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# I British Corps and the Battle of the Scheldt

## A Reassessment

NICHOLAS WHEELER

*Abstract: This paper will demonstrate that I British Corps' operations were critical to the opening of the port of Antwerp. By examining the impact that I British Corps had on the operational and strategic levels of command within Twenty-First Army Group, it challenges the narrative that their operations were supporting in nature. Anchoring the centre of a three corps operation designed to open the port of Antwerp, clear the Scheldt Estuary, and push German forces out of southern Holland, I British Corps faced the bulk of Fifteenth Army and was decisive in undermining its strategic concept of operations. In fact, I British Corps' actions ensured the operational success of 2nd Canadian Division and the strategic success of First Canadian Army and Twenty-First Army Group.*

THE BATTLE OF THE SCHELDT is well known within Canadian military history. II Canadian Corps, under the temporary command of Major-General Charles Foulkes, fought a bloody battle in the Breskens Pocket, South Beveland, and Walcheren Island between September and November 1944. Firsthand accounts of the battle, war diaries, and official reports describe horrific conditions, a determined German enemy, and appalling numbers of casualties. In this respect, II Canadian Corps' story dominates the historiography of the Scheldt and Antwerp. There is, however, another aspect of this story that has long been neglected. Lieutenant-General Sir John Crocker's I British Corps played an important role in the Battle of the Scheldt.

I British Corps, a multi-national formation composed of divisions from Canada, Britain, the United States, and Poland, anchored the

right wing of First Canadian Army. From this position, Crocker was tasked with opening Antwerp and protecting the left flank of Second British Army as it continued its push towards Germany. The Corps' operations were profoundly influenced by the ongoing strategic debate between the Supreme Allied Commander, General Dwight Eisenhower, who favoured a broad-front advance into Germany, and the Commander of Twenty-First Army Group, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, who advocated a narrow thrust. The resulting ambiguity in directives to Crocker put him in a unique position to have a considerable influence on the operational and strategic outcome of the Battle of the Scheldt. A re-examination of the primary and secondary sources indicates that I British Corps played a much larger role in the opening of Antwerp and the defeat of Fifteenth Army than previously recognized.

This paper will demonstrate that I British Corps' operations were critical to the success of Allied operations to open the port of Antwerp. A reassessment of I British Corps' operations challenges the marginalized nature of its role in the battle. In exploring the relationship between I and XII British Corps, this paper will dissect Montgomery's 16 October directive and examine how his strategic direction should have translated into operational action in contrast to how operations unfolded. By assessing this strategic and operational disconnect, and the influence Montgomery had on XII British Corps' operations, it will demonstrate that I British Corps assumed a much larger operational and strategic role in the battle than previously recognized.

This paper also assesses the impact of I British Corps' operations in relation to 2nd Canadian Division's efforts to isolate the South Beveland isthmus. Initially, this analysis will focus on the strategic direction issued by Montgomery prior to 16 October, arguing that the continued disconnect between Montgomery's strategic direction and intent prevented 2nd Canadian Division from accomplishing the operational task of securing the South Beveland isthmus. As a result, First Canadian Army was unable to clear the Scheldt Estuary. It will then examine the relationship between 2nd Canadian Division and I British Corps post-16 October. Crocker's efforts to secure the northern and eastern flanks of 2nd Canadian Division subsequently resulted in the isolation of the South Beveland isthmus and the operational and strategic successes of First Canadian Army and Twenty-First Army Group.



Lieutenant General J. T. Crocker, commander of I British Corps. [© IWM (TR 2169)]

While the Battle of the Scheldt has a lengthy historiography, I British Corps' operations during the Scheldt campaign are neglected within the literature. One would assume that the analysis of a strategically critical battle such as the opening of the port of Antwerp would be comprehensive. However, several factors have led to I British Corps' role in this operation being marginalized or misunderstood. This in turn has led to an inaccurate assessment of the importance of the Corps during this period. In fact, the narrative surrounding I British Corps operations has evolved from early assessments of their extreme importance, to a later characterization as only supporting in nature.

Why has I British Corps role in the opening of Antwerp been downgraded and, more generally, neglected? The earliest accounts of the Battle of the Scheldt consist of Twenty-First Army Group's report completed shortly after the end of the war in Europe and two Canadian Military Headquarters (CMHQ) reports compiled in 1946 and 1948. These three reports provide little with respect to I British Corps' operations, and primarily focus on the overarching

strategic situation and II Canadian Corps' operations.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the CMHQ report, the author, W.E.C. Harrison, was likely trying to provide a general overview of the Scheldt operation to be included within C.P. Stacey's, official historian of the Canadian Army, forthcoming official history instead of a comprehensive account of the battle. While Harrison does describe I British Corps' operations as "extremely important," the text is mostly descriptive in nature, with the role of I British Corps being peripheral to the main focus of the work—II Canadian Corps.

The focus on the Canadian narrative continued in Stacey's the *Victory Campaign* in 1960. The production of the three-volume *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War* was constrained by a desire to publish them shortly after the end of the conflict and in a format that appealed to the general reader.<sup>2</sup> As a result, Stacey only briefly recounts the story of I British Corps. Operations from 16 to 29 October are related in a single paragraph while those between 30 October and 8 November are restricted to half a page.<sup>3</sup> A likely explanation for I British Corps' operations being largely overlooked is that they simply did not meet the requirements outlined by Stacey for their incorporation into the official history.<sup>4</sup> It is not surprising then, that a multi-national British Corps, in the "Cinderella Army" of Twenty-First Army Group, did not receive more attention within a Canadian official history. Considering Stacey's intent, a microscopic focus on a British Corps fighting with the First Canadian Army would have seemed out of place.

<sup>1</sup> 21st Army Group, Clearing of the Scheldt Estuary: Oct-Nov 1944, 1944, Combined Arms Research Library Digital Library, 3. <http://cgsc.cdmhost.com/cdm/singleitem/collection/p4013coll8/id/2615/rec/2> accessed 18 July 2017.; W.E.C. Harrison, CMHQ Report #154: Clearing the Scheldt Estuary and Opening the Port of Antwerp: Operations of First Canadian Army in NorthWest Europe, 1 Oct. - 8 Nov. 44 (Preliminary Report), May 5, 1946, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), 5-7; W.E.C. Harrison, CMHQ Report #188: Canadian Participation in the Operations in North-West Europe, 1944. Part VI: Canadian Operation, 1 Oct. - 8 Nov. The Clearing of the Scheldt Estuary, April 7, 1948, DHH, 88.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Sarty, "The Origins of Academic Military History in Canada, 1940-1967," *Canadian Military History* 23, 2 (2015): 8,10.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Perry Stacey, *The Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, Vol. III: The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe 1944-1945* (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer and Controller of Stationary, 1960), 390, 424.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

Stacey's limited account of I British Corps has had unintended consequences on the scholarly examination of First Canadian Army operations during October and November 1944. British, American, and German official histories pay little attention to I British Corps in favour of more strategically important operations. Consequently, I British Corps is perceived as something distant and peripheral to the Scheldt campaign. Since Stacey's official histories were considered the definitive account of the Canadian Army during the Second World War until as late as the 1980s, the academic analysis of I British Corps during this period is very limited.<sup>5</sup> Copp's analysis of I British Corps in relation to Twenty-First Army Group can be considered the only academic work that has been written on this subject to date.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, the absence of academic analysis has allowed memoirs and popular histories to define I British Corps' role in the battle.

Depending on the source, either a British or Canadian narrative is ever present throughout memoirs and popular histories. From a Canadian perspective, excellent examples are the works of Denis Whitaker and Mark Zuehlke. II Canadian Corps is at the forefront of their narratives of the Battle of the Scheldt while I British Corps and its units are relegated to a secondary role. The works of R.W. Thompson and J.L. Moulton insert a British narrative into the battle, but not to the benefit of I British Corps. Their accounts focus on the participation of other British units, examining operations within the Scheldt proper, with only a cursory analysis of I British Corps' operations.

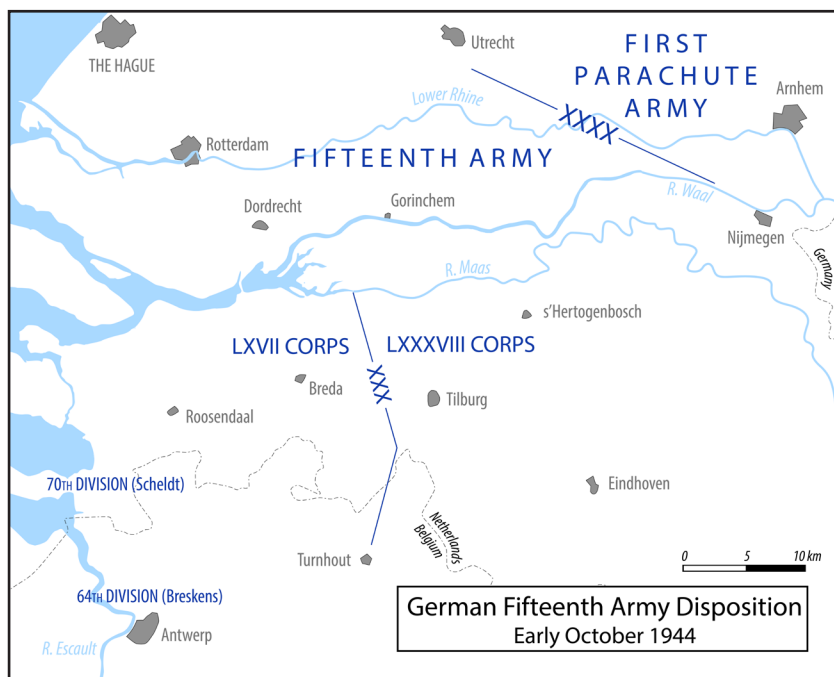
The consistent reduction of I British Corps within the literature has generated the belief that Crocker's forces played nothing more than a supporting role. Douglas Delaney has argued, "Large and successful though the operation may have been, it was still only a supporting action to protect the right flank of the First Canadian Army as it struggled to clear the Scheldt Estuary."<sup>7</sup> Harrison would have likely been surprised at this evaluation of I British Corps' role in operations north of Antwerp.

