal. We bogged down early in the town of Coesfeld. Some slight small arms opposition, snipers and road blocks. “A” Company have to off-load and take out these nuisances. In many cases, the guns of the tanks simply level anything that moves.

Have observed that most of the enemy we are running into now appear to be Volksturm or “home guard” types, either very old, or very young. But many of these are quite dangerous, and on “home soil” they put up quite a solid resistance. It appears that we have made a breakthrough some enemy are simply surrendering, and abandoning guns and equipment where they stand. We are moving at top speed for the tanks now. At one stage we pass a British recce car burning, the lead tanks have simply pushed it off the road, and as we slow to pass by, we can get the unmistakable smell of burning flesh. The heat of the fire and smell is almost overpowering. The recce car has obviously run into a German tank or bazooka, not a pleasant sight, and a memory that is hard to erase. Some men pass a remark that the Airborne may be tough, but they would not want to ride in one of those “coffins.”

Continue the advance at a rapid pace, with a few stops on and off the tanks, to assist in clearing a few road blocks. Suddenly while in motion, an explosion comes from the tank immediately ahead. Our troops piled off into the ditches, since the first reaction was that we were under fire from a bazooka or anti-tank weapon. However, crawling in the ditch ahead, I find that Captain McGowan has been badly injured, and the explosion has come from a grenade on his belt, which has torn him almost in half. We lowered him to the ground, and I held him in my arms, semi-conscious and he died in that position. We have now lost the best commanding officer we ever had.

We have to leave Sam at the roadside, marking the spot with a rifle and helmet. We are being pressed to move on quickly. This death, and the manner in which it happened has left all the men in the platoon and company feeling a great sadness, even though death of friends is an everyday occurrence. Sam McGowan, from Western Canada, was a professional soldier and one of those rare individuals who had natural leadership ability. It is simple to say, but in fact he was loved by all the men. I personally felt a great loss, since over the few years that I had known and worked with him, we had done several two-man patrols in Holland, in the Bulge, and in periods of waiting and in darkness, talking quietly, in some danger, that is when you get close to a man, and Sam was a great human being.

In late afternoon we enter the town of Greven, a fairly large community, the largest we have taken thus far. The tanks move out front to the canal, and word is that we have prevented the demolition. We stay in the town, immobilized for lack of fuel and ammunition. “A” Company is out front with the tanks, we can hear fighting going on, and we are hopeful that somehow the tanks will get across the Canal before last light.

At about 0100 hours while we are dug-in on the canal, the Germans in retreat blow up a large ammunition dump. It looks like the

Victoria Day fireworks, but the explosive force is severe enough to blow out all the windows of the buildings in the area. Never heard anything like it before, or expect to again. Word is that the battalion and division is in a heavy fight for the bridgehead, this is the toughest point we have run up against. It seems the enemy has decided to make a strong far side stand at the canal, and they are using artillery, mortar and every kind of fire they can muster to keep us from attempting a crossing. Late at night, we hear that a crossing is to be made in the early hours by the British 8th Battalion, downstream, in an effort to outflank the guns. At the same time we are to make a frontal attack, not a happy situation to look forward to, but that is the order. Shelling and mortar fire all night, all men at full alert. Heavy casualties are being sustained by the men of "A" and "C" Company on the river bank.

March 31st

All roused up early at 0500 hours. One good measure to start the day is that Quartermaster Laing has caught up with us again, he has brought packs that were dropped, and he also has some "hot chow." It is hard to describe how much this means to the men, who have been living on COMPO rations and scrounged food for days. At first light, we suddenly become aware of the fact that we are located in a rather large town, many German civilians running about, somewhat frightened, the parachute smocks and red berets seem to have that kind of effect.

The men have found in their wanderings, a German supply depot and warehouse, filled with Nazi flags, arm-bands, guns and food. Crates of eggs suddenly are secreted in various places, but almost as soon as the good stuff appears, we have to place a guard on the place, and the first organized job is to release civilian prisoners who have been badly treated. Our medics try and treat some of them with what limited supplies we have, and at the same time, we turn over clothing and food. The prisoners are in tears to see us and find we are allies. We have to do what we can very quickly since we have orders to move out and take an attack position on the Canal.

Marching single file, the distance to the nearest canal side is about 5 miles. "A" Company is leading, and then when we get within sight distance, everything breaks loose, mortars,

artillery and machine gun fire from the other side. "A" Company is hit very badly. We are running forward now, mostly in the ditches. We keep passing medics working over the wounded and dead, lying on the roadway, and in the ditches. We can't stop, just keep running. Keep wishing we had the tanks with us for some support and the larger guns. The constant shelling of the road is bad enough, but for the first time, we are getting German air-burst fire. This is the worst since you can't take cover, it sprays everywhere, many of the company and the platoon are hit and fall.

