

The 2015 Ross Ellis Memorial Lecture

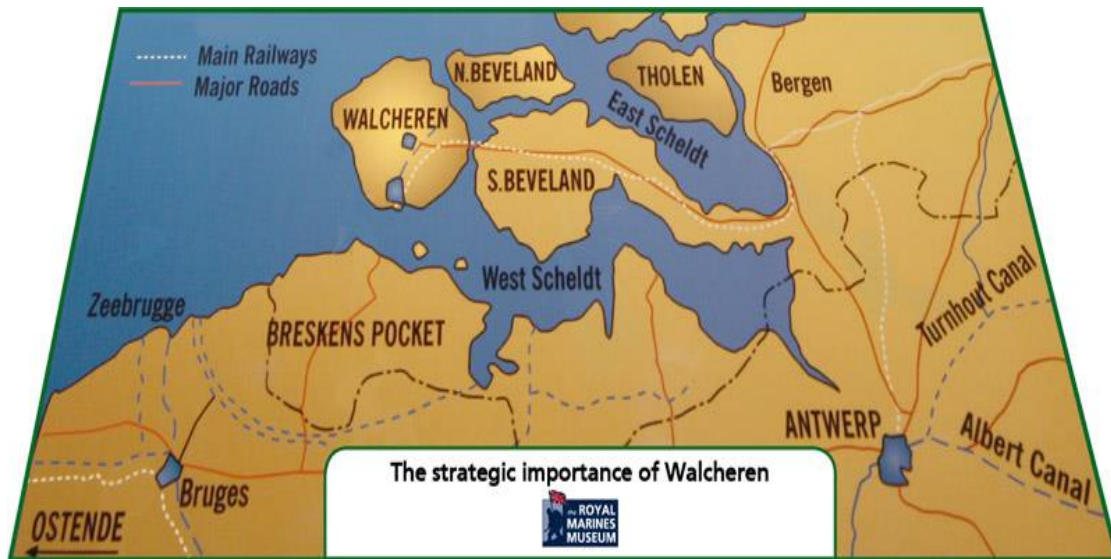
*A Perfectly Engineered Killing Ground:
Calgary Highlanders and the Walcheren Causeway Battle*

Mark Zuehlke

On October 31, 1944, 2nd Canadian Infantry Division's 4th Brigade fought its way through to eastern approaches leading onto the Walcheren Causeway. This achievement set the stage for one of the bitterest battles that the Calgary Highlanders Regiment faced in World War II. It was a battle that was also the first major leadership test for Ross Ellis, who this annual lecture series honours, since his promotion to command of the regiment just twenty-one days earlier. Tonight's lecture is intended to not only tell the story of the battle for Walcheren Causeway, but also through that story to examine an exemplary soldier's leadership style and command ability.

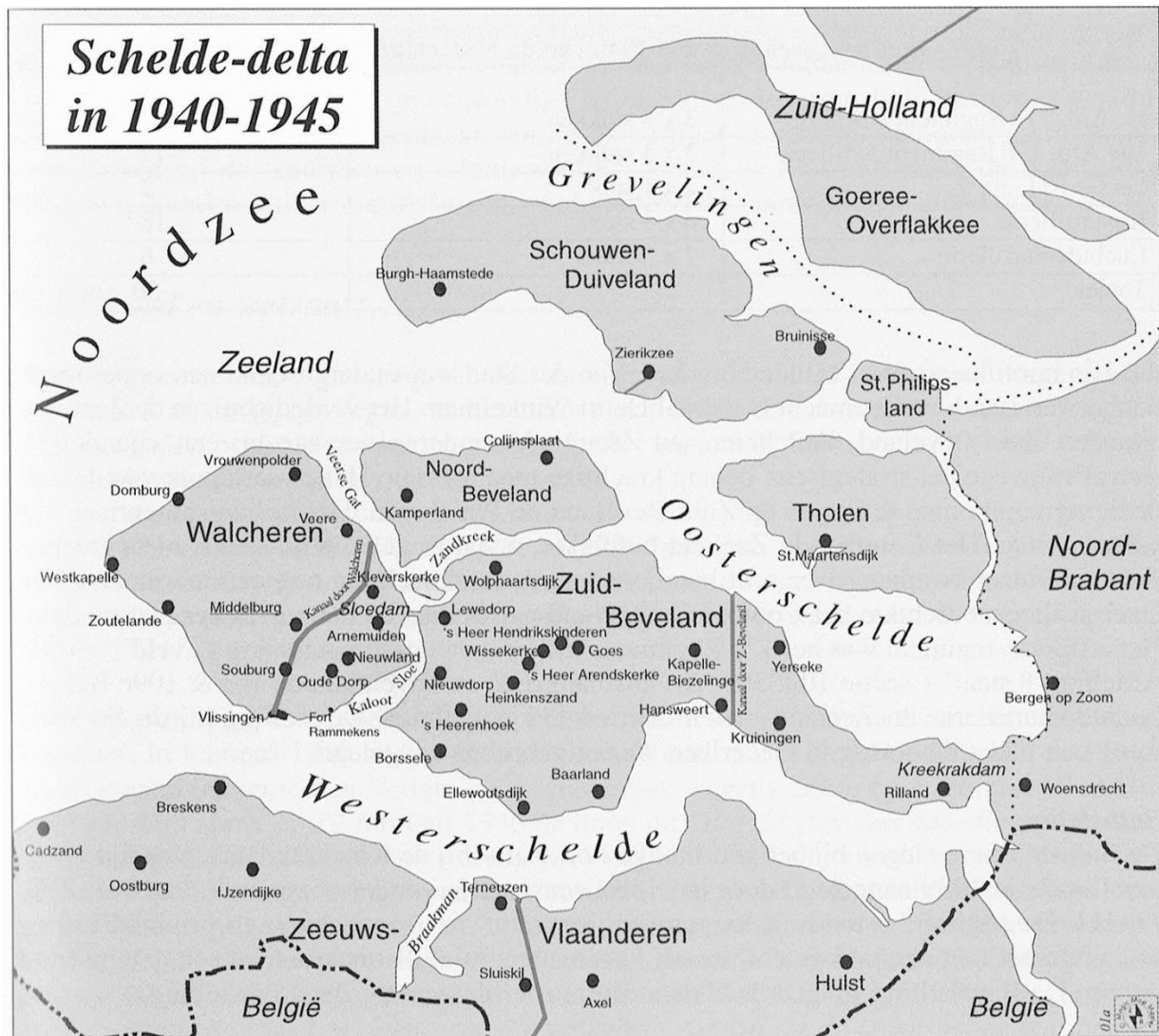
Much of this lecture draws on the research for the Walcheren Causeway section of my book on the Scheldt Estuary Campaign titled *Terrible Victory*. But I also want to acknowledge the contribution of a Walcheren Island Dutch historian Rene Hoebeke for his amazingly detailed Slagveld Sloedam (which means Battle of the Sloedam—the Dutch word for Causeway). Weighing in at 5.5 pounds and 928 pages this is the undisputed bible for the story of the Battle of the Walcheren Causeway, although the first half is dedicated to the 1940 battle between Dutch and German forces for its