The reality is that I British Corps played a significant part in the strategic and operational success of Twenty-First Army Group.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Cook, *Clio's Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars* (Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2016), 162.

<sup>6</sup> Terry Copp, *Cinderella Army: The Canadians in Northwest Europe 1944-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 122-173.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Delaney, *Corps Commanders: Five British and Canadian Generals at War, 1939-1945* (Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2011), 167.



Anchored in the centre of Montgomery's three-corps operation, I British Corps faced the bulk of the German Fifteenth Army commanded by Gustav von Zangen. From this central position, Crocker was in a unique position to determine the operational success of II Canadian Corps and the strategic success of Twenty-First Army Group. As I British Corps began operations to clear German forces south of the River Maas, the lack of a clear operational plan by Montgomery forced I British Corps to take the leading role in the defeat of Fifteenth Army. The existential threat posed by Crocker's formation forced Fifteenth Army to reinforce LXVII Corps at the expense of LXXXVIII Corps, facilitating XII British Corps operations. Further, I British Corps fixed the majority of Fifteenth Army within its area of operations, which in turn lessened the burden on II Canadian Corps and XII British Corps. In this respect, 2nd Canadian Division relied heavily on I British Corps in its efforts to isolate the South Beveland isthmus. Without the advance of 4th Canadian Armoured Division and 49th West Riding (WR) Division on their eastern flank, the clearance of the Scheldt Estuary would have inevitably been delayed, causing a host of operational and strategic issues. Regardless of the

position I British Corps occupies from a historiographical perspective, Crocker's forces played a decisive role in the operational and strategic success of Twenty-First Army Group in October and November 1944.

Crocker arrived north of Antwerp on 23 September and quickly found himself torn by operational and strategic priorities. The intent was for II Canadian Corps to focus on operations in the Scheldt Estuary while I British Corps cleared German forces between II Canadian Corps and XII British Corps. The reality was much different. Between 27 September to 16 October, Crocker focused primarily on securing Second British Army's left flank, using 49th (WR) Division and 1st Polish Armoured Division, as the commander of Second British Army, Lieutenant General Miles Dempsey attempted to break into the Ruhr. Given the enormity of this task, Crocker lacked sufficient forces to support 2nd Canadian Division's attack towards the South Beveland Isthmus. So, while Crocker was explicitly directed to support II Canadian Corps, Montgomery's overarching strategic imperative prevented him from accomplishing this task.<sup>8</sup> In the end, I British Corps' advance quickly ground to a halt as Crocker had insufficient combat power to overcome the German defensive positions or maintain a solid frontline.<sup>9</sup>

With the culmination of the strategic debate between Eisenhower and Montgomery, the directive issued on 16 October to Twenty-First Army Group should have eliminated any strategic dissonance that

<sup>8</sup> I British Corps, Operation Instruction No. 16, 9 October 1944, Department of National Defence (DND) Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 10 790, Library and Archives Canada (LAC); Letter to Lieutenant General Crocker from Field Marshall Montgomery, 28 September 1944, John Crocker Personal Papers. John Crocker Personal Papers, Letter to George Crocker from Lieutenant General Crocker, 9 December 1944, page 1. In the letter to Crocker, Montgomery emphasized that the "right wing of the (First Canadian) Army must 'drive' hard northwards on the axis Tilburg-Hertogenbosch." He further indicated, "Breda, and places that way (presumably Roosendaal), do not matter." Developing operations northwards towards the Maas, excluding the advance on Tilburg-Hertogenbosch were obviously inconsequential to Montgomery, including any kind of flank support to 2nd Canadian Division. Additionally, in his letter to his brother, Crocker recounted that after receiving the letter, "...I was sent for by Montgomery, who told me what he wanted." Montgomery clearly articulated to Crocker that advance of Second British Army were the main effort of Twenty-First Army Group.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Lieutenant General Crocker to George Crocker, 9 December 1944, John Crocker Personal Papers. In Crocker's assessment of the situation to his brother, as 49th (WR) Division established bridgeheads over the Antwerp-Turnhout canal, the remainder of I British Corps "... followed up at once, ridiculously thin on the ground and still without most of my artillery, tanks, etc..."

existed. On the surface, Montgomery's orders to First Canadian Army and Second British Army appeared to reorient Twenty-First Army Group's priorities towards Antwerp. While First Canadian Army accelerated operations in the Scheldt with II Canadian Corps, Montgomery tasked I and XII British Corps to isolate and destroy Fifteenth Army south of the Maas. Montgomery's directive suggests this took the form of a three-phase operation. In phase one, I British Corps, on the right flank of First Canadian Army, would advance towards Roosendaal/Bergen Op Zoom on 20 October in support of 2nd Canadian Division's efforts to isolate the South Beveland isthmus. Composed of two mutually supporting operations, Operation Suitcase would be executed by the recently attached 4th Canadian Armoured Division, while Clarke Force executed Operation Rebound.<sup>10</sup> Previously, the inter-army boundary of 8 October and the extant task of protecting Dempsey's left flank had prevented any intimate support from I British Corps. However, Montgomery's directive shifted this boundary west, allowing the II Canadian Corps and I British Corps boundary to shift accordingly.<sup>11</sup> By reducing I British Corps' area of responsibility and attaching 4th Canadian Armoured Division, it permitted Crocker to focus his combat power on a decisive thrust north along 2nd Canadian Division's eastern flank.

Concurrently, Montgomery directed Second British Army to shut down all offensive operations not designed to open the port. Operation Pheasant consisted of a reinforced XII Corps attacking west towards 's-Hertogenbosch and Breda on an axis of advance centered on Poppel/Breda/Moerdijk. Theoretically, the forty-eight hour delay between the two operations suggests that I British Corps would fix German forces south of the Maas, while XII British Corps conducted a wide-sweeping flank attack to trap and isolate the majority of Fifteenth Army in southern Holland.<sup>12</sup> Phase three, the destruction of Fifteenth Army, would then be executed concurrently by both I and XII British Corps. Strategically, the end state envisioned Antwerp

<sup>10</sup> 49th (WR) Division Operation Instruction 55 (Operation REBOUND), 17 October 1944, First Canadian Army, General Staff, October 1944, DND Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 13628, LAC; 4th Canadian Armoured Division Operation Instruction 11 (Op SUITCASE), 17 October 1944, 4th Canadian Armoured Division, General Staff War Diary, September-October 1944, DND Fonds, RG24, C3, volume 13788, LAC

<sup>11</sup> I British Corps, Operation Instruction No. 17, 17 October 1944, DND Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 10 790, LAC.

<sup>12</sup> Harrison, CMHQ Report #188, DHH, 90.

open, Fifteenth Army destroyed south of the Maas, the redeployment of the majority of Twenty-First Army Group's combat power east, and the effective resupply of Allied forces outlined in Eisenhower's broad front strategy.

Of course this plan was conceptual in nature and does not accurately portray the reality or complexity of the situation. In order to truly understand the strategic importance of I British Corps' operations to Twenty-First Army Group, it is necessary to examine the role Crocker's forces and XII British Corps played in the offensive. A close examination of Montgomery's 16 October directive and the orders issued by both I and XII British Corps suggests an uncoordinated and underdeveloped concept of operations.

Crocker issued Operation Instruction Number 17 the formation on 17 October 1944. The tasks outlined in the order marked a key shift in previous assigned tasks in Operation Instruction Number 16. While I British Corps retained responsibility for protecting the right flank of 2nd Canadian Division, the previously assigned task of clearing the Germans south of the Maas is absent.<sup>13</sup> Considering the direction that Montgomery provided on 16 October, this is a curious omission and suggests that Montgomery had not fully developed a comprehensive plan to this point. Realistically, with 1st Polish Armoured Division and supporting forces fixed in Alphen since 5 October, and 4th Canadian Armoured Division and Clarke Force directed to clear 2nd Canadian Division's eastern and northern flanks, Crocker did not have additional forces to attack north and fix LXVII Corps as outlined in Montgomery's directive.

It was not until 23 October, when 104th (US) Infantry Division came into the I British Corps' line, that Crocker executed a four-division attack against German forces south of the Maas. The Division, commanded by Major-General Terry Allen, arrived twenty-four hours after I British Corps should have fixed LXVII Corps and XII British Corps began operations to cut the lines of communication over the Maas. This indicates a significant lack of synchronization

<sup>13</sup> I British Corps, Operation Instruction No. 16 and 17, LAC. Operation Instruction No. 16 identifies that I British Corps was tasked "To protect directly the right flank 2 Cdn Inf Div whilst it is undertaking offensive ops westwards from the area WOENSDRECH [sic] 6020 against SUID BEVELAND" and "To clear enemy at present SOUTH of R Maas." Within Operation Instruction No. 17, I British Corps is only tasked "To prevent the enemy interfering with 2 Cdn Inf Div during its ops to capture SUID BEVELAND."

between phase one and two of Montgomery's concept of operations. In execution, as 4th Canadian Armoured Division and Clarke Force advanced northwest, a single brigade from the 49th (WR) Division occupied the centre of the Corps' front. Without a coordinated advance north in cooperation with XII Corps' attack east, a gap would open between First Canadian Army and Second British Army, which in theory could have been exploited by LXVII Corps.

Evidence indicates that Crocker and his division commanders were unaware of Montgomery's plan for a joint operation between I and XII British Corps. It was not until 21 October, six days after Montgomery's directive, that Crocker discussed the concept of a coordinated action to trap Fifteenth Army in southern Holland with 4th Canadian Armoured Division.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, 104th (US) Infantry Division did not receive clear direction until 23 October when Montgomery personally briefed the division's senior officers.<sup>15</sup> While Allen's division did not come onto the line until this date, he had met previously with the First Canadian Army Headquarters staff on 18 October and with Simonds and the Chief of Staff on 20 October to discuss 104th (US) Infantry Division's upcoming role in operations.<sup>16</sup> Had a comprehensive strategy existed at this point, there would have been no requirement for Montgomery to brief Allen's division. This suggests that Crocker and his division commanders began operations prior to the development of a coordinated I and XII British Corps plan.

