

The Cruellest Month

Canadian military historians have generally paid slight attention to the operations carried out by [1st Canadian Army](#) in April 1945.

It is almost as if the great battles of February and March in the Rhineland exhausted the historians just as they wore down the men who fought there in 1945. April is instead remembered as the month of the liberation of Holland, “the sweetest of springs.”

But April was also the cruelest month, for if the war was all but won, the killing did not stop. The military cemeteries in Holland contain the graves of 1,191 Canadian soldiers killed in April and 114 who lost their lives during the last five days of the war in May. Their story and the record of the reunited 1st Cdn. Army are well worth examining.

On March 27, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery issued a new directive that began with the words “*We have won the battle of the Rhine.*” Montgomery proceeded to outline his plans for the final phase of the war which focused on operations aimed at Northern Germany and Berlin. Supreme Allied Commander Dwight D. *Eisenhower’s* negative response to this directive created *one of the great controversies of the war*, which we will examine in a future article, but for the moment we can explore the consequences of the one strategic issue that Ike and Monty agreed upon—Canadian operations to liberate the western Netherlands and establish a supply route through Arnhem and Apeldoorn to support 2nd British Army’s advance into Germany.

Lieutenant-General Charles Foulkes’s 1st Cdn. Corps, newly arrived from Italy, took over control of the Nijmegen bridgehead, with 49th British Division under command, on March 15. The Yorkshiremen of the West Riding Div. had served in 1st Cdn. Army since the previous August and there were no difficulties with the new arrangement.

Foulkes accepted the plans prepared by the British division for an attack on the German positions south of the Rhine River and 5th Cdn. Armoured Div. supported the British advance, forcing the Germans to retreat to the north bank of the river.

The army commander, General Harry Crerar, decided to delay a direct attack on Arnhem until the city and its defenders were cut off by an

advance across the IJssel River to Apeldoorn. This in turn depended upon the success of 3rd Cdn. Div. in clearing the east bank of the river and the cities of Zutphen and Deventer.

As the Canadians prepared for these operations they were confronted with a new set of problems. Reports from the old provinces of Holland, including the cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam, indicated that the terrible conditions of the “*hunger winter*” were continuing and the people of western Holland were facing starvation.

The Nazi governor, *Seyss Inquart*, who had *deliberately created the food shortage* in retaliation for the actions of the Dutch resistance, now *threatened to flood much of Holland* as a defensive measure. If military action was the answer, all possible speed was required.

First Div., waiting in the Rhineland, was placed under the command of Guy Simonds’s 2nd Cdn. Corps. Formation patches and divisional signs were removed and the division was brought north to woods in the vicinity of Gorssel while 3rd Div. captured Zutphen. Major-General Harry Foster held his O group on April 10 and outlined the plan for the first phase of *Operation Cannonshot*.

Foster selected 2nd Cdn. Infantry Brigade, (the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry, the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, the Loyal Edmonton Regiment) to make the assault crossing of the IJssel River.

Each brigade in 1st Div. had one battalion from a Permanent Force regiment and two militia battalions. This distinction had been of some importance during training in England but by 1945 very few officers and non-commissioned officers who served in the early years of the war were still around and the battalions were staffed with the products of Brockville and other officer training schools, while many senior NCOs were former privates.

This citizen army had acquired a high degree of professionalism, particularly at the staff level and in the supporting arms. Infantry rifle companies suffered such high casualties that the ever-changing mix of officers and NCOs makes generalization about comparative combat effectiveness impossible. A battalion that distinguished itself in 1944 might still carry the same proud name in 1945 but it was made of different men. Sydney Frost, a Captain in the Patricias during *Operation Cannonshot*, noted that just two officers who had landed with the Patricias in Sicily were still with the battalion in April 1945. Despite the turnover regimental traditions and reputations lived on.