control. Rene kindly gave me a copy of the book when I visited his home in 2004 and my Dutch historian colleague Johan van Doorn translated for me over the phone relevant portions that contributed greatly to understanding details of the Calgary Highlander battle that are not well known to us here in Canada.



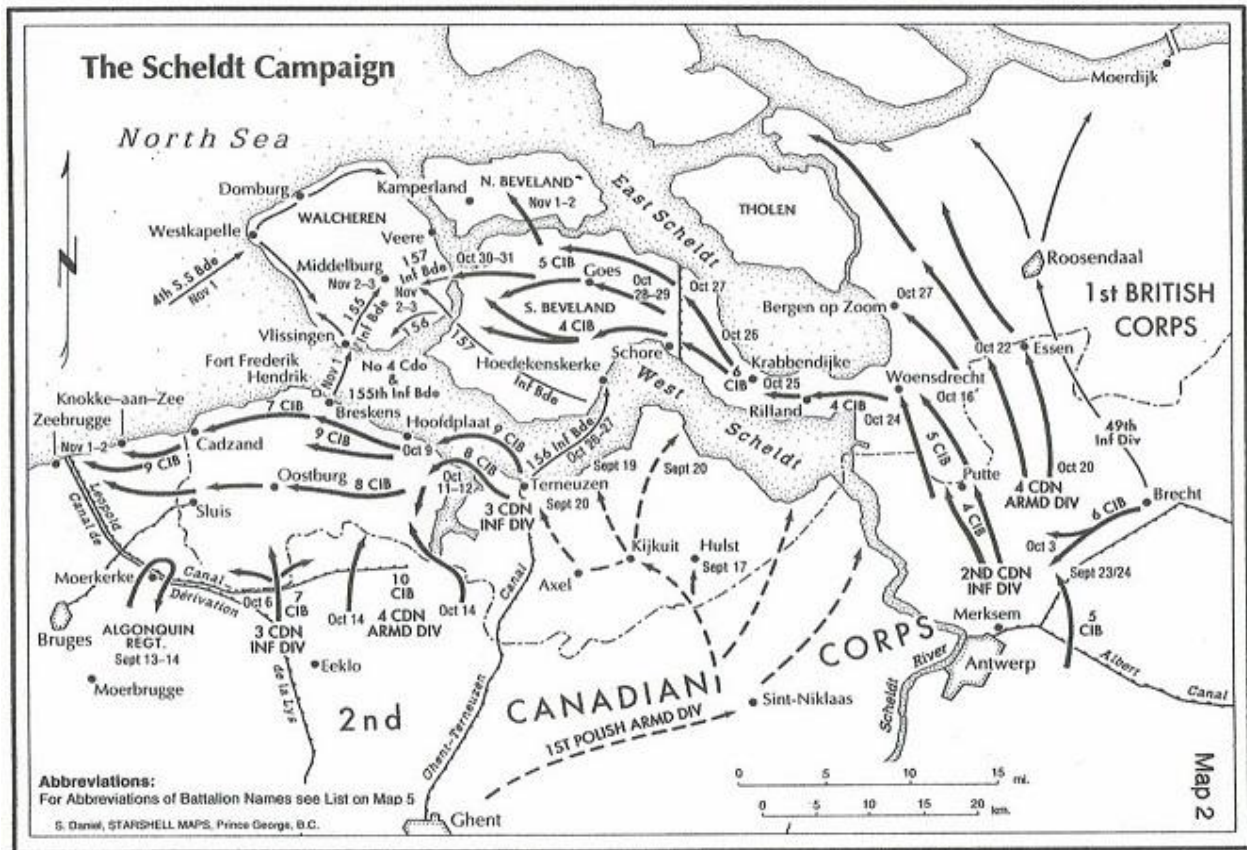
Map: The Strategic Importance of Walcheren.
Source: Mark Zuehlke