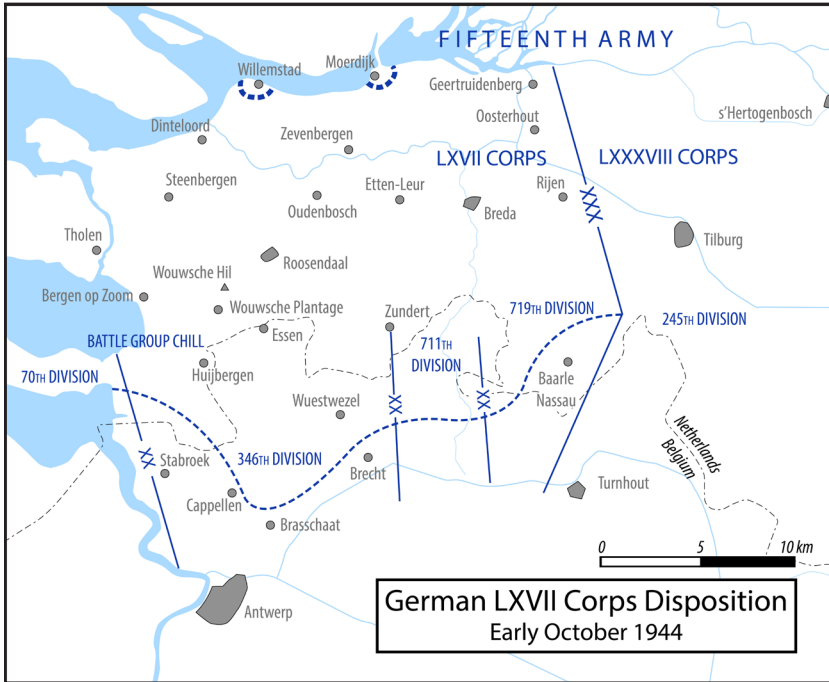
Montgomery's plan also lack clarity with regards to the role of XII British Corps during phase two of the operation. In Second British Army tasks, he directed Dempsey to attack towards Moerdijk with a view to "cutting the communication routes over the Meuse [Maas] of all enemy troops south of the river."<sup>17</sup> This implies that Montgomery wanted to isolate the majority of Fifteenth Army within southern Holland so that XII British Corps could act as the anvil

<sup>14</sup> 4th Canadian Armoured Division, General Staff War Diary, September-October 1944, War Diary, 21 October 1944, DND Fonds, RG24, C3, volume 1788, LAC. First Canadian Army, G Plans War Diary, July-October 1944, War Diary, 20 October 1944, DND Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 13607, LAC.

<sup>15</sup> Gerald Astor, *Terrible Terry Allen* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 255.

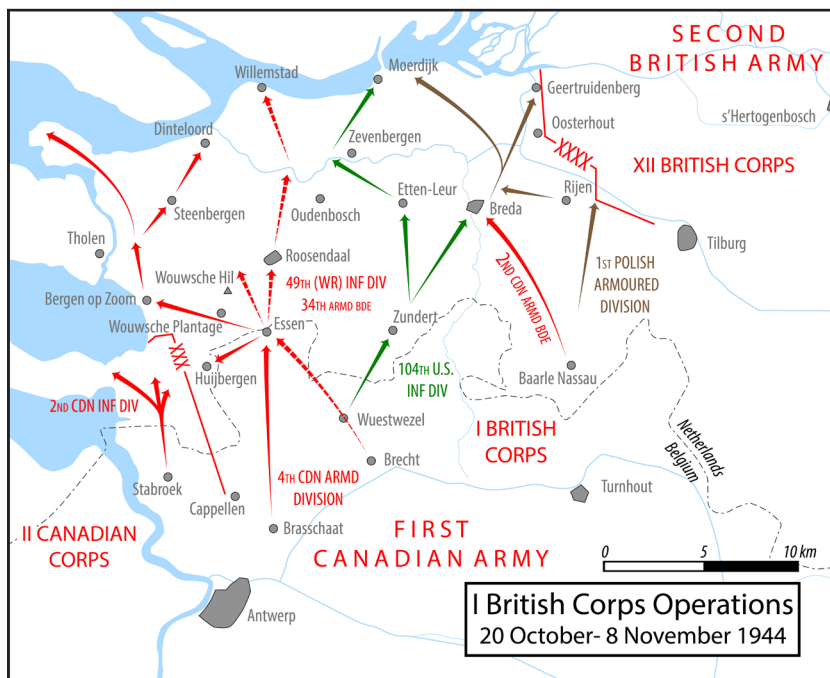
<sup>16</sup> First Canadian Army, G Plans War Diary, War Diary, 18 and 20 October 1944, LAC.

<sup>17</sup> Field Marshal Montgomery's Directive, 16 October 1944, cited in Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 655.



to I British Corps' hammer. However, XII British Corps' direction to its formations lacks any mention of this concept. XII British Corps' Operation Instruction number 17 sets a limit of exploitation at Geertruidenberg, identifying the attack to Moerdijk as only a possible future task.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, this concept of operation would not achieve the desired effect outlined by Montgomery in his 16 October directive. However, given his predilection to provide direction to corps commanders, it is likely that XII British Corps issued these orders with Montgomery's blessing. XII British Corps also issued the order on 20 October, which explains why I British Corps had not planned for a coordinated operation. In conjunction with the obvious issues with the direction issued to I British Corps, it suggests that Montgomery did not have a concrete idea of what he wanted to do south of the Maas, besides opening Antwerp as quickly as possible to reorient his forces east. Without the successful execution of the first

<sup>18</sup> XII British Corps Operation Instruction number 17 (Operation PHEASANT), 20 October 1944, First Canadian Army, General Staff, October 1944, DND Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 13628, LAC.



two phases, Fifteenth Army retained sufficient withdrawal routes and crossing sites, rendering Montgomery's overall objective of destroying von Zangen's forces impossible.

As I British Corps began Operations Suitcase and Rebound, it faced LXVII Corps, composed of 85th Division, which had been redeployed from LXXXVIII Corps to counter the threat of the 2nd Canadian Division at the South Beveland isthmus, the 346th Division, the 711th Division, and the 719th Division. First to cross the line of departure, 4th Canadian Armoured Division advanced along 2nd Canadian Division's flank towards Esschen and Bergen Op Zoom, while Clarke Force provided flank security by attacking Wuestwezel. Such was the threat posed to the integrity of LXVII Corps' defensive line by the advance of 4th Canadian Armoured Division and Clarke Force's defeat of 711th Division at Wuestwezel, that it precipitated the redeployment of 245th Division to LXVII Corps.<sup>19</sup> Initially, von Zangen intended to reinforce 85th Division in the Woensdrecht

<sup>19</sup> Elmar Warning, *Battles of 67 German Corps between Scheldt and Maas*, 15 September-25 November 1944, DND Fonds, RG24, C17, 20 523, LAC, 33-34.

area against 2nd Canadian Division and to stop the advance of 4th Canadian Armoured Division, which followed the overall concept of operations for Fifteenth Army. Von Zangen understood that he lacked sufficient forces after the retreat from France to maintain a continuous defensive line from the South Beveland isthmus to 's-Hertogenbosch. To compensate for this, he redeployed divisions, battle groups, and other combat enablers to points threatened by Allied operations and then redeployed them to other hot spots as required.<sup>20</sup> However, Otto Sponheimer, Commander LXVII Corps, believed that Clarke Force's success at Wuestwezel threatened to split the corps in half and potentially collapse Fifteenth Army's front.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of 85th Division's desperate need for reinforcements, the actions of I British Corps altered the priorities of Fifteenth Army.

The immediate requirement for 245th Division's transfer east had a two-fold effect. First, it limited Fifteenth Army's ability to hold the South Beveland isthmus. As 4th Canadian Armoured Division advanced northwards along 2nd Canadian Division's extended flank, it represented an existential threat to von Zangen's influence over South Beveland isthmus, while at the same time Clarke Force threatened the integrity of Fifteenth Army's front. Essentially, Crocker left von Zangen two choices: maintain pressure on 2nd Canadian Division and risk the destruction of Fifteenth Army, or surrender the isthmus to First Canadian Army and temporarily stave off defeat. Both courses of action had obvious strategic consequences. Second, the defeat of the 245th Division by Clarke Force and its subsequent withdrawal northeast to Zundert, magnified the threat to Fifteenth Army. In the face of the mounting casualties taken by 85th and 346th Division, the inability to provide reinforcements in the Woensdrecht area, and the continued advance of 4th Canadian Armoured Division, von Zangen felt he had no choice but to conduct a withdrawal along the entire Fifteenth Army front. On 23 October, Sponheimer indicated, "Now a withdrawal of the whole front had to be carried out, come what might, regardless of OKW (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht) orders, if the whole corps was not to be sacrificed and the way to the Maas left open to the enemy. As a result of the Corps' strong insistence, permission was given for the whole front to be withdrawn to the general line of Halsteren (north of Bergen Op Zoom)/South

<sup>20</sup> Steiger, AHQ Report #69, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Warning, Battles of 67 German Corps, 33-34.

Roosendaal/South Breda/Alphen North.”<sup>22</sup> With this withdrawal, I British Corps forced Fifteenth Army to abandon their attempts to retain some measure of influence on the South Beveland isthmus.

Crocker’s execution of phase one achieved an important victory when it forced Fifteenth Army to abandon control of the isthmus. However, the decision by von Zangen to withdraw LXVII Corps to a new defensive line between 23 to 24 October also had a considerable impact on the evolution of Montgomery’s concept of operations. While I British Corps was supposed to fix LXVII Corps, their initial success forced the Germans to withdraw almost 20 km north in some areas; effectively shortening their main defensive line and reducing their area of operation by half. This seems to have left Montgomery with two choices: maintain phase two as outlined in his 16 October directive with LXVII Corps much closer to the Maas than anticipated, or adjust the concept of operations for XII British Corps. Montgomery chose the latter and decided to reduce XII British Corps’ limit of exploitation to just west of Raamsdonkveer, 17 km from its original objective of Moerdijk. Although this decision may seem like a legitimate tactical decision, evidence suggests that Montgomery’s commitment to a determined thrust by XII British Corps to isolate Fifteenth Army was marginal at best.