The 2nd Cdn. Inf. Bde. had long been considered the outstanding brigade in the Canadian army. During his famous 1942 inspection, Montgomery, who was unimpressed with then divisional commander George Pearkes and most other senior Canadian officers [..], declared that the 2nd could be the best brigade in all the Commonwealth armies. “*The PPCLI,*” he wrote, “*have the best officers, the Seaforths the best NCOs and the Edmontons the best men.*”

After Sicily and Ortona and the promotion of brigadier-generals Chris Vokes and Bert Hoffmeister to divisional commands, the reputation of the 2nd Bde. was set for all time. One result was that it got more than its share of high profile operations.

Brig.-Gen. M.P. Bogert, a veteran of the Italian Campaign, was now in command and he planned *the assault crossing* within the framework of a corps artillery plan. The battalions were introduced to the *Buffalo*, a Landing Vehicle Tracked, which could enter and leave the water on most gradients while providing 30 men with protection from small arms fire.

The corps plan called for an elaborate “smoke box” created by smoke generators and concentrations of medium and heavy artillery on prearranged targets with virtually unlimited artillery on call down to company level.

Medium bombers were to hit on prearranged targets and *Typhoon aircraft* were on call. This was war in a new style for those who had fought in Italy.

In his memoirs, *Once A Patricia*, Syd Frost writes: “*The more I saw of the orderly, deliberate way the Canadian Army (in Northwest Europe) went about its tasks, the more I liked doing business with them.*”

Operation *Cannonshot*, after a delay of 24 hours was launched at 3:30 p.m. on April 11. *The enemy appeared to be totally surprised.* Apparently ignorant of 1st Div.’s presence they assumed that the attack would come from 3rd Div.’s at Deventer. The initial opposition came from small German battle groups built around one or two self-propelled guns. The Seaforths and PPCLI used their *PIAT* (Projector, Infantry, Anti-Tank) guns until the first anti-tank guns got across the river. By 9 p.m. the bridgehead was “snug”. German reserves reached the area at midnight and in accordance with their doctrine counterattacked immediately.

Military historians have long argued that the German army was particularly effective on the battlefields of World War II because of its

training and commitment to mission tactics. The German army's Instructions On The Command of Troops insisted that "*decisive action remains the prerequisite for success in war. Everybody from the highest commander to the youngest soldier must be conscious of the fact that inactivity and lost opportunities weigh heavier than do errors in the choice of means.*"

In other words, if in doubt, attack. Perhaps this doctrine has merits in the abstract but the Allies had long since learned that German battlefield behaviour was amazingly predictable. That is why competent Allied commanders insisted on digging-in after an assault rather than exploiting their initial success. Why, they reasoned, risk an encounter battle when the enemy will come to you allowing your artillery, mortars and machine-guns to destroy them with observed fire?

This is precisely what happened in the IJssel bridgehead. The *Seaforths* and *PPCLI* repulsed hastily mounted counterattacks, taking more than 200 prisoners and inflicting heavy casualties. The Loyal Eddies joined them, and by dawn the engineers had a bridge in place and the tanks of the First Hussars were across in preparation for the next phase.

The plan now called for Brig.-Gen. J.D.B. Smith's 1st Cdn. Inf. Bde. (Royal Canadian Regt., 48th Highlanders, Hastings and Prince Edward Regt.) to advance east along the axis of the Apeldoorn-Deventer railway to the airfield at Teague [Teuge] while Brig.-Gen. J.P.E. Bernatchez's 3rd Cdn. Inf. Bde. (Royal 22nd Regt., Carleton and York Regt. and West Nova Scotia Regt.) was directed south of Apeldoorn to prepare an assault crossing of the canal in the event 1st Bde. ran into difficulty.

With the 48th Highlanders leading, 1st Bde. moved swiftly west. Resistance was spotty but one burst of shell fire struck the command group killing Lieutenant-Colonel D.A. Mackenzie, the Highlanders, commanding officer. The RCRs (Lieutenant-Colonel D.A. Reid) with C Squadron of the First Hussars took over the lead and by noon on the 13th were less than one mile from Apeldoorn.

The plan to pause at the airfield and prepare a co-ordinated attack across the Apeldoorn canal north of the city was abandoned when the *Dutch resistance reported* that the main road bridge over the canal, in the heart of the city, was intact [..]. At first light on the 14th the RCR-Hussar battle group fought its way toward the bridge which was well protected by anti-tank guns.