The path that led the Calgary Highlanders to the Walcheren Causeway started on September 4, 1944 when the tanks of the 11th British Armoured Division entered Antwerp, which was at the time Europe's largest port. Opening the port to Allied shipping was a key strategic goal because all supplies and reinforcements were still being brought in across the beaches in Normandy. Yet in a highly controversial decision it was decided to not complete securing the port facilities to the north of the city or to immediately clear the ground bordering the Scheldt Estuary or West Scheldt as it is sometimes called. Instead the British turned east to launch Operation Market Garden, the famous drive towards the Rhine that ultimately ended in failure. In the meantime, it fell to First Canadian Army to clear the Scheldt and open Antwerp to Allied shipping.



Map: Scheldt Delta, 1940-1945.
Source: Mark Zuehlke

The Germans were heavily ensconced on both sides of the West Scheldt. Walcheren Island was particularly heavily fortified with the only land connection provided the narrow causeway. To get to Walcheren by land meant advancing north from Antwerp to Woensdrecht and then pushing west across Zuid-Beveland (or South Beveland in English), then crossing the causeway.



Map: The Scheldt Campaign
 Source: Mark Zuehlke

There isn't time here to detail the entire campaign. But basically 3rd Infantry Division drew the duty of clearing the Breskens Pocket, 4th Armoured Division was concentrated on the mainland advance north from Antwerp to cut off the Germans within the estuary area. 2nd Division's task was to carry out the approach to South Beveland and then the drive westward to Walcheren Island. All three divisions faced extremely stiff opposition with their battalions suffering heavy casualties. By the time 5th Brigade of 2nd Division reached the causeway on October 31.

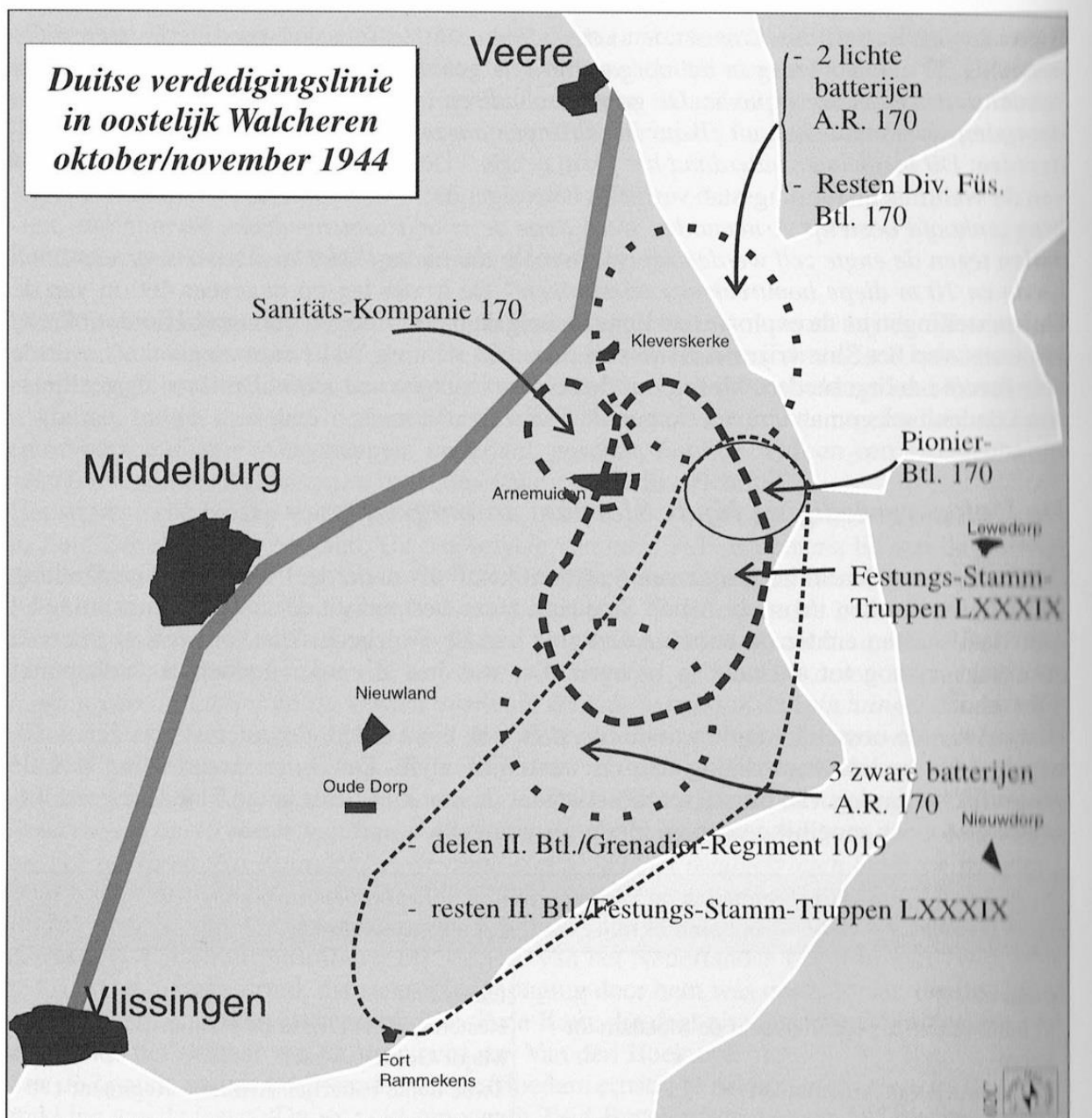
By this time plans were well advanced for two amphibious operations against the island under the codename of Operation Infatuate. Landings were scheduled for November 1 by British commandos at Westkapelle and Vlissingen. On South Beveland, brigades of the British 52nd (Lowland) Infantry Division were supporting 2nd Division