XII British Corps’ operations seem to confirm Montgomery’s lack of commitment to the destruction of Fifteenth Army. XII British Corps consisted of, running northeast to southwest, 53rd (W) Division, 7th British Armoured Division, 51st (H) Division, and 15th (S) Division. Supporting this attack were 33rd Tank Brigade, 6th Guards Tank Brigade, and 4th Armoured Brigade. Considering they faced three understrength divisions, XII British Corps held a considerable advantage against LXXXVIII Corps. The initial stages of Operation Pheasant indicate a staggered assault. 53rd (W) Division and 7th British Armoured Division began their advance towards ‘s-Hertogenbosch in the early morning of 22 October. Two days later, 51st (H) Division attacked northwest with a general axis of advance west of ‘s-Hertogenbosch while 15th (S) Division struck out towards Tilburg. By this time, I British Corps had already precipitated LXVII Corps withdrawal to their new defensive line.

As XII British Corps continued its advance, 51st (H) Division attacked northwest towards ‘s-Hertogenbosch on 25 October, while

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 34.

7th Armoured Division consolidated behind their lines and then advanced west towards Loon Op Zoom, capturing Udenhout on 27 October. On the same day, 15th (S) Division and 6th Guards Tank Brigade cleared Tilburg and were subsequently withdrawn from the line the following day to counter a German offensive in the Venlo area. By this time, German resistance stiffened along the entire XII British Corps front.

Allied intelligence and reconnaissance reports indicated that LXXXVIII Corps intended to retreat to bridgeheads over the Maas. In conjunction with this withdrawal, they established a defensive line from Dongen to the Afwaterings Canal on 24 October, which tied into LXVII Corps position. Beyond this line, LXXXVIII Corps controlled crossing sites at Raamsdonkveer, Huesden, and Hedel where German forces either crossed by bridge or makeshift ferries. In an effort to reduce these bridgeheads, 53rd (W) Division advanced north from 's-Hertogenbosch while 51st (H) and 7th British Armoured Division, through combined efforts, attacked the bridgeheads at Raamsdonkveer and Huesden. While successful, LXXXVIII Corps managed to hold these bridgeheads until 5 November, effectively preventing any further advance westwards by XII British Corps.

To this effect, Terry Copp's argument that Montgomery demonstrated marginal commitment to XII British Corps' advance west in support of First Canadian Army's operations merits investigation.<sup>23</sup> An examination of the message logs between I British Corps and XII British Corps develops a common theme—a painfully slow advance west by XII British Corps towards Moerdijk. Situation reports indicate that until 28 October, LXXXVIII Corps put up minimal resistance, with a few exceptions in Middelrode against 7th British Armoured Division and house-to-house fighting in 's-Hertogenbosch against 53rd (W) Division. The Germans primarily relied on delaying operations, including obstacles, mines, and bridge demolition to slow the British advance. Operations such as this represented the only viable course of action for LXXXVIII Corps at the time. Had they tried to effect a standard defensive line in their weakened state, they likely would have been overrun.

When XII British Corps attacked on 22 October, LXXXVIII Corps only had 59th Division and a much reduced 712th Division to hold the front. Its remaining division, the 245th had redeployed east

<sup>23</sup> Copp, *Cinderella Army*, 157.

to counter the advance of I British Corps. To reinforce the German corps, 256th Volksgrenadier Division began arriving piecemeal from Germany beginning the night of 19 to 20 October and only established a defensive line from Dongden/Loon Op Zand/Vught on 25 October. This explains why XII British Corps reported a stiffening of German resistance between 28 to 30 October, as lead elements of 51st (H) Division and 7th British Armoured Division came into contact with 256th Volksgrenadier Division at this time.<sup>24</sup> That being said, by 24 October, 712th Division had effectively been destroyed by the 53rd (W) Division in 's-Hertogenbosch, forcing 59th Division to absorb their responsibilities on the front.<sup>25</sup> A decisive strike through 59th Division may have allowed XII British Corps to overrun 256th Volksgrenadier Division as it attempted to establish its defensive line.

Why did XII British Corps have such a difficult time against a vastly inferior force? The important element to be gleaned from the situation reports and message logs is that XII British Corps seemed content to methodically push the Germans out of southern Holland rather than trap Fifteenth Army south of the Maas. Montgomery opted for his standard set-piece attack to reduce and attrite LXXXVIII Corps, contrary to what he outlined as his phase two objective—cutting the lines of communication over the Maas at Moerdijk. Despite pushing elements of von Zangen's forces north of the Maas, it failed to achieve his purported strategic end state—the destruction of Fifteenth Army.

Post-war reporting from LXXXVIII Corps reflects this fact. According to General H.W. Reinhard, commander of LXXXVIII Corps, XII British Corps could have rolled up the entire Corps front at St. Michels-Gestel and Esch had they maintained continuous pressure on 59th Division during the initial stages of Operation Pheasant.<sup>26</sup> Considering XII British Corps attacked this section of LXXXVIII Corps' defensive line with two infantry divisions, an armoured division, and two independent tank brigades, the destruction of this overstretched and weakened division should have been easily achievable. Although Reinhard does concede that XII British Corps

<sup>24</sup> I British Corps, War Diary and Message Logs, October-November 1944, Message Logs, 280415October1944 and 300340October1944, DHH, Kardex, 79.681, Reel 4.

<sup>25</sup> Steiger, AHQ Report #69, 54.

<sup>26</sup> H.W. Reinhard, 88 German Corps Commitment from Albert Canal to the Lower Maas - 5 September-21 December 1944, DND Fonds, RG24, C17, 20 523, LAC, 18.

pressed the Germans as they moved north, he also argues that the pressure was not so determined to prevent an orderly withdrawal by LXXXVIII Corps' formations.<sup>27</sup> As the corps and division headquarters, along with the vast majority of the Corps' artillery and enablers, withdrew across the Maas intact and supported the infantry division's withdrawal through the bridgeheads, Reinhard's assessment of XII British Corps' slow advance has merit.<sup>28</sup> The slow advance of the British allowed 256th Volksgrenadier Division to establish a long defensive line, which prevented any significant penetration north. This enabled LXXXVIII Corps to maintain bridgeheads at Raamsdonkveer until 1 November, Huesden until 5 November, and Hedel held until 7 or 8 November. The fact that XII British Corps did not capture a bridge intact is also indicative of Reinhard's claim of a controlled withdrawal of German forces. Even though LXXXVIII Corps did manage to withdraw north across the Maas, it did not escape unscathed. XII British Corps inflicted heavy casualties and left LXXXVIII Corps considerably weakened, if not combat ineffective.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, reporting from both German and British forces seems to indicate that XII British Corps failed to take advantage of a weakened enemy.<sup>30</sup>

Another indication of Montgomery's strategic fixation to the east was the transfer of units from XII British Corps to VIII British Corps prior to clearing all German forces from south of the Maas. 15th (S) Division and 6th Guards Tank Brigade completed operations on the south-western flank of XII British Corps in Tilburg on 27 October. The previous day, in an effort to draw the Allies away from the Maas and lessen the burden on Fifteenth Army, von Rundstedt directed the execution of a spoiling attack in the Venlo area against Twenty-First Army Group's eastern flank. Under specific direction from Montgomery to counter the threat to VIII British Corps, the two formations were redirected east to stem the advance of German forces on 28 October. Were they actually required though? Charles MacDonald indicates that by 28 October, 7th (US) Armored Division, under VIII British Corps, had stopped the German offensive in cooperation with a significant Allied air offensive. While likely

<sup>27</sup> Reinhard, 88 German Corps, 22-23.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 22-24.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 18.

unknown to Montgomery or Dempsey, the actions of the Americans convinced von Rundstedt that there was little to gain from continued offensive operations and he cancelled subsequent efforts.<sup>31</sup> So, by the time that 15th (S) Division and the 6th Guards Tank Bridge began their movement to Venlo, VIII British Corps' front had stabilized and the crisis averted. In the end, British reinforcements assisted with the restoration of the previous gains of VIII Corps.

MacDonald also makes a seemingly innocuous statement that the transfer of the two formations made little difference to XII British Corps' operations as they had already completed their assigned tasks in the offensive to open Antwerp.<sup>32</sup> Yet Montgomery's 16 October directive clearly stated, "The whole of the available offensive power of Second Army will now be brought to bear (on Antwerp)..."<sup>33</sup> From this, it can be reasoned that 15th (S) Division and the 6th Guards Tank Bridge had a limited objective of Tilburg, potentially without subsequent assigned tasks. Similarly, A.G. Steiger argues that by 29 October, "...the current crisis of Fifteenth Army had passed its climax, the battle was lost and any withdrawals of Allied forces from that front at this late stage would be of scant significance."<sup>34</sup> Both assessments are derived from a misunderstanding of the situation within southern Holland and the impact these two units could have had on operations. Despite the fact that they captured Tilburg, XII British Corps struggled to reduce German bridgeheads over the Maas into the first week of November. As previously mentioned, this was also the period in which XII British Corps first came into contact with 256th Volksgrenadier Division's main defensive line. Coupled with the fact the responsibility for the capture of Moerdijk was transferred to Crocker's forces, these two formations could have been gainfully employed within either I British Corps' or XII Corps' area of operations.

For example, while 7th British Armoured Division and 51st (H) Division reduced the bridgeheads north in the Raamsdonkveer and Huesden areas, 15th (S) Division and 6th Guards Tank Brigade could have struck northwest towards Moerdijk, supporting 1st Polish

<sup>31</sup> Charles B. MacDonald, *United States Army in World War II: European Theater of Operations, The Siegfried Line Campaign* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), 245-246.

