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R E P O R T NO. 19

HISTORICAL SECTION

ARMY HEADQUARTERS

5 Nov 48

Operation "PLUNDER": The Canadian Participation
in the Assault Across the Rhine and the Expansion
of the Bridgehead by 2 Cdn Corps 23/24 Mar - 1 Apr 45

AMENDMENT NO. 1

Insert following para 56:-

56a. The British Army of the Rhine (B.A.O.R.) has turned out a series of highly interesting Battlefield Tour studies. These were written with the object of providing an accurate yet concise story of the most important battles and of the many problems concerned with them. The B.A.O.R. report on Operation "VARSAITY", while it does not make any changes in the Canadian narrative necessary, does have great historical value in that it provides a source of accurate information regarding

- (a) Airborne operations of XVIII United States Corps (Airborne) in support of the crossing of the River RHINE 24-25 March 1945, with particular reference to 6th British Airborne Division, and
- (b)
 - (i) Tactical and administrative build-up.
 - (ii) Problems of organization of traffic control.
 - (iii) Reports on the effect of various weapons.
 - (iv) New lessons derived from tactical experiments.
 - (v) Technical notes on the employment of certain specialist arms such as artillery.

These items are not dealt with in this account of Canadian operations, but may be set down later under separate heading. (British Army of the Rhine Battlefield Tour Operation VARSAITY)

for *P. Mayer Capt*
(C.P. Stacey) Colonel,
Director Historical Section.

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Operation "PLUNDER": The Canadian Participation
in the Assault Across the Rhine and the Expansion
of the Bridgehead by 2 Cdn Corps 23/24 Mar - 1 Apr 45

AMENDMENT NO. 2

Insert following para 76:-

76a. The British Army of the Rhine (B.A.O.R.) has turned out a series of highly interesting Battlefield Tour studies. These were written with the object of providing an accurate yet concise story of the most important battles and of the many problems concerned with them. The B.A.O.R. report on Operation "PLUNDER", while it does not make any changes in the Canadian narrative necessary, does have great historical value in that it provides a source of accurate information regarding

- (a) The part played by 12 Brit Corps on 24-25 Mar 45, with particular reference to the operations of 15 (S) Inf Div and the Air Operations connected therewith.
- (b) (i) Tactical and administrative build-up.
(ii) Problems of organization of traffic control.
(iii) Reports on the effect of various weapons.
(iv) New lessons derived from tactical experiments.
(v) Technical notes on the employment of certain specialist arms such as artillery.

These items are not dealt with in this account of Canadian operations, but may be set down later under separate heading: (British Army of the Rhine Battlefield Tour Operation PLUNDER)

for *PLMayer* *Cap.*
(C.P. Stacey) Colonel,
Director Historical Section.

CONFIDENTIAL

R E P O R T NO. 19
HISTORICAL SECTION (G.S.)

ARMY HEADQUARTERS

26 Jun 48

Operation "PLUNDER": The Canadian Participation
in the Assault Across the Rhine and the Expansion
of the Bridgehead by 2 Cdn Corps 23/24 Mar - 1 Apr 45

<u>Contents</u>	<u>Paras</u>	<u>Page</u>
Introduction	1-2	1
Plans and Preparations for the Assault Across the Rhine	3-13	1
Support for the Operation	14-17	5
Topography of the Battlefield	18-22	7
The Enemy Situation	23-34	9
Disposition and Plans of 2 Cdn Corps	35-47	13
The Assault, 23 Mar 45	48-50	18
The Airborne Attack, 24 Mar 45	51-59	19
The Expansion of the Bridgehead by 51 (H.) Div, 23-25 Mar 45	60-71	24
Command of Left Sector Passes to 43 (W.) Inf Div, 25 Mar 45	72-74	28
The General Situation at Midnight 26/27 Mar 45	75-83	29
The Approaches to Emmerich, 27-28 Mar 45	84-85	33
Lt-Gen Simonds 2 Cdn Corps Enters the Battle, 28 Mar 45	86-87	33
The Assault on Emmerich by 7 Cdn Inf Bde, 28 Mar 45	88-97	34
2 Cdn Inf Div arrives in the Bridgehead, 29 Mar 45	98-102	39
Development of Operation by 30 Corps, 29-31 Mar 45	103	41
Orders for the Final Punch, 28 Mar 45	104-110	41
The Situation From the Enemy's Point of View, 30 Mar 45	111	45
The Situation on the Left Flank, 30/31 Mar 45	112	45
8 Cdn Inf Bde Passes through Toward the Hoch Elten, 30 Mar 45	113-118	46