and 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade had been informed on the evening of October 30 that it would stand down and be pulled back for a deserved rest.



Walcheren Causeway.
Source: Mark Zuehlke

Early on the morning of October 31 the brigade was alerted that plans had changed and it was now required to advance across the causeway and establish a bridgehead on Walcheren. The causeway was a perfectly engineered killing ground. About 1,200 yards long and uniformly 40 yards wide it was straight as a gun barrel. There was no cover except for a few craters and some slit trenches that the Germans had dug for their own defence. Running the length of the causeway was a railway track, a cobbled road, and a bicycle path. The trees pictured here by this time had been shredded by artillery fire.



Map: German defenses, Eastern Walcheren causeway.
Source: Mark Zuehlke

The Germans had spent years strengthening the defences on the causeway's western end. At the very exit there was a large concrete wall that could be swiveled shut to entirely block the rail tracks and road. Loopholes had been cut into the wall to enable the Germans to fire from behind it. On both sides of the causeway stretched high

dykes and into these the Germans had burrowed out a network of bunkers and gun slits that bristled with machine guns. The immediate defences were held by the 170th Pioneer Battalion an engineering unit.



Depiction of German engineers.
Source: Mark Zuehlke

German engineers were not like British and Canadian engineers because they were first trained as infantry and then became engineering specialists. Engineer battalions were more heavily armed than general infantry battalions and often made up of tough veteran troops. This was the case with the 170th. Backing up the engineers were Fortress Troops of the 89th Corps. These were also well-trained troops under orders to surrender not an inch of ground. Together the Germans numbered about 1,000 men.



German artillery unit
Source: Mark Zuehlke

The Germans were also extremely strong in artillery with three batteries of about twenty guns each that were either 75 or 88-millimetres positioned close by. There were also three 88s so positioned that they could fire straight along the causeway. On the opposite side of the island at Domburg were several 150-millimetre guns (pictured here) and also a 220-millimetre coastal gun battery. These guns were well within range of the causeway and could bring devastating fire down upon it.



Coastal Battery on Walcheren
Source: Mark Zuehlke

The 220-millimetre coastal battery, visible here, was the only one of the large guns on Walcheren capable of a 360-degree rotation so that it could fire inland. All the others could only fire out to sea. This battery and the nearby 150-millimetre ones—which were easily rotated—posed a serious and unrecognized threat to the Canadian attackers. There were also numerous heavy and light mortars arrayed throughout the area.



25 pounder gun
Source: Mark Zuehlke

The Black Watch was tasked with carrying out the first attack. Fire support was to come from the 25-pounder guns of only the 5th Canadian Field Regiment. Because all the roads on South Beveland had been badly damaged by aerial bombing meant to disrupt German movement and turned into a mud-drenched quagmire by the heavy fall rains, 2nd Division was badly handicapped in getting artillery onto it and even more hampered in bringing ammunition to the guns. Consequently, and as the expectation at corps and divisional command was that the advance across the causeway would be easily won, the division's other two field regiments had been deployed across the Scheldt near Terneuzen to support the commando assault on Vlissingen.



Tanks in the mud.
Source: Mark Zuehlke

The deplorable road conditions were also why attempts to bring tanks up to support the attack had been abandoned. It was also felt that, even if the tanks could get up to the causeway without becoming hopelessly mired in the mud, there would be no cover to protect them from the known 88-millimetre guns at the opposite side of the causeway.