<sup>32</sup> MacDonald, *Siegfried Line*, 246.

<sup>33</sup> Montgomery's 16 October directive cited in Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 655.

<sup>34</sup> Steiger, AHQ Report #69, 61.

Armoured Division. On 28 October, 719th Division withdrew from Breda to assume command of the Moerdijk bridgehead. Had 15th (S) Division and 6th Guards Tank Brigade attacked towards Moerdijk with 1st Polish Armoured Division, it is likely they would have caught 719th Division in the midst of a withdrawal. Their subsequent destruction and the capture of Moerdijk by these three formations likely would have shortened operations south of the Maas and led to additional Fifteenth Army casualties. Another plausible option saw them supporting the reduction of the bridgehead at Raamsdonkveer and the destruction of German forces at Geertruidenberg, thus freeing 1st Polish Armoured Division to advance directly on Moerdijk.<sup>35</sup> Both of these actions would have outflanked 256th Volksgrenadier Division's defensive line. Given these examples, legitimate tasks remained for either of these formations. The burden on I British Corps certainly would have been reduced and may have facilitated the isolation and destruction of Fifteenth Army. Montgomery's direct intervention to transfer these two formations east demonstrates that while he professed Antwerp as his top priority, his strategic focus remained fixed on the Ruhr regardless of what his strategic direction indicated.

Crocker and his division commanders would likely have been surprised at XII British Corps' methodical advance west and the reallocation of its formations to support operations not designed to open Antwerp. Copp identifies that during Montgomery's visit to 4th Canadian Armoured Division Headquarters on 25 October, the concept of trapping Fifteenth Army was abandoned.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, L.F. Ellis indicates that on 27 October Crocker issued orders for I British Corps' final drive to the Maas, which included the capture of Moerdijk.<sup>37</sup> XII British Corps' orders on 27 October also reflect this change in the concept of operations.<sup>38</sup> The re-tasking of the capture of Moerdijk to I British Corps indicates that clearing Fifteenth Army south of the Maas, not destroying it, was now the primary objective of phase three of the operation. Had XII British Corps actually cut off Fifteenth Army's withdrawal routes, LXVII Corps likely would have

<sup>35</sup> I British Corps, War Diary and Message Logs, War Diary, 4 November 1944.

<sup>36</sup> Copp, *Cinderella Army*, 157.

<sup>37</sup> L.F. Ellis, *The Defeat of Germany, Vol. II, Victory in the West* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1968), 193.

<sup>38</sup> XII British Corps Operation Instruction number 18 (Operation PHEASANT), 27 October 1944, First Canadian Army, General Staff, October 1944, DND Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 13628, LAC.

been limited to two options: be destroyed or surrender. Instead, phase three transitioned from a combined I and XII British Corps isolate and destroy operation to I British Corps independently executing a concerted clearance operation to push back an enemy determined to delay and fix them for as long as possible.

In examining von Zangen's strategic plan, it is obvious that Fifteenth Army had two principal strategic objectives: deny the Allies the use of Antwerp and fix Allied forces in southern Holland.<sup>39</sup> Both of these objectives sought to prevent the Allies from striking into Germany. Considering these two objectives, the area between Geertruidenberg and 's-Hertogenbosch (XII British Corps' area of operations), was not required for von Zangen to successfully execute his mission. While he was able to fix XII British Corps for a period of time, this area did little to facilitate the retention of the South Beveland isthmus or influence Antwerp. Simply put, Fifteenth Army could lose this area with minimal impact on the accomplishment of their main effort. In fact, Model had recommended, with von Rundstedt's support, that this area be evacuated as early as 24 September in order to gain the necessary reserves to either secure the Bergen Op Zoom/Roosendaal/Moerdijk bridgehead or prevent a breakthrough between Arnhem and Aachen.<sup>40</sup> Unsurprisingly, this concept is reflected in von Zangen's actions. For Fifteenth Army, its vital ground encompassed Woensdrecht/Bergen Op Zoom/Roosendaal/Breda/Moerdijk, which corresponded with I British Corps' area of operations and the bulk of von Zangen's forces. Had Fifteenth Army retained this area, it would have denied the Allies the use of Antwerp and tied down, at a minimum, First Canadian Army and potentially elements of Second British Army. Thus, only through I British Corps' advance northwards could von Zangen's strategy have been undermined and Fifteenth Army decisively defeated.

The initial thrust of 4th Canadian Armoured Division and Clarke Force on 20 October, and the subsequent response by von Zangen, demonstrates the importance of the threat posed by Crocker's forces. The continued advance of I British Corps magnified this threat exponentially. By 27 October, I British Corps was threatening the newly established Halstren/South Roosendaal/South Breda/

<sup>39</sup> CMHQ, Special Interrogation Report – General Gustav von Zangen, Kardex, 981.065, DHH, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Steiger, AHQ Report #69, 33.

Alphen line. 4th Canadian Armoured Division had finally cleared the northern outskirts of Bergen Op Zoom on 28 October, 49th (WR) Division found itself south of Roosendaal, 104th (US) Division had captured Zundert in its first combat operation, and 1st Polish Division prepared to break the stalemate at Alphen. From this position, Crocker ordered 4th Canadian Armoured Division to attack towards Steenberghe while 49th (WR) Division cleared Roosendaal on its right flank. Allen's division attacked towards Standdaarbuiten to seize a crossing point over the Mark River at the same time that 1st Polish Armoured Division captured Breda and pushed on to Moerdijk.

Opposition was fierce as I British Corps attempted to push the bulk of Fifteenth Army north of the Maas. Between 28 October and 2 November, 4th Canadian Armoured Division fought a hard campaign against 85th Division and 6th Para Regiment north of Bergen Op Zoom and onto Steenberghe. On 3 November, the division entered the town and the following day forced the Germans to withdraw to Dinteloord. Following up their success, the division linked up with elements of the 49th (WR) Division on the outskirts of Dinteloord and subsequently forced the remaining Germans north of the Maas.<sup>41</sup> To the east, 49th (WR) Division successfully captured Roosendaal on 30 October and continued its advance to the Mark River. Both 49th (WR) Division and 104th (US) Infantry Division successfully crossed the river on 2 November under heavy fire causing the collapse of the Mark River defensive line. The Polar Bears then assaulted towards Willemstad on the Maas, capturing the town on 5 November.

Prior to crossing the river, 104th (US) Division also encountered a determined German enemy. Capturing Oudenbosch on 30 October, Allen's division reached the canal first on 31 October and attempted a rapid crossing in the hopes of catching the Germans off guard. Unfortunately, after a two-day battle and heavy casualties, the division withdrew and reattempted the crossing with 49th (WR) Division. Having successfully established a bridgehead across the Mark River on 2 November, Allen's Timberwolves continued towards Moerdijk, and assaulted the German bridgehead in cooperation with 1st Polish Armoured Division.

On the right flank of I British Corps, 1st Polish Armoured Division successfully broke the stalemate at Alphen and captured Breda on

<sup>41</sup> Harrison, CMHQ Report No. 188, 96.

28 October in cooperation with 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade and Imp Force. The Poles then split into two brigade groups: one attacking along the I/XII British Corps boundary to Geertruidenberg and the other towards Moerdijk in a converging attack with 104th (US) Infantry Division on 8 November. Although the Poles and Americans successfully cleared the remnants of Fifteenth Army from south of the Maas, they found the bridge across it had been destroyed two-days prior.

I British Corps' attack to the Maas proved to be decisive in the defeat of Fifteenth Army. O.B. West's situation report for 29 October indicated that I British Corps' operations in Bergen Op Zoom, Roosendaal, north of Zundert and southeast of Breda threatened to collapse the front. Within the same situation report, the Germans indicated that XII British Corps' attacks had been halted north of Loon Op Zand and did not threaten the integrity of Fifteenth Army's front.<sup>42</sup> Later in the day, Model informed von Rundstedt that Fifteenth Army either had to begin its withdrawal north of the Maas or fight on to its ultimate destruction.<sup>43</sup> While at no time did XII British Corps force Fifteenth Army to radically alter its front lines, by 29 October, I British Corps' operations shifted von Zangen's main effort from fixing the Allies in southern Holland to saving what he could of Fifteenth Army.

Without a sufficient threat within I British Corps' area of operations, all indications were that von Zangen would redeploy forces to counter the threat posed by XII British Corps. In this respect, Crocker's actions completely undermined Fifteenth Army's defensive strategy. By forcing the redeployment of elements of LXXXVIII Corps into I British Corps' area of operations, Crocker not only weakened LXXXVIII Corps' position but also fixed these units within LXVII Corps' area of operations. Thus, the previous use of "fire department brigades" to shore up weak points in Fifteenth Army's defensive line was rendered untenable. Similarly, the existential threat posed by I British Corps forced von Zangen to immediately redeploy 245th Division west. As 256th Volksgrenadier Division was still in the process of transporting elements of its division from Germany, the relief in place was conducted with only part of its combat power

<sup>42</sup> O.B. West Situation Report, 29 October 1944, cited in Steiger, AHQ Report #69, 59.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

in position. Without its full combat power by the time the relief in place was ordered, 256th Volksgrenadier Division lacked the strength to maintain the previous defensive line held by 245th Division. As 1st Polish Armoured Division's operations in the vicinity of Breda threatened to turn their right flank, it forced their withdrawal north, eventually on an extended defensive line from Dongen to Vught on 25 October.<sup>44</sup> This meant, for the first part of XII British Corps' advance west, it faced only the 59th Division stretched along the entire front and the 712th Division occupying 's-Hertogenbosch. In large part, this explains why German resistance was minimal until 28 October and why 15th (S) Division faced little opposition when capturing Tilburg.<sup>45</sup> Considering the slow rate of advance by XII British Corps against two understrength divisions, the addition of a third likely would have further impeded XII British Corps' operations considerably. XII British Corps' operations were, in reality, supporting in nature to the decisive operations of I British Corps.