Finally, in one mad dash we run full out the last 1,000 yards for the canal, and then just in front of us we see the bridge go up in an explosion and smoke. Now we are caught on the bank, and the first thing we do is start to dig-in and try and return some of the fire with our light weapons. We are going to be here at least tonight, we cannot assault without artillery and boats.

This is the worst night we have spent. The Germans have obviously concentrated everything they own on the far side, so we are getting heavy and direct fire into our positions all night. The fire is so fierce that we are concerned for a counter-attack. It seems certain that if the enemy came across in force, we could be over-run. Can't figure out where the division is, and the artillery and tanks we need.

At about 0200 hours sent out a patrol in two sections, to examine the banks, and also to try and plot the German gun positions, will need this for any attack tomorrow. Also we have had a chance to radio for artillery support. Sergeant Page took out one patrol, returned an hour later to say that he had come across some "A" Company men, who had been in hand-to-hand fighting with the enemy left on the near side, it seems clear now. Have no idea what happened to the master idea, especially for the other battalions to cross down-river and outflank the guns. Wish they would move and take some of the pressure off us. Not looking forward to day break. It is obvious that the brigadier will want to get across, by any means, and that means us.

April 1st

At daybreak, it is April Fool's Day. What a laugh, and what a mess to look at. The German shelling has let up, but we are gathering reports and it

looks like we have suffered the worst casualties. Our 4 Platoon has 4 dead and 7 wounded, but "A" Company is almost at half strength. Sergeant Pym, an old friend, is killed. Nothing to do but consolidate and wait and see what comes down from Headquarters.

At least had a good feed. Some of the men by some strange means, managed to save some of the eggs they looted. These are cooked or half cooked in tin helmets over open fires. At 100 hrs. orders come down that we are to move off, parallel to the canal, to a point where the British have thrown up a floating bridge. We are to run across and establish a bridgehead on the far side. The objective is to take the town of Ladbergen.

This is a real foot race, shelling is now concentrated on the bridge. Also close enough for sniper and small arms fire. "C" Company is leading, men on foot are cut down, nothing to do but run and step over bodies and get to the shore. By some kind of luck, most of us reach terra-firma, and now the whole battalion is involved in a "fire-fight" for the town. Finally, with some platoons in hand-to-hand fighting with the enemy, we have secured the town, and we are dispersed by platoon and company to establish a perimeter defence. Again dig in and stay the night.

This is another big town, lots of good houses. Then we hear the recon cars and other troops coming through our area. They are going to push forward. Everyone is hoping that we can have a day here to rest and recover. Finally the word is passed that we can secure in some of the houses, with 50 percent standing down. That is great news, some men can get some sleep, dry out, and patch wounds.

April 2nd

Stand-to is called early, and in the first light of dawn we can now see the town, and to some surprise it appears to be quite a size. The men, after cooking some eggs, and whatever else each person has been able to scrounge, tried to clean up a little, then went on an inspection tour of houses and shops. As might be expected, looting started in earnest, and this is one of the first opportunities. The trouble with "looting" apart from orders prohibiting it, is simply that everyone is restricted in what one takes, since there is no way to carry it, except on your back. Therefore

the larger items fortunately are overlooked for more useful items such as socks, clean clothing and underwear. It is seldom that the Company has had such an opportunity and the men are making the most of it.

From a purely practical standpoint, the stuff the men have on, is getting "smelly," dirty and worn out. So there is some concentration on items that would be concealed under the uniform, many men are changing to silk undies, sport shirts and anything else that is clean and will not show under the "Jump Smock" and these "smocks" are the dirtiest item at this point.

About noon word is passed that we are locked in for the day, great "joy" among the troops. At 1400 hours reinforcements arrive by truck and we have picked up a new company commander, Major Kenneth Waters. It looks like we will be bargaining for the new replacements but we will get all we need, not a bad looking lot, a little scared and frightened. They all look so clean. Split the new men up in the sections, it won't take long till they feel welcomed once they get a little dirt on them.

No chance to meet the new commander. The best story is that Major Waters comes to us from the First Special Service Force. This was a combined US-Canadian group, badly cut up and broken up following a battle at Anzio in Italy. Some comfort to know that the new CO is "battle hardened," and hopefully a practical man.

We stay the night in the town, barricaded in, although it is clear that Armour and Infantry are out front. It looks like the Germans have broken and run, but there is still some evidence that snipers have been left behind. Looking for a rest, the rule will be 50 percent at posts through the night, not bad at all.

R.F. "Andy" Anderson returned home with the battalion after the war and joined the Toronto Police in December 1945. He remained with the force for 10 years before leaving to go to university. He was appointed the first traffic engineer for the city of Scarborough and later spent 20 years working in the Mayor's office in the City of Toronto.