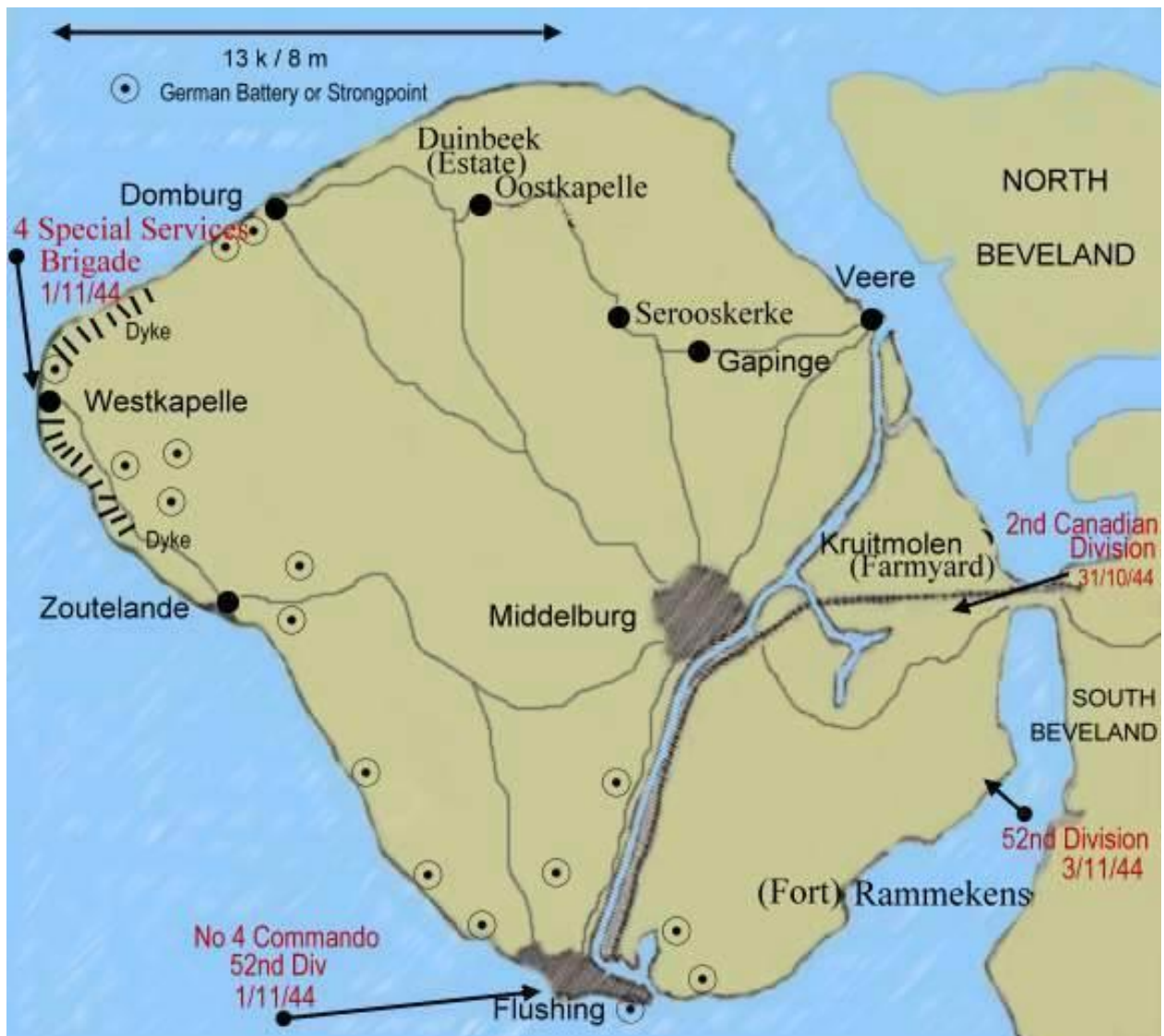
Brigadier Bill Megill
Source: Mark Zuehlke

5th Canadian Infantry Brigade's Brigadier Bill Megill did not want to advance his troops across the causeway. But orders from divisional and corps headquarters were adamant that the attack must be made to support the British commando landings scheduled for November 1.



Major General Charles Foulkes
Source: Mark Zuehlke

Because Lieutenant General Harry Crerar had fallen ill and been evacuated to hospital in England, the army was under Lieutenant General Guy Simonds' command. And II Corps was commanded by Major General Charles Foulkes, who was 2nd Division's commander. Foulkes was a politically cunning general with a marked talent for self-advancement. He was not an officer who would question orders or look for imaginative alternatives. Under pressure from Simonds to keep the Germans known to be facing the causeway pinned in place, he was determined that the causeway must be crossed and a bridgehead on Walcheren Island established.



Map: Walcheren Causeway
Source: Mark Zuehlke

There was some justification to the need to keep the Germans holding the causeway pinned in place. German doctrine called for rapid re-deployment of nearby forces to reinforce the troops wherever an Allied attack fell. It would take relatively little time to shift particularly the more competent engineer battalion along the road through Middelburg to Vlissingen (which the British called Flushing).



German bunker
Source: Mark Zuehlke

And so the Black Watch attacked. The supporting artillery fire had no effect against the German forward facing bunkers and slit trenches. Some Germans also waited out the artillery fire in bunkers like this that were hidden on the reverse flank of the dykes—able to race back to their firing positions the moment the shelling ceased. The Black Watch, already desperately understrength, was shredded. About 85 men were killed or wounded before the assault collapsed.