The Hussars lost two tanks, including one which tried to smash through a road block. North of the city the bridges were blown and patrols from the Hasty Ps established that the canal was strongly defended.

To the south, 3rd Bde. was held up by a strong enemy position until Bernatchez ordered the lead battalions to bypass the resistance and head for the canal. The Royal 22nd Regt., as the reserve battalion, was ordered to deal with the enemy and did so by assaulting the woods from the rear. It then joined its sister battalions along the canal two kilometres south of Apeldoorn.

It was now the evening of April 15. Operation *Cannonshot*, which had begun with such great promise four days earlier, *was in danger of deteriorating into a series of costly piecemeal attacks.*

Major-General Harry Foster did nothing to help the situation when he ordered 1st Bde. to continue operations to attack across the canal in the centre of Apeldoorn. To the north and south of the city the enemy had created a thin crust of defences based on the western bank of the canal. A set-piece attack with the kind of assets used in the crossing of the much wider IJssel would bring certain success and force the enemy to abandon the city or risk encirclement. Fighting to clear city streets in a town full of friendly civilians and refugees was not a brilliant idea. *No one could use tactical air or serious artillery fire against a Dutch city*, so the infantry and tanks would have to do it one house at a time [..].

The *RCRs* and *48th Highlanders* went about their task carefully. With the BBC reporting that the Red Army was in the suburbs of Berlin and the Germans seeking a truce in western Holland, no one wanted to take unnecessary casualties in what appeared to be the last days of the war. The attack quickly turned into a stalemate. The forward companies were “pinned down by arty, mortar and machine-gun fire” and the supporting tanks were bogged down trying an indirect approach to the canal. A request for *Crocodiles* to flame the basements of houses along the canal was refused, as none were immediately available.

The best solution seemed to be an assault crossing of the canal south of the city by 3rd Bde. Bernatchez was warned to plan such an attack but as divisional engineers and artillery prepared to provide support the situation suddenly changed. The army commander *wanted bridges across the river at Zutphen*, and ordered 2nd Bde. south. The Germans had abandoned the area because 5th Cdn. Armd. Div. had entered Arnhem and turned east, threatening to cut off the enemy.

This manoeuvre allowed 2nd Bde. to do an unopposed crossing of the Apeldoorn canal and then advance north, turning the enemy positions in front of 3rd Bde. The Germans withdrew as fast as they could run, abandoning equipment and the city of Apeldoorn. Syd Frost recalls that, *“The War Diarist of the Loyal Edmonton Regiment could not restrain his envy of the staff cars, vehicles, household wares, food and other loot left behind by the Germans [..] for the Patricias: ‘the PPCLI had been busy on our night capturing hundreds of wandering enemy with so much loot that most of the Patricias were offering to resign their positions as privates and go home to live in a manner befitting their status as millionaires.’”*

RCR patrols reported the enemy was gone and on April 17 the regiment was in the centre of the city. The joy of the Dutch population knew no bounds. It had appeared as if their garden city was to become a battleground and now almost miraculously the fighting had ended. Canadian veterans who return to Apeldoorn for the anniversaries of the liberation know that memories of 1945 are still warm.

First Div. suffered 506 casualties, more than 100 of them fatal, in the six days of Operation CannonsHOT. Most of 1st Bde.’s 184 losses came in the fighting for Apeldoorn, a battle which was allowed to continue despite previous experience with the costs of clearing urban areas. The contrast between the first phase of CannonsHOT with its careful preparation and full use of the army’s skills and resources and the improvised operation in the suburbs of Apeldoorn needs to be underlined.

Granting subordinate commanders wide latitude to devise and carry out their own measures within the overall framework of the commanders intention has enormous appeal for professional soldiers and military theorists, but the experience of both the German and Allied armies in Northwest Europe suggests that success in battle was almost always due to the co-ordinated application of overwhelming force requiring the exercise of command and control at the most senior levels. Operation CannonsHOT was no exception.

Bron: Legion Magazine/Terry Copp