As Crocker's forces attacked north on 20 October, they gradually reduced Fifteenth Army's ability to influence the South Beveland isthmus and by 24 October had, in conjunction with 2nd Canadian Division, sealed off the isthmus completely. Although this permitted II Canadian Corps to execute Operations Vitality and Infatuate, the clearance of South Beveland and Walcheren Island respectively, Fifteenth Army still retained the ability to fix Allied forces in the west. As I British Corps developed subsequent operations north, XII British Corps' methodical advance west and the redeployment of 15th (S) Division and 6th Guards Tank Brigade east left Crocker to face the bulk of von Zangen's forces. During the final days of operations in southern Holland, I British Corps reduced the Bergen Op Zoom/Roosendaal/Breda/Moerdijk bridgehead and forced Fifteenth Army to withdraw.<sup>46</sup> Having undermined von Zangen's strategic concept and pushed his forces north of the Maas, it is evident that I British Corps was instrumental in achieving Montgomery's altered phase three, allowing him to reorient Twenty-First Army Group east.

An analysis of I British Corps' relationship with II Canadian Corps is equally important to understand the operational and

<sup>44</sup> Reinhard, 88 German Corps, 19.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>46</sup> I British Corps, Operation Order No. 5, 1 November 1944, DND Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 10 790, LAC.

strategic significance of its operations. Regardless of the evident shortcomings in Montgomery's overall plan to open the port of Antwerp, his 16 October directive enabled I British Corps to operate jointly with 2nd Canadian Division in its efforts to secure the South Beveland isthmus. I British Corps' operations, in relation to II Canadian Corps, have normally been relegated to the margins of history. However, a careful examination of the facts paints a much different picture. Instead of executing a simple flank security task, I British Corps, specifically 4th Canadian Armoured Division and 49th (WR) Division, played a decisive role in securing the isthmus in partnership with 2nd Canadian Division. More importantly, without I British Corps' support, 2nd Canadian Division would likely not have been able to achieve its objectives within the greater context of First Canadian Army's clearance of the Scheldt Estuary. Through this action, I British Corps set the conditions for II Canadian Corps and First Canadian Army to achieve operational success and strategic success within an Allied context.

The importance of the South Beveland isthmus was recognized by both the Allies and the Germans. Walcheren Island and South Beveland were connected to the mainland through a narrow isthmus approximately 25 km north of Antwerp. Whomever controlled the isthmus, controlled access to the Scheldt. From the German Army's perspective, their initial defensive planning assumed that Antwerp would be retained, thus covering the land approaches into the Scheldt. By maintaining control over these two areas, any Allied assault on the Scheldt would have to be amphibious. Compared to a land based assault, amphibious operations are resource intensive, both in equipment and training. Thus, any delay in the capture of the Scheldt facilitated Fifteenth Army's task to fix Allied forces in southern Holland. Second British Army's capture of Antwerp had completely undermined this strategy. As the Allies threatened to push north of the city in early September, the possibility existed that they could have seized the isthmus and launched a land-based assault into South Beveland. Of course, this came to naught and Second British Army continued its advance towards Germany, allowing Fifteenth Army to extricate itself through the Scheldt. Consequently, throughout September and October 1944, LXVII Corps' and Fifteenth Army's main effort aimed to counter this Allied threat.

The Allies recognized the requirement for a land based approach into the Scheldt early in the planning phase of the operation.<sup>47</sup> Montgomery first mentioned the use of the isthmus as a route into South Beveland in a letter to the Commander of First Canadian Army, Harry Crerar, on 13 September 1944, which outlined his future plans for the Channel Ports and Antwerp.<sup>48</sup> Subsequent Canadian planning and direction throughout September indicated that both Crerar and Simonds considered its capture, along with the capture of Bergen Op Zoom and Roosendaal, as a pre-condition to attacking South Beveland and Walcheren Island.<sup>49</sup> Both Canadian generals outright rejected a purely amphibious operation to clear the Scheldt Estuary. With few suitable landing sites on South Beveland and Walcheren Island, a large-scale amphibious operation would allow the German fortress commander, Lieutenant General W. Daser, to concentrate his limited forces at these key sites. Consequently, an amphibious assault would result in the Allies attacking into well-prepared kill zones with Daser capable of maintaining a tactical reserve to reinforce threatened landing sites.

Any attempt to launch a waterborne assault across the West Scheldt, in Crerar's and Simonds' estimation, required a concurrent land-based attack in order to disperse Daser's forces. Even if a sufficient number of landing sites did exist, the necessary number of landing craft and the time required to conduct training did not.<sup>50</sup> Given the necessity of the isthmus to First Canadian Army operations, its successful capture had considerable strategic significance. First Canadian Army would have to secure the isthmus to attack west, in conjunction with a more limited amphibious operation in order to clear the Scheldt and open the port of Antwerp.

To secure the isthmus, Simonds tasked 2nd Canadian Division, commanded by Major-General R.H. Keefer, to clear the right flank of II Canadian Corps. Despite the strategic importance of this task, 2nd Canadian Division received negligible support. Relieved by 4th

<sup>47</sup> Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 358, 369.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> First Canadian Army, G Plans War Diary, July-October 1944, Operation Infatuate - An Appreciation, 19 September 1944, DND Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 13607, LAC; First Canadian Army, G Plans War Diary, July-October 1944, Op 'Infatuate' - Notes on Conference, 21 September 1944, DND Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 13607, LAC.

<sup>50</sup> First Canadian Army, G Plans War Diary, Op 'Infatuate' - Notes on Conference, 21 September 1944.

Special Service Brigade at Dunkirk, 2nd Canadian Division moved north to relieve 53rd (W) Division of XII British Corps in the Antwerp area on 16 September. This allowed First Canadian Army's area of operations to shift east relieving XII British Corps along the Antwerp-Turnhout canal so they could support Operation Market Garden. Between 18 to 24 September, Keefer's division successfully pushed the Germans out of the Antwerp suburb of Merxem northeast of the city. Leaving 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade to hold their gains in Antwerp, the remainder of the division pushed east along the southern edge of the Antwerp-Turnhout Canal. After several unsuccessful attempts to establish a bridgehead, they crossed at 49th (WR) Division's bridgehead south of Ryckervosel.<sup>51</sup> Emerging from the bridgehead, they advanced west, capturing St. Leonard on 28 September and Brecht on 1 October. Having cleared the north bank of the Antwerp-Turnhout canal, 2nd Canadian Division reoriented north on two axes of advance along the Putte/Woensdrecht road and the Maria ter Heide/Esschen road. Given the inability of II Canadian Corps or I British Corps to provide direct support, Keefer and his division must have felt increasingly isolated.

2nd Canadian Division suffered from Montgomery's continued desire to push east into Germany. With I British Corp's operational focus consumed by its flank security task, the obstacles to 2nd Canadian Division's operations mounted. Between 5 to 16 October, 2nd Canadian Division fought a vicious campaign against the 70th, 85th, and 346th Divisions in an attempt to seal off the isthmus and establish a secure base from which to launch operations into South Beveland. From 2nd Canadian Division's perspective, their most challenging opponent came in the form of 6th Parachute Regiment. Employed as the vanguard of Lieutenant General Kurt Chill's 85th Division, Colonel Frederich von der Heydte, commanded the 6th Parachute Regiment. Recently arrived from Germany, the regiment consisted of "twenty-five hundred fanatical and eager young parachutists."<sup>52</sup> The first two battalions of von der Heydte's regiment arrived in Bergen Op Zoom on 8 October and engaged in zealous combat against 2nd Canadian Division until they were forced to withdraw by I British Corps' in late October. Battles such as Hoogerheide and Woensdrecht

<sup>51</sup> Harrison, CMHQ Report #188, 48.

<sup>52</sup> CMHQ, Special Interrogation Report –Lieutenant General Erich Diestel, Kardex, 981.065, DHH, 7.

are recounted as bloody slaughters by both the Canadians and the Germans.<sup>53</sup> Regardless of the deployment of the “elite” 6th Parachute Regiment, on 16 October O.B. West and Fifteenth Army reported that the isthmus had been lost and that its recapture was no longer possible.<sup>54</sup> While 2nd Canadian Division managed to sever the link between 70th Division in South Beveland and LXVII Corps on the mainland, they lacked the necessary support to attack into the Scheldt. The real dilemma facing Keefer was if his division could hold its position, and resist German counter-attacks.

The reality of the situation did not favour the Canadians. 2nd Canadian Division suffered heavy casualties during its advance north and the ensuing operations to capture the isthmus. While this left many of the battalions undermanned, the division’s key leadership suffered a disproportional number of casualties. Battalion casualties varied from 5 to 30 per cent from 1 to 16 October, however, when non-infantry personnel are subtracted from the battalions’ effective strength, these percentages rise significantly. Take for example, the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry (RHLI). Between 16 and 17 October, their companies reported an average strength of forty-five men.<sup>55</sup> After Woensdrecht, the Black Watch fared little better, reporting a combined effective strength of 379 soldiers in its four rifle companies. Thus, the regiment’s companies had the effective strength of reinforced platoons. Officer casualties only exacerbated the situation. Between 1 to 16 October, the RHLI lost twenty of its thirty-five officers while the South Saskatchewan Regiment lost a staggering thirty of its thirty-one officers.<sup>56</sup>

Given the heavy casualties, defensive lines were not continuous along the battalion/brigade/division front and reconnaissance patrols could not be conducted due to manpower shortages.<sup>57</sup> This denied 2nd Canadian Division units important intelligence gathering operations and afforded the Germans a certain freedom of manoeuvre to infiltrate porous defensive positions. While the LXVII Corps’

<sup>53</sup> Denis Whitaker, *Tug of War: The Allied Victory That Opened Antwerp* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2000), 175.

<sup>54</sup> Steiger, AHQ Report #69, 50.

<sup>55</sup> Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 385.

<sup>56</sup> First Canadian Army, Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General War Diary, September-October 1944, Casualty and Strength Report for 16 October 1944, Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 13 659, LAC.