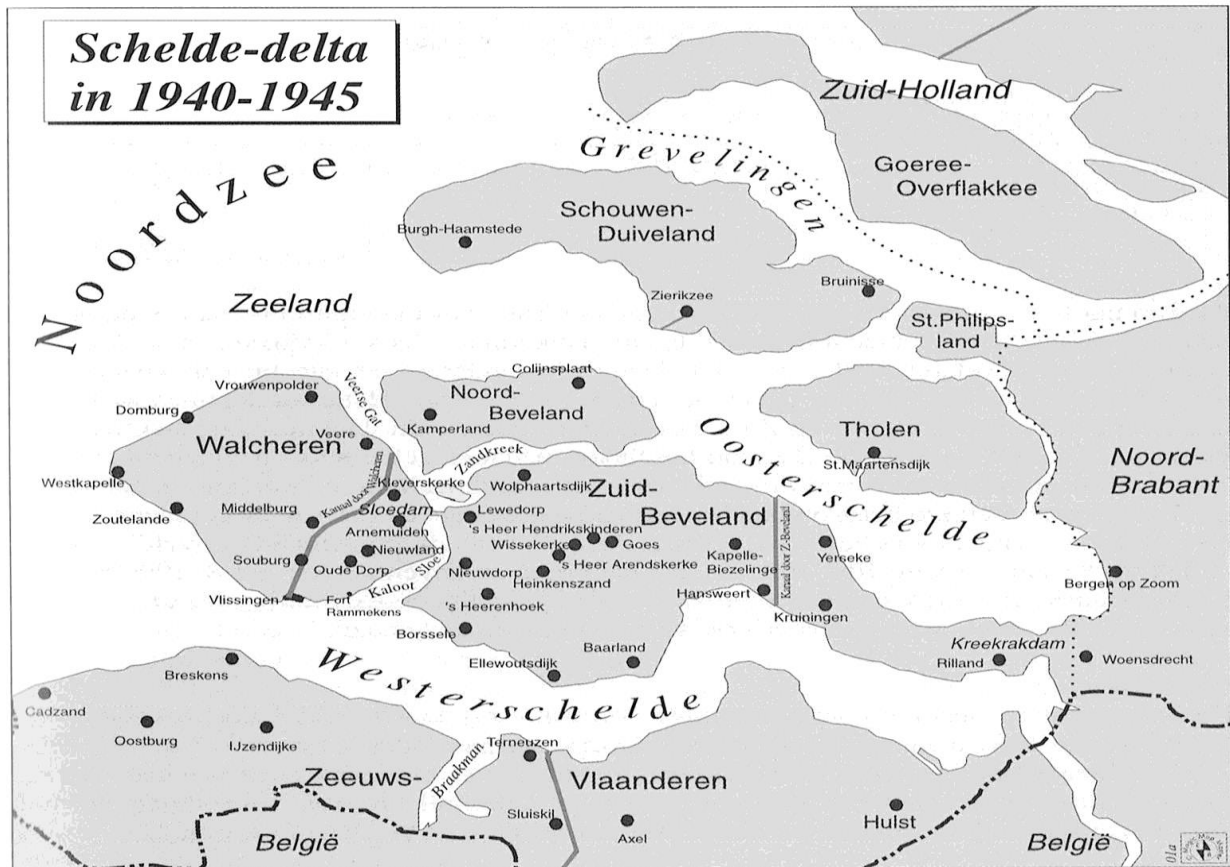
Major Ross Ellis (on the right)
Source: Mark Zuehlke

Major Ross Ellis, (pictured here on the right) had just shortly before been promoted to acting commander of the Calgary Highlanders. He watched the Black Watch attack with dismay. As a company commander, Ellis had built a reputation for being an officer who genuinely cared for the welfare of his men. He was also a leader who made a point of being up close to the front, always wearing his balmoral and never a helmet. This was not bravado, he explained to his wife, but a recognized need to “let them know I was there. It wasn’t because I was trying to be brave, or be a hero.” For their part, as the editor of the battalion paper put it, “Most of us have known him for a long time...there is a warm feeling for him deep down inside us. He’s not merely the finest soldier in the battalion; he’s a man among men, a man who has been through everything with us and who knows us better than we know ourselves.”



Walcheren causeway with extensive artillery fire damage
Source Mark Zuehlke

The causeway by this time had suffered extensive damage from artillery fire. But a major feature was also these large craters almost directly in the middle. Ellis knew that if his men were to get across they would need far heavier artillery support than what had been given to the Black Watch. At his insistence 5th Brigade's Brigadier Bill Megill arranged for the British Lowland Division's artillery to support the attack along with the single Canadian regiment. No heavy artillery units were within range as they were all on the southern bank of the Scheldt in order to support the commandos, so these 25-pounder regiments were all that was on offer.



Map: Scheldt Delta, 1940-1945.
 Source: Mark Zuehlke

The plan called for the Calgary regiment to advance with one company after another across the causeway and then spread out to form a bridgehead extending as far inland as the village of Arnemuiden. Thereafter the Regiment de Maisonneuve would exploit through this bridgehead and continue an advance towards Middelburg.



