

# **AGAINST ALL ODDS: The Canadian Infantry Battle for the Scheldt**

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**For:  
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**H.C. Chadderton:**

This is a film about a sad and tragic episode of World War II: the Battle for the Scheldt Estuary. Yes, it's a story of heroism, but it's also about a battle which need never have been fought.

On September 4<sup>th</sup>, the British Army was in Antwerp, but for some reason the high command said, "Stop, not an inch further." The Allies needed the port of Antwerp to supply their troops. But the Allied shipping couldn't get in to Antwerp because the Germans had control of what is known as the Scheldt Estuary. That is, the waterway, some 50 kilometres, which runs through Holland and also through a very small part of Belgium. The German troops which occupied both the south side of the Scheldt behind me, and the north side of the Scheldt across the waterway, had orders to fight to the last man and the last round.

The tragedy of the Battle of the Scheldt covers many facets: stupid blunders on the part of the Generals, the failure of the Allies to trust the Belgian and the Dutch Resistance, the petty arguing of the Allied Generals, the fierce resolve which Hitler built into his troops. All these and many more contributed to a battle which lasted more than two months, but which as we shall see could have been all over in a few short days.

I'm standing now at the edge of the Scheldt in Breskens, which was the focal point of the south side of the Estuary. Looking off in the distance, we can see the northern tip of Walcheren. Next we see Flushing, which is all part of the northern Scheldt. Moving along the shore of Holland itself and in the far background, Antwerp.

Today, the Scheldt is busy with shipping. But for two months in the fall of 1944 when the Allies needed to get to the port of Antwerp with the supplies for the land troops who were moving towards Germany, not one ship moved along this waterway. Hitler and his armies had complete control of the entire Estuary, and so it took two months for the Canadians to clear both the far side and the south side of the Scheldt where I stand today.

And now on to Antwerp to start our story.

Behind me are parts of the immense docks of Antwerp. This was the prize which the Allies needed so badly to shorten their supply lines towards the end of 1944.

This is the Albert Canal, the northern boundary of the city of Antwerp. This was really the scene of one of the major fiascoes of World War II. General Horrocks and the 30<sup>th</sup> British Corps had gotten into Antwerp, and they could've driven 20 miles north and cut off the retreating

Germans. But instead Montgomery issued in an order, "Here you stop, and you will go not one foot further."

Some 20 kilometres north of this Canal, the Germans were fleeing for their lives out of Holland, back towards the Rhine. It was about here on the Albert Canal, east of Antwerp that on October 4<sup>th</sup> the Canadians attacked Merxem. They built their Kapok bridging behind the dyke on the far side over there, brought the bridging down under cover of darkness, laid it across the water; then the troops went over and fanned out, attacking the Germans on either side. It took them about three hours of bitter fighting. Once they had that, they were able to go on to capture Oorderen, Eekeren, Hoogerheid and on to Woensdrecht.

It is now October 12<sup>th</sup>, and in two weeks the Canadians have moved from Antwerp through Merxem, up through Putte, Hoogerheide and are facing the heights of Woensdrecht. This is the exact location where the commanding officer of the Black Watch Battalion had his tactical headquarters. The battle plan for the Black Watch on Friday, October 13<sup>th</sup>, known now as Black Friday, called for this under-strength battalion to move from this ground, where I am actually standing right now, in a frontal attack in plain daylight, up the hills and capture the high ground at Woensdrecht.

From this position I shall try to explain what happened on that fateful morning of October 13<sup>th</sup>. The only weapons which the commanding officer had left in his arsenal were smoke bombs, and those were laid down in front of the enemy position, which meant that the Germans could not actually see the troops, but they still knew that they were advancing.

At about 11:30 a.m., the commanding officer crawled up to this position, from which he could see that he had a total disaster on his hands. He signalled to his company on the right to retire and gave the signal to these troops, which had advanced on the left of this area to retire as well.

This field that we're looking at today, this peaceful scene, was littered with the bodies of the dead, the dying and the wounded. That was the end of the battle of Black Friday.

Now, as you can see here, this was a piece of ground that led uphill. Along the top of that high ground was actually the road which led out of Walcheren and Beveland, through Bergen Op Zoom and Breda and on into Germany. This was a focal point for the Germans. If the Canadians were going to be stopped, it had to be right at that high ground. The guns of Woensdrecht strike fear into the hearts of every infantryman who survived that battle. They were dug in along the top

of what was a dyke and a road. So after the terrible debacle of Black Friday, which took place over there, the Brigadier said, "We must capture this high ground." And so the commanding officer of the Rileys said there is only one way to capture the German guns of Woensdrecht: in a night attack.