<sup>57</sup> Whitaker, *Tug of War*, 219.

situation was as bad or worse, it did not negate the threat they presented to 2nd Canadian Division. For example, Huijbergen and south of Bergen Op Zoom were still controlled by 85th Division as late as 21 October.<sup>58</sup> Division intelligence reports reflected this threat, assessing that LXVII Corps was still capable of influencing their operations in the Woensdrecht and surrounding area.<sup>59</sup> Local attacks and artillery fire by German forces continued, forcing Keefer to maintain all three of his brigades in a defensive posture unless they were conducting local offensive operations. Any reorientation west would have resulted in the destruction of the Canadian division.

In reality both sides had culminated. While the isthmus had been lost to the Allies on 16 October, the threat the Germans faced was largely a paper tiger.<sup>60</sup> 2nd Canadian Division did in fact hold the isthmus, but they had to maintain their tactical and operational focus on the immediate German threat, thus preventing them from consolidating and attacking into South Beveland. The secondary effect of their operational focus was that First Canadian Army could not execute its plans for the clearance of the Scheldt. Even with the isthmus in Canadian possession, von Zangen could still accomplish his objective of denying Antwerp to the Allies as long as LXVII Corps posed a threat to 2nd Canadian Division.

Without reinforcements or operations to secure their eastern and northern flanks, 2nd Canadian Division was essentially fixed. Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade's war diarist summed up the frustrations of the division quite succinctly: "Cannot understand why they do not put more troops in the area and finish the job once and for all instead of playing about shifting first one battalion then another. This is beginning to look like a winter campaign unless something breaks soon."<sup>61</sup> Comments like this would have been exactly what von Zangen wanted to hear as LXVII Corps and Fifteenth Army continued to pursue operations against the Canadians on the isthmus. Without the removal of this threat, 2nd Canadian Division

<sup>58</sup> Warning, Battles of 67 German Corps, 27, 32.

<sup>59</sup> 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, General Staff War Diary, August-November 1944, 2nd Canadian Infantry Division Intelligence Report, 22 October 1944, DND Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 13 751, LAC.

<sup>60</sup> War Diary, O.B. West, entry dated 16 October 1944 cited in Steiger, AHQ Report #69, 50.

<sup>61</sup> 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary, 16 October, cited in Copp, *Cinderella Army*, 145.

was unable to achieve Simonds precondition for the assault on the Scheldt. In Stacey's words, "Until we could establish a much firmer grip on the area about the eastern end of the isthmus it was useless to think of advancing into South Beveland."<sup>62</sup>

Nominally, this support was supposed to come from I British Corps. Crocker's orders on 8 October directed the Corps to advance north on 2nd Canadian Division's right flank to support the capture of the isthmus and clear all enemy forces south of the Maas. As it has been previously established, Crocker lacked the necessary combat power to provide this support. With their flank security task still in effect, supporting 2nd Canadian Division into South Beveland was simply impossible. Even if they had sufficient forces, the boundary between I British Corps and XII British Corps left Bergen Op Zoom and Steenberg within 2nd Canadian Division's area of operations. A quick map estimate clearly indicates that leaving this area in 2nd Canadian Division's area of operations prevented I British Corps from influencing the battle between Keefer's division and the German forces. In addition, the idea that I British Corps was capable of clearing most of Fifteenth Army south of the Maas was fantastical.

Crocker's directive was an admission that I British Corps had effectively lost its ability to conduct determined offensive operations. The extended front line and lack of manoeuvre units meant that I British Corps had to "maintain a defensive policy with active patrolling and local offensive action when and if considered desirable by Div Comds."<sup>63</sup> Crocker's paragraph on future tasks painted an even grimmer picture for the prospects of his corps. Without the addition of 4th Canadian Armoured Division, anticipated sometime between 15 and 21 October, he identified that I British Corps lacked the necessary forces to secure 2nd Canadian Division's right flank. Crocker seemed to be at a loss as to what he was expected to achieve with an infantry and armoured division. Although he provided timelines for attacks on Tilburg and 's-Hertogenbosch, these operations were directly related to Second British Army's flank security. His primary task of clearing German forces south of the Maas was left to be determined. What is more important in this context is that 2nd Canadian Division was incapable of achieving its operational objectives without I British Corps' support.

<sup>62</sup> Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 386.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

After the resolution of the strategic debate with Eisenhower, Montgomery's 16 October directive set the conditions for I British Corps to isolate the South Beveland isthmus in conjunction with 2nd Canadian Division. Crocker's eastern boundary, established on 8 October, shifted west to Poppel/Tilburg and the task of flank security for Second British Army was removed. More importantly, First Canadian Army's inter-corps boundary shifted west along a the line Capellen/Putte/Hoogerheide and then west to the sea. With the reduction in Crocker's area of operations and the shift of the First Canadian Army inter-corps boundary, I British Corps was now capable of directly supporting 2nd Canadian Division, given they received the necessary reinforcements.

The addition of 4th Canadian Armoured Division to I British Corps partially solved Crocker's combat strength issue. As previously mentioned, I British Corps plan consisted of a two division attack along the right flank of 2nd Canadian Division. Major-General H.W. Foster, commander of 4th Canadian Armoured Division, planned to attack two-up with reorganized brigade groups towards Esschen in Operation Suitcase. In his path lay Lieutenant-General Diestel's 346th Division. At the same time, Clarke Force's Operation Rebound sought to fix the 711th Division en route to Wuestwezel and provide flank security to Foster's division. If successful, 4th Canadian Armoured Division would attack northwest to Bergen Op Zoom while Clarke Force maintained flank security. The intent was to either encircle the German forces threatening 2nd Canadian Division, or force them to withdraw north. Either scenario saw 2nd Canadian Division consolidating in the Woensdrecht area and then launching westwards into South Beveland.

On 20 October, 4th Canadian Armoured Brigade Group and 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade Group launched from their start lines near Camp de Brasschaet and Maria ter Heide. Although their advance was slow, more due to mines, obstacles, and booby traps than enemy contact, initial gains reduced 2nd Canadian Division's extended right flank and elements of the two divisions managed to link up in Vossenburg.<sup>64</sup> The following day, both brigade groups advanced to the Roosendaal Canal, and despite heavy resistance at times, penetrated deep into 346th Division's lines. Brigadier R. Moncel's forces even managed to deploy infantry units across the

<sup>64</sup> I British Corps, War Diary, 20 October 1944.

canal to establish a bridgehead while his armour provided left flank security. At the same time, Clarke Force pushed 711th Division out of Wuestwezel, causing the previously discussed threat to LXVII Corps' centre.

By the early morning of 22 October, Esschen was captured by Brigadier J.C. Jefferson's Brigade Group, allowing the division to eliminate pockets of bypassed enemy in their rear areas. Over 450 Germans surrendered, leading the war diarist to surmise, "their tails are up."<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile, Clarke Force had defeated the attack by 245th Division, pushing them north between Zundert and Wuestwezel. Although I British Corps achieved considerable success to this point, LXVII Corps still exerted considerable influence in the area. 70th Division threatened 2nd Canadian Division from the isthmus and 85th Division and 346th Division still occupied their northern and eastern flank.

The continued push towards Esschen and later Bergen Op Zoom had a decisive impact on 2nd Canadian Division and the German units opposing them. Elements of 6th Parachute Regiment and self-propelled guns from 85th Division redeployed from the Woensdrecht area to support 346th Division's attempts to halt 4th Canadian Armoured Division's advance. Despite weakening the forces facing 2nd Canadian Division, the threat posed by 4th Canadian Armoured Division's advance left von Zangen with few options. As he lacked an operational reserve he could only move units from other parts of Fifteenth Army's defensive line. Another key indication of the effect of Foster's attack was the redeployment of German artillery into two central locations on the Canadian frontage.<sup>66</sup> While German artillery continued to engage 2nd Canadian Division, it was now also tasked to fire missions to counter the advance of 4th Canadian Armoured Division. Obviously this meant that German units facing Keefer's division lost a measure of their fire support capability. At this point, the German commanders likely feared imminent encirclement by 2nd Canadian and 4th Canadian Armoured Divisions.

Despite this early success, 2nd Canadian Division's intelligence reported, "any assessment of str[ength] on our immediate front

<sup>65</sup> 4th Canadian Armoured Division, General Staff War Diary, 22 October 1944.

<sup>66</sup> 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, General Staff War Diary, August-November 1944, 2nd Canadian Infantry Division Intelligence Report, 22 October 1944, DND Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 13 751, LAC.

facing north is difficult and unreliable.”<sup>67</sup> Further, their intelligence assessed, “The enemy intends to hold firmly where he stands and will oppose at any cost every effort made by us to seal off completely the South Beveland isthmus.”<sup>68</sup> Even with elements of 85th and 346th Divisions, and the entire 245th Division being drawn away from 2nd Canadian Division by I British Corps, lacked the combat power to independently isolate the isthmus. Keefer needed Foster to position 4th Canadian Division between him and LXVII Corps forces to protect his rear and flank areas as he attacked west.

On the night of 22 October, Moncel and Foster planned to exploit the Division’s success in Esschen by advancing northwest towards Bergen Op Zoom. With this action, they hoped that they would finally force both Chill and Diestel to either fight to the bitter end encircled by Canadians, or withdraw north, ceding the isthmus to the Canadians. Neither option was likely acceptable to Sponheimer or von Zangen, but they were quickly running out of time and options.

Advancing northwest on 23 to 24 October, Moncel’s Brigade Group ran into Chill’s forces on the Wouwsche Plantage. While Chill had been focused on 2nd Canadian Division, Moncel’s advance on his left flank once again forced him to reorient part of his forces to face the impending threat. The continual sapping of German forces from their positions in the Woensdrecht area by 4th Canadian Armoured Division allowed Keefer to expand and solidify his position on the isthmus.<sup>69</sup> Despite inflicting heavy casualties on Chill’s forces, 4th Canadian Armoured Brigade Group failed to eject them from the Wouwsche Plantage.<sup>70</sup> While nominally a setback, it still diverted Chill’s operational focus from 2nd Canadian Division. To increase the pressure on Chill’s forces, Jefferson’s Brigade Group attacked from Huijbergen on 25 October, having captured the town in a joint effort with 2nd Canadian Division and 29th Canadian Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment the day prior.