Walcheren Causeway
Source: Mark Zuehlke

It was a clear, cold night as Major Francis “Knobby” Clarke’s ‘B’ Company led the way forward to the causeway just before midnight on October 31. The other companies followed one after the other close behind. Spirits were high, one wag even boasting as the ‘O’ Group had broken up a few hours earlier that “Jerry would not forget the Halloween Party...the Calgary Highlanders calculated to put on for his benefit.” Before them stretched the causeway. ‘B’ Company advanced in single file with five yards distance between each man. They numbered about a 100 men.



Depiction of the conditions of the Causeway on the night of 31 October – 1 November 1944

Source: Mark Zuehlke and the Calgary Highlanders,
<http://www.calgaryhighlanders.com/transitions/2004events/2004walch.htm>

The Highlanders advanced quietly, before their artillery was hammering down on the dykes either side of the causeway. 'B' Company was halfway across, just about at the large craters when all hell broke loose around them. Intense machine-gun fire, fortunately mostly fired over their heads, forced the men to hunch. Then the artillery fire started falling on them and men began to die or fall wounded. The attack bogged down. 88-millimetre shells were screaming in and rather than exploding some of these rounds bounced off the cobbles to pinwheel through the ranks of the men. Wherever a sheltering hole presented itself men dove in for cover. Clarke radioed Ellis for permission to withdraw, which was quickly given. By 0300 the company had pulled back, dragging its wounded and some Black Watch wounded with it. Nobody was left behind.



Soldiers of the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals inspect a German slit trench near the Walcheren Causeway

Source: Mark Zuehlke and the Calgary Highlanders

<http://www.calgaryhighlanders.com/history/highlanders/1939-45/walcherencauseway.htm>

There was to be no respite, Ellis and Megill worked frantically to put together another artillery plan. This time all the guns would fire on a fairly flat trajectory straight into the dyke positions in an attempt to actually put shells straight into the mouth of slit trenches and bunkers, like this one, that contained an anti-tank gun. The guns would be firing across a narrow 750-yard frontage. Some of the guns would be dropping shells directly in front of the infantry with fifty-yard lifts every two minutes to keep ahead of the men. The creeping barrage that the Canadians used well and often.



Major Bruce MacKenzie
Source: Mark Zuehlke

'D' Company led this time under command of Major Bruce MacKenzie. Despite the creeping barrage the Germans began throwing artillery fire at the advancing men and the attack began to waver. Many of the men were young replacements and their

nerve was fraying. MacKenzie suddenly bellowed, "Come on, you sons of bitches!" and started running forward. The company raced after him.