By 12:00 noon of the next day, the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry had captured the high ground, and the guns of Woensdrecht were silenced.

Let's move now to the high ground which was behind Woensdrecht. And from there we shall be able to see the commanding position that the Germans had, and I think we, once again, wonder how one battalion of Canadian infantry with the very small loss of life, very few casualties, was able to carry out a tremendous tactical victory.

Antwerp is about 20 kilometres due south of here. It took the Canadians a little more than two weeks of bitter fighting to get from the outskirts of Antwerp to where they had captured the heights of Woensdrecht. If the British had kept going on September 4<sup>th</sup>, they could have been here in an hour.

From Woensdrecht Heights the Canadians received more bad news: they were going to have to fight their way through to the end of the island of Walcheren, and under normal conditions, they might have expected, at the very least, that they would get bombing support. When that idea hit the desk of Air Marshall Tedder, the deputy supreme commander, he said no. He said, "I think the Canadians have become drugged with bombs. We're not going to give them any more aerial support. We'll let them see what they can do as infantryman with their own weapons."

As you can see, once the Canadians got past Woensdrecht, the land was very flat, very wet and soggy. Not the kind of ground over which you could use armoured vehicles, but perfect for aerial bombardment against the German strong points, an example of where bombs would have saved many Canadian lives.

By about the middle of October 1944, the lead Canadian infantry troops had reached this area. We called it Isthmus, and I'll show you on the map just about where we were at that time. As you know, Antwerp was the prize and it was being held by the Germans on the south side and on the north side. After the battle for Woensdrecht, the Canadians had to head up this causeway, and you can see what they were facing, Germans dug in, pill boxes. The Canadians were fighting on foot. This land was flooded. There was very little artillery. There was very little aerial support for a number of reasons, including the weather.

Now those who write about wars are very fond of saying that the only thing that counts is when you win. And I suppose in a sense that's true. But if Canadians are to understand what their young men did here in 1944, they're going to have to look at some of the other factors that were involved in this battle. For example, the troops who went through here were fighting against enormous odds, and one of them was the lack of reinforcements.

Now, we're speaking here of what many Canadians who fought in the Scheldt battle, including myself, consider to be really the blackest disgrace of our country in wartime. The political masters in Ottawa were playing games with the lives of Canadian boys.

The conscription crisis came to a head in the fall of 1944. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of October the Minister of National Defence, former Colonel J.L. Ralston, had visited this area. Now mind you he was in the back areas where he was talking to the commanders. And he got the news for himself. One General wrote of Ralston's trip and I quote:

*"In order to provide at least some reinforcements, cooks and batmen were being sent into battle. They were untrained, and it was an act of murder."*

This General went on to say that the conscripts must be sent over. Mackenzie King and his cabinet colleagues could no longer play political games with the lives of Canadian soldiers. Mackenzie King then fired Ralston; got himself a new General and cabinet authorized 15,000 infantry trained men to go into battle. Fifteen thousand men came over. Unfortunately, it was far too late to help in the Battle of the Scheldt.

So you can get some idea from that, of just one of the many factors and it's why we call this film ***Against All Odds***, because despite all that the Canadians came through this area. They put the boots to the best that the Germans had, and they kept going. But at one terrible, terrible cost.

This is about as good a place as I am going to find to tell Marcel's story. As I sit in front of an immense German bunker, you can still see the gun apertures. Those walls are probably six feet thick. Marcel was born in Rivière-du-Loup in Quebec. When he was 17, he wanted to join the army. But his mother had lost two brothers in World War I and she said no.

Three weeks from the time that Marcel walked in front of the orderly room and signed the document that he could go overseas, he came

up to the Regiment de Maisonneuve as a reinforcement, right in this very area. He knew a little bit about the typewriter. He knew damn all about the modern weapons of the infantryman at that time.

His platoon commander said something to him like this, 'Son, keep your head down and watch the old boys.'

We have Marcel's story, and as nearly as we can recapture the date and the place and the time, it was in the polder lands, about a 100 feet from where I am sitting, that Marcel drew his last breath on earth.