Heavy fighting continued on 26 October, but the following day Moncel’s Brigade Group ejected the 85th Division from the Wouwsche Plantage and advanced further north to Wouwsche

<sup>67</sup> 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, General Staff War Diary, 2nd Cdn. Inf. Div. Int. Summary No. 14 for the period of 222400AOct44.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, General Staff War Diary, War Diary, 24 October 1944.

<sup>70</sup> Warning, Battles of 67 German Corps, 32.

Hil. For Jefferson's part, as he advanced west towards Bergen Op Zoom, German resistance dissolved as the 85th and 346th Divisions withdrew north to escape encirclement. Von Zangen decided to save what he could of Fifteenth Army instead of sacrificing them in the Scheldt. Late in the day, 29th Canadian Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment reported Bergen Op Zoom clear of German forces. At this point, the South Beveland isthmus could now be deemed secured by both 2nd Canadian Division and 4th Canadian Armoured Division.

When I British Corps' operational success is put into the context of 2nd Canadian Division's and First Canadian Army's operations, it is evident that they were much more than a supporting operation. The earliest example of this was I British Corps' ability to draw 245th Division away from its intended task. Clarke Force's successful occupation of Wuestwezel prevented the reinforcement of 85th and 346th Divisions in the Woensdrecht area. This enabled 2nd Canadian Division to retain and expand its footprint on the isthmus. Had 245th Division successfully reinforced the German forces facing 2nd Canadian Division, it may have resulted in their decisive defeat and potential destruction. This suggests a linkage between the operational success of I British Corps and 2nd Canadian Division.

Similarly with Bergen Op Zoom captured, 4th Canadian Division interposed itself between Keefer's forces and Sponheimer's divisions, effectively securing their eastern and northern flanks. The elimination of this threat enabled 2nd Canadian Division to reorient their brigades west and advance into South Beveland. A better way to define this action is as a cordon operation. While 2nd Canadian Division may have formed the inner cordon on the South Beveland isthmus, 4th Canadian Armoured Division and I British Corps provided the solid outer cordon that pushed back and defeated the external threat. In essence, the efforts to secure the South Beveland isthmus became a joint operation between the two divisions, not 4th Canadian Armoured Division or I British Corps in a supporting role. Again, this is a clear indication of I British Corps directly influencing 2nd Canadian Division's ability to execute its operational tasks.

Surprisingly, this reliance on 4th Canadian Armoured Division has been recounted as a failure by 2nd Canadian Division in the official history. Stacey states, "Anticipating relief from embarrassment on its right by the advance of the 1st Corps under Montgomery's new policy, the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division was able on 23 October to begin the final clearing of the Woensdrecht area preparatory to

operations against South Beveland.”<sup>71</sup> The evidence does not support Stacey’s assessment. The division fought a difficult and bloody battle, with little support, from the Antwerp-Turnhout Canal to the South Beveland isthmus. In the process of fighting elements of three separate divisions and an alleged “elite” parachute regiment, they suffered heavy casualties, particularly amongst the division’s officers and senior non-commissioned officers. A more accurate account of 2nd Canadian Division’s performance comes from von der Heydte: “The Canadians—I say that as a German—fought brilliantly: to the rank of Brigadier, the officers stood side by side with their men on the front lines.”<sup>72</sup> If anything, their inability to secure their objective was a reflection of the tactical and operational reality of Montgomery’s disconnected pre-16 October strategy. That being said, without I British Corps, 2nd Canadian Division would have continued to exhaust itself in attempts to accomplish an impossible task.

Operationally, the isolation of the South Beveland isthmus was one of First Canadian Army’s preconditions to executing Operations Vitality and Infatuate. Thus, the operations of I British Corps between 20 to 26 October can be directly linked to Allied strategic success. By securing 2nd Canadian Division’s eastern and northern flanks, I British Corps set into motion a series of operational actions that led to the opening of the port of Antwerp. With Simonds’ precondition of securing the South Beveland isthmus met, he was able to launch both 2nd Canadian Division and 52nd (L) Division into South Beveland to execute Operation Vitality. Once complete, 4th Special Service Brigade executed Operation Infatuate onto Walcheren Island. The end result of these operations is well-known and led to the liberation of the Scheldt Estuary from German control. What is not recognized is that the successful realization of Allied strategy hinged on, and was made possible by, the actions of I British Corps.

Friendly casualty rates are a strong indicator of the determination of an enemy in defensive operations. High casualty rates tend indicate a well-led and determined enemy, while low casualty rates normally are indicative of the opposite. In the weeks leading up to I British Corps’ advance to the Maas, 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions suffered crippling casualties during their operations to the South Beveland

<sup>71</sup> Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 391.

<sup>72</sup> Colonel F. von der Heydte, cited in Terry Copp, *The Brigade: The Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade, 1939-1945* (Willowdale, ON: John Deyell Co. Ltd., 1992), 142-143.

isthmus and in the Breskens Pocket respectively. Between 2 to 19 October, 2nd Canadian Division suffered 1,460 killed and wounded with an average of 81.1 casualties per day.<sup>73</sup> 3rd Canadian Division, arriving at the Breskens Pocket on 6 October, fared no better and suffered 1,213 killed and wounded between 6 to 19 October. This equated to an average rate of 86.6 casualties per day.<sup>74</sup>

However, these statistics need to be put into context in order to understand why they were so high. As 2nd Canadian Division advanced to the South Beveland isthmus, they did so without the benefit of support from II Canadian or I British Corps. As a result, the division found itself fighting elements of three German divisions focused exclusively on its destruction. However, as 4th Canadian Armoured Division advanced along its right flank, their daily casualty rate dropped by 34 per cent to 53.67 casualties per day.<sup>75</sup> This suggests that 2nd Canadian Division's daily casualty rate between 2 to 19 October would have been lower had I British Corps advance in a mutually supporting role during this period.

Within the Breskens Pocket, 3rd Canadian Division fought in restrictive terrain, which greatly facilitated German defensive operations. In fact, during the period of 6 to 19 October, 3rd Canadian Division suffered 65.5 per cent of their casualties in a six-day window during its assault across the Leopold Canal and the amphibious operation at Braakman.<sup>76</sup> The daily casualty rate during this period was 132.5 compared to 52.25 during the remaining eight days.<sup>77</sup> While German forces within the Breskens Pocket have long been considered to have mounted a formidable defence, these numbers suggest that terrain was a determinant factor in their ability to defend within the pocket.

Undoubtedly, 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions faced a determined and motivated enemy, but how do I British Corps casualty statistics compare? Did I British Corps face a defeated enemy racing to cross the Maas to safety or an enemy determined to delay and fix them as long as possible? 4th Canadian Armoured Division's war diary certainly indicates that it faced strong German resistance during their advance

<sup>73</sup> First Canadian Army, Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General War Diary, September-October 1944, Consolidated C and S state 1-31 October 1944.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

to the Maas. Similarly, Stacey, Ellis, and MacDonald provide several examples of fierce combat in their respective official histories.

Casualty statistics support these claims. During the period of 20 October to 8 November, three of the four divisions within I British Corps suffered higher casualties than 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions. In particular, 104th (US) Infantry Division averaged 77.25 casualties per day after it entered the line on 23 October.<sup>78</sup> In total, they suffered 1,236 killed or wounded, which was over 400 more casualties than 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions. Although reports indicate a determined German opposition, the higher casualty rates within 104th (US) Infantry Division may also have been due to the manner in which Allen fought his division. Regardless, both 4th Canadian Armoured Division and 49th (WR) Division have slightly higher casualty rates than 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions.

Brigade casualties follow the same trend as their higher headquarters. I British Corps brigades had the highest four casualty rates within First Canadian Army during this period. Indicative of the determined resistance faced by 4th Canadian Armoured Division, 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade suffered the highest daily casualty rate within the corps, with an average of 26.9. This totalled 538 killed or wounded, which was more than double the total of five of the six infantry brigades within 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions.<sup>79</sup> Both division and brigade statistics suggest that as I British Corps advanced to the Maas, it fought an enemy that was as or more determined than the German forces facing 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions. It is unlikely that Fifteenth Army would have withdrawn across the Maas had Crocker's forces not executed a determined and decisive assault. It is clear that the operations of I British Corps in October and November 1944 were a critical part of the operational and strategic success of II Canadian Corps, First Canadian Army, Twenty-First Army Group, and possibly the Allied war effort.

This paper has demonstrated that I British Corps' operations were critical to the operational and strategic success of Allied operations to open the port of Antwerp. As Crocker's forces began their advance, they represented an existential threat to LXVII Corps

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.; First Canadian Army, Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General War Diary, November-December 1944, Consolidated C and S state, 1-8 November 1944.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

and Fifteenth Army as a whole. Recognizing this, von Zangen was forced to redeploy and maintain forces within I British Corps' area of operations to prevent the collapse of his army's defensive line. As Crocker fixed formations on his front, it prevented the much needed reinforcement of German forces facing 2nd Canadian Division and XII British Corps, thus undermining von Zangen's strategic plan to retain the South Beveland isthmus and deny the port of Antwerp to the Allies. Clearly, Crocker's actions undermined von Zangen's and the German Army's ability to achieve operational and strategic success.

As 4th Canadian Armoured Division and Clarke Force secured the northern and eastern flank of 2nd Canadian Division, it enabled the execution of First Canadian Army's plan to clear the Scheldt and eventually open Antwerp as a logistical hub for the Allied forces. Operational success on the part of I British Corps was directly responsible for the operational success of II Canadian Corps and the strategic victory of First Canadian Army. Without I British Corps successfully completing its operational tasks, the clearance of the Scheldt Estuary and the opening of the port of Antwerp would have been considerably delayed. Regardless of I British Corps' status within the historiography of the Battle of the Scheldt, Crocker, and the action of his forces, deserve to be recognized for the decisive victory they achieved in October and November of 1944.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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