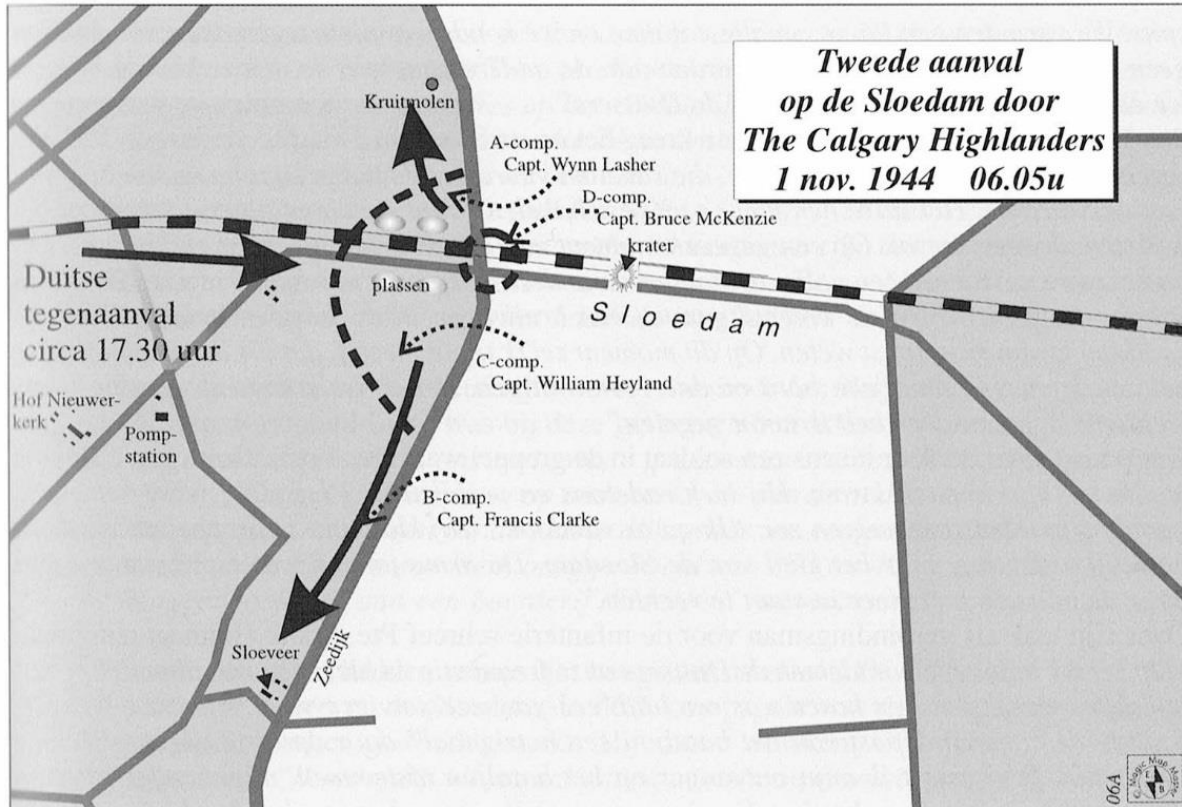


Assault on the Walcheren Causeway. Artist unknown.

Source: Mark Zuehlke and Archive Liberation Museum Zeeland <http://liberationroute.com/the-netherlands/historical-location/the-assault-on-the-walcheren-causeway>.

And so into the jaws of hell the Calgary Highlanders charged that morning shortly after dawn at 0652 hours right through the fire to the other side. Here they paused before the concrete obstacle for two minutes as artillery blasted it with fire, the shells screaming in no more than two feet above the heads of the Canadians. And then

the charge began again. Straight into withering MG42 machine-gun fire that knocked down one man after another. But the survivors fought their way over the obstacle and at 0933 hours MacKenze signaled that he was past the causeway.



Second Attack on the Causeway by the Calgary Highlanders, 1 November 1944

Source: Mark Zuehlke

With 'D' Company holding the gate literally open, the other companies came across the causeway and started widening the bridgehead. Soon a tenuous grip was won. But things were going badly. 'B' Company's wireless set was destroyed and it became pinned on the southern dyke. 'A' Company came up against a bunker complex and was stopped cold. Captain Wynn Lasher soon wounded with a bullet in the back and the only other officer also wounded. Again showing his penchant for leading from the front Ellis walked across the causeway and entered the bridgehead at 1545 hours.



Hawker Typhoons

Source: Mark Zuehlke and Daily News Dig, <http://dailynewsdig.com/classic-aircraft/>

This was about the same time that a squadron of Hawker Typhoons swept in to rocket German positions followed by the arrival to two Spitfire squadrons who threw down strafing fire. But nothing slowed the German fire coming at the Canadians.

And then Ellis realized that the Germans were counterattacking with a head-on drive alongside the railroad. Realizing the situation was hopeless, Ellis ordered a withdrawal. When MacKenzie tried to establish a holding position 300 yards out from the eastern end of the causeway with the remnants of 'B' and 'D' Company, Ellis told him to bring them out. Each company fielded no more than twenty men and he knew the battle was lost. The job now was to get the wounded out and keep more men from dying. He did not wait for permission from Megill to carry out the withdrawal. And that was typical of his leadership style. In a crisis, make the decisions you think are necessary and deal with the consequences later. In the end there were no consequences because the action was logical and necessary.



A member of the Calgary Highlanders is treated after being wounded on the Causeway.
Source: Mark Zuehlke

A renewed attempt by the Regiment de Maissonneuve failed at a heavy cost in casualties. 5th Brigade's attacks had cost 135 men killed, wounded, or missing. The cost for the Calgary Highlanders was sixty-five casualties, of which 18 were killed, two missing in action (and presumed to have been obliterated by a 220-millimetre shell strike), and 45 wounded.



D Company, early November 1944

Source: Mark Zuehlke

This photo shows 'D' Company's survivors and it was taken on the day immediately following the battle. The company numbers 41 men of all ranks.



Monument of Honour of the Black Watch R.H.R.
Source: Mark Zuehlke

Today a small stone monument on the causeway, which no longer looks at all like it did at the time, honours the casualties.



Memorial to the 52nd (Lowland) Division
Source: Mark Zuehlke

The day after the Canadian debacle on the causeway elements of the 52nd Lowland Division discovered a spot to its south where one of its battalions was able to slip across the mucky waterway in assault boats and then struggle on foot across 1,500 yards of deep mud to gain Walcheren Island. The move caught the Germans entirely by surprise. With the commando forces also successfully ashore the fall of the island was inevitable and the final phase of the Scheldt Estuary Campaign drew to a close.



Monument to the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade
Source: Mark Zuehlke

As the Calgary Highlanders war diarist declared the memory of the Walcheren Causeway would live long in the minds of his regiment. After the war, Ellis declared that the Canadian high command had failed in their intelligence homework—the worst he ever experienced. It was these reports that declared an amphibious operation, such as the British Lowland Division carried out, impossible and stated that the only viable attack option was via the causeway. But then, he said, it was discovered that there were several places that “could have easily been exploited by our units with success. These kinds of things left a bad taste in my mouth. Our boys were just cannon fodder. Our biggest achievement was that we were able to send as many as possible back alive. The battle itself was not successful.” Ultimately the soldiers of the Calgary Highlanders and the other two battalions gave their best, their commanders like Ellis did so as well. And it is that fine performance, bravery, and sacrifice that should frame our remembrance of the Battle of the Walcheren Causeway.