By the way, this is quiet today. This is peaceful, but not in those days of October 1944. The roaring of the "moaning minnies," as we call them, those were German mortars that were intended to kill you, but they were intended to scare the hell out of you too. And the crashing down of the artillery shells all round them, the rattle and the chatter of the machine guns. All being inflicted upon a young man of 18, who mark you, three weeks earlier had been working in an orderly room in Canada. That was Marcel's war. His body was never found.

This immense bunker on Beveland in the north fell to the Regiment de Maisonneuve on October 25<sup>th</sup>. The battle for the south part of the Scheldt was just starting. So let's go to the Leopold Canal.

This is the Leopold Canal, which is actually the border between Belgium and Holland. You'll be hearing more about the Battle of the Leopold. But as a prelude, the Algonquin Regiment from North Bay, Ontario, was sent on a suicide mission across this Canal in a night attack using little pontoon boats. They were literally wiped out, and those that survived swam back onto the Belgium side and went into reserve.

It will be recalled that, in the early part of the film, we explained how the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division had moved north from Antwerp up through Hoogerheide, Woensdrecht and along the Isthmus. There was also a planned "Switchback," which was going to clear the whole Breskens Pocket, and that battle started right where we are here on the Leopold Canal. To go back in time, it would be the day of October 5<sup>th</sup> when the 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division moved into positions just in behind the Leopold Canal. Also, to place ourselves geographically, you will note that this is Holland and below is Belgium. And the border starts between Knokke and Cadzand and runs sort of helter skelter down through here, and it is actually part of the Leopold Canal at this place where we are now standing. Then the border runs up through here down along this way, back through here, across the Scheldt and up through Putte. That means that the main objective of the Allies was at Antwerp. It also means that in order to clear the waterway into Antwerp, the Canadians were fighting in the north in Holland and up

through Belgium across the Holland border. The objective of Operation Switchback, was that the Canadians were to cross the Leopold Canal, drive straight north to the coast, eliminate the tremendous German gun battery at Cadzand, capture the port of Breskens and then move easterly eliminating all of the German gun batteries which were denying to the Allies the use of the Scheldt waterway into Antwerp.

I wanted to hunch down low on this dyke to provide some idea of the perspective of what happened here on the night of October 5, 1944. The North Shore Regiment brought up the canvas assault boats, carrying them over these fields and lying them right along the slope of this dyke, so that when the signal came, there would be time to grab the assault boats, carry them up over the top of the dyke, down the slope on the other side and into the water.

At 0400 in the morning, the North Shore grabbed their Kapok assault boats and went up over this canal. We followed them. About this time the flame throwers were shooting streams of liquid fire across the canal. We could hear the Germans screaming. Some of them alight like torches, running up and down among those trees. Approximately one half of the people who had gotten into the boats made it to the far side. However, those who did were able to scramble up that bank, and we had done the impossible. We had crossed the Leopold Canal and captured the German positions on the far side.

We're now on the far side of the Leopold Canal bank. The Germans were dug in on the rear slope. Some of their fortifications were concrete bunkers, some were made of logs. But they had a complete field of fire across the canal. When we got here we spread out in both directions, and the Germans had withdrawn further north. There were roads leading from the north into the canal banks. And the Germans had those roads covered with fixed line machine gun fire.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade stayed on this position for an unbelievable six days and never got off it. There was no way. The polder lands out here were flooded. You couldn't walk in them. If you tried to move along the German roads you wouldn't get 10 yards until you came under intense heavy fire. After six days the General staff realized that there had to be another way to get to the coast in the north, and thank God they gave the order to withdraw.

I went over the Leopold Canal with the Royal Winnipeg Rifles as an officer on October 6<sup>th</sup>, and we made this German bunker our headquarters. In fact it was exactly this location where I was wounded by a German shell. By that time the 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade had been in continuous action since D-Day on June 6<sup>th</sup>. We of course took a terrible shellacking here, and I think it's true to say, that almost the

last of the originals who had joined away back in 1939 and 1940 were gone from us. Maybe we should go and see where they are buried in soil that will forever be Canada.

McGwyer, St. John, Ward, Halliday, Giles, Corporal Single, Heeks, Jacinski, Volet; oh my God, Choquet. Jimmy Kerr, I served with him right from the start. There but for the grace of God it would be me.

While the 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was getting ready to cross the Leopold Canal here, the 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade made a wide sweeping movement around here, back across the border of Belgium into Holland and down towards the Braakman Inlet. When they reached this point, they were stopped dead because the Germans had strongly fortified the far side of the Braakman Inlet. Also, they did not have too much time to waste right here because the Germans were bringing all of this area under heavy artillery fire from Westkapelle and from Flushing.

In 1944, this Braakman Inlet opened out to the Scheldt, and it was about three kilometres across its mouth. It is now fully blocked off by a dyke.

On October 9<sup>th</sup>, the 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade swept around in their Buffaloes and landed here at Hoofdplaat. The next afternoon they were followed by the 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade in the Buffaloes, who took the same route and landed a bit south of Hoofdplaat, and commenced an attack down towards Biervliet.

This monument is erected near Hoofdplaat. The wording says it all:

*"Freedom. Thanks to the Canadian army which landed here on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 1944."*

It's a very unusual monument. It shows firstly the rifle, which is the infantryman's weapon. But it also shows the tracked vehicles, which were so very necessary to fight in this land of dykes and canals and polder land.

This is a Sherman tank. This vehicle was called a "priest," a self-propelled gun on tracks. This was the famous Buffalo which could carry up to 10 to 30 men across water, across mud. There was nothing that could stop it. Particularly without the Buffalo, this landing could never have been made.

The factory in the far distance, is on the other side of the Braakman Inlet. That was the spot from which the Canadians took off in their Buffaloes. They went out into the Scheldt and at this point the Canadian army chemical warfare unit came into play. They laid down

a tremendous smoke screen. The Germans thought it was just another fog in the Scheldt. How wrong they were, because the Canadians landed, made their way across this marshland and up over the dykes.

I am standing now on the ruins of Fort Frederik Hendrik. It had been developed by the Germans as their principle stronghold, in what is the most northerly part of the south of the Scheldt area. Across there is Walcheren Island and Flushing. The Canadians, in some two and a half weeks of bitter fighting, had come up from the Braakman Inlet, across dykes, canals, polderland. They had captured 14 or 15 Dutch villages which the Germans were holding, and eventually had taken Breskens (that was the North Nova Scotia Regiment's job) on October 22<sup>nd</sup>. They were then in a position to turn westward and clear the entire coastal area between Breskens and Knokke-Heist in Belgium. That was to be a very difficult struggle.

This is now October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1944. The battle for the southern part of the Scheldt Estuary started on October 6<sup>th</sup>, when the 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade went over the Leopold Canal right about here. They didn't get anywhere, and so they launched the 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade attack in the Buffaloes. This water brigade landed about here on the Dutch coast, and they captured Hoofdplaat, Schoondijke, Breskens and on to Cadzand. Cadzand was the site of the largest German gun emplacement in the southern part of the Scheldt.

This command post I'm sitting on is 35 feet underground. It gives you some idea of the importance of this particular battery. It was taken by the Regina Rifles on October 20<sup>th</sup>.

As you can see, I'm just climbing out of one of the German bunkers. The sad irony of the Battle of the Scheldt in this area, is that when the Canadians did finally capture this battery, the Dutch Resistance (the Underground) told them that the Germans here had already given up to the Dutch as early as September 4<sup>th</sup>. It took six hard weeks and many, many lives to take it eventually.

I'm sitting in front of the monument to the Belgian Resistance fighters who helped clear the Scheldt Estuary. This morning we witnessed a very moving ceremony where some 43 years after the Germans were driven from this area something like 2,700 Belgian people saluted the members of the Belgian Secret Army.

As one of the freedom fighters told me this morning, "Because the Allies thought at first that we, the freedom fighters, might be traitors, they chose to ignore our help and thus Hitler had time to regroup his forces." Looking back on it now, that was the fact which must have caused many more casualties among both the Canadians and the

Belgian resistance than would have been necessary, had we been able to work together.

This is the beach at Knokke-Heist. This marked the end of the clearing of the southern part of the Scheldt. The Canadians took it. I am told that almost as a comic opera hundreds and hundreds of Germans came marching in over this sand with their hands in the air saying, "All is kaput! All is kaput!"

This beacon at Knokke-Heist in Belgium marks the final objective of the Battle for the south part of the Scheldt. Let's go back to the Beveland area now where the battle is still raging in the north.

Just to explain how far we are in the battle right now, this is Antwerp. The Canadians came up through here, through Hoogerheide, through Woensdrecht, along the Isthmus, on to South Beveland and right to this very spot which is the eastern end of the causeway.

Standing here, 40 plus years after the event, one has to wonder how the Canadians ever did it at all. How they, with no artillery, no aerial bombardment, were able to drive the Germans out of this line of bunkers. But they did it.

Let's go back in time now to October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1944. Possibly the children back in Canada were playing trick-or-treat, but it was no trick-or-treat for the Canadians who were trying to capture this causeway.

I'm going to try to explain next what happened in this Battle for the Walcheren Causeway, this thin strip of ground which joins South Beveland to Walcheren Island. This is known as the Sloe. It was flooded at high tide. At low tide you could see some land, but none of it you could walk on. It was just mud and ooze. I'm going to try to reconstruct what happened on that night that the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade had to take the Causeway.

From the east end, down there, the Black Watch had the job of leading off. They got as far as just in front of that crane. And they were driven to ground and had to dive into the mud on either side of the dyke.

Then it was the Calgary's turn, still night, Germans still firing everything they had. The Calgarys moved up, perhaps three to four hundred metres, losing men every step of the way, but advancing towards the objective which was Walcheren Island.

By five, say six o'clock in the morning, after a crazy, confused night, the Canadians finally had their toehold on Walcheren Island. To get there, they had to come up this narrow strip of land about one

kilometre in length. Today it's a major highway.

On the last day of October in 1944, it was another kind of road, a road that was littered with dead bodies. But a road also that has written a page of valour into the history of Canada. To move north from Antwerp about 10 kilometres and to turn east and capture the whole north of the Scheldt, we were looking at probably three days. But because of the decision to stop at Antwerp, it took nearly two months of some of the most intensive fighting in any land battle in World War II for the Canadians to get this far, to get to where they had a toehold across the Causeway on Walcheren, at a cost roughly estimated at 1,500 Canadian dead.

I guess the tragedy of it all though, is that nobody would listen to the Dutch Resistance. The Dutch Resistance had told the Canadians and the higher command right from the start; you don't have to go across that Causeway. They said, "Look, you can forge across the Sloe." And that's, of course, exactly what the British did four days later.

By about the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> of November, the Canadians finally made it to Middleburg. By that time this whole island was under water with the exception of this town at the centre and a few of the coastal areas. Necessarily the dykes had to be bombed, and in fact, this island sunk into the ocean as a defensive measure.

Today, I am in front of this beautiful, beautiful town hall. They tell me it is one of the most remarkable structures in all of Europe. The other thing about it is that it was blown to pieces during the war. And the quiet, patient Dutch put it back together again, literally brick by brick.

I think the thing that would strike most Canadians is the welcome that we get when we come to Walcheren, bearing in mind that we flooded their island; we ruined their land with salt water, although it has now recovered, we blew up practically every standing structure on the island. And yet these wonderful people look upon us as friends, look upon us as the people who liberated them. They accepted the cost of that to get the Germans out of their country.

This is Flushing, one of the major objectives of the Canadians in the drive to clear the Scheldt Estuary. This particular position was held by German coastal troops, but in the last days of Walcheren the Germans put fanatical Hitler Youth into these bunkers to make sure there would be no surrender. This bunker was taken in a seaward assault where the landing craft came in, deposited their armoured vehicles which came up what is known as the hards, or the beach area, and came in behind this particular position. I'm perched right now on top of the observation tower of one of 11 heavily fortified coastal installations that the Germans had built and upon which they

had placed their last hopes to stop the Allies from entering the port of Antwerp.

We're now at Westkapelle, which was really the end of the battle for the north side of the Estuary. The Canadians came up from Antwerp through Hoogerheide, along the Isthmus, across South Beveland, the terrible costly fight for the Causeway, down through here and up through here. Westkapelle was the site of an enormous German gun battery and from this position there is no doubt that the German gunners had complete control of the Scheldt. Without taking this position there was no way that the Allies could move even one ship the 50 kilometres down into Antwerp.

We're standing in front of a Sherman tank, and I think it's important to realize that before even one tank could have reached this final destination, it cost something like 6,500 casualties in two months of the most bitter fighting one could imagine. This, to the German, was his last stand. He had no alternative. The Canadians and the other troops had pushed him right back onto this island and he was fighting to the last man and the last round, as they say in military terms. That probably was another one of the factors when we say that the battle for the Scheldt was a battle **Against All Odds**.