	<u>Paras</u>	<u>Page</u>
The Operations of 9 Cdn Inf Bde, 30-31 Mar 45	119-121	48
2 Cdn Inf Div Continues its Push Northward, 31 Mar 45	122-123	49
The Reconnaissance East of the Oude Ijssel, 31 Mar - 1 Apr 45	124-125	50
5 Cdn Inf Bde's Attack to the North, 1 Apr 45	126-127	51
Operations of 2 Cdn Corps, 31 Mar - 1 Apr 45	128-135	52
4 Cdn Armd Div's Part in Operation "PLUNDER", 24-31 Mar 45	136-137	54
First Cdn Army Takes 2 Cdn Corps Under Command, 2359 hours 1 Apr 45	138-144	56
The Enemy's Situation at 2359 hours 1 Apr 45	145-149	58
Conclusion	150-151	60

Appendices

- Appendix "A" - HQ 3 Cdn Inf Div, Confirmatory Notes
Conference 1600 hrs 17 Mar.
- Appendix "B" - Op "PLUNDER" Casualties.
- Appendix "C" - Map - Operation "PLUNDER" - The Assault Across
The Rhine - Operations by 2 & 3 Cdn Divs,
23-31 Mar 45.
- Appendix "D" - Map - Operation "PLUNDER" - The Assault Across The
Rhine - Operations by 2 & 3 Cdn Divs, 31 Mar-1 Apr 45.
- Appendix "E" - Map - Clearing of Emmerich by 7 Cdn Inf Bde,
29-30 Mar 45.
- Appendix "F" - Map - German Dispositions on Second British Army
Front, 1000 hours 26 Mar 45.

REPORT NO. 19

HISTORICAL SECTION (G.S.)

ARMY HEADQUARTERS

Operation "PLUNDER": The Canadian Participation
In the Assault Across the Rhine and the Expansion
of the Bridgehead by 2 Cdn Corps 23/24 Mar - 1 Apr 45

Reference Maps: G.S.G.S. 4414 Holland and Germany
 1/25,000 Sheets 4002, 4003, 4004,
 4102, 4103, 4104, 4204, 4203.

1. The following narrative continues the series of official reports dealing with the operations of the First Canadian Army in North-West Europe and is a direct sequel to Report No. 186. It describes the part played by the Canadians in the assault across the Rhine (Operation "PLUNDER" by Second British Army on the night 23/24 Mar; 9 Cdn Inf Bde being under command) and deals with the expansion of the Rhine bridgehead by 2 Cdn Corps up to 2359 hours 1 Apr 45, the time at which H.Q. First Cdn Army became fully operational on the east bank of the Rhine.
2. The successful conclusion of Operations "VERITABLE"^x (of which "BLOCKBUSTER" was a part) and "GRENADE"^x on 10 Mar left the Supreme Commander in a position to enter upon the decisive stage of the war on the Western front. The winter offensives by First Canadian and Ninth U.S. Armies had now given the Allied forces control of the whole of the west bank of the Rhine from the Dutch - German border to the bridgehead established by General Bradley's 12 U.S. Army Group at Remagen some 12 miles south of Bonn on 7 Mar. It was thus possible to contemplate the launching of operations on a large scale into trans-Rhenish Germany. So far as 21 Army Group was concerned, the assault across the river had been conceived by Field-Marshal Montgomery as an operation which "required to be under the control of one Army Commander rather than two" in the northern part of the sector, (Hist Sec File AEF: 45/First Cdn Army/C/E: General Crerar's Despatch to the Minister of National Defence, 5 Apr 45, para 7); further to the south he proposed to mount a co-ordinated assault with Ninth U.S. Army near Rheinberg. With the attainment of his objectives on the west bank, therefore, the C.-in-C. was able to regroup his forces and give Lt-Gen Dempsey the necessary frontage and the responsibility of forcing a crossing in the area of Xanten and Rees. The intention was to establish a bridgehead, in conjunction with First U.S. Army to isolate the Ruhr from the rest of Germany, and break into the North German plain. (Ibid)

PLANS AND PREPARATIONS FOR THE ASSAULT ACROSS THE RHINE

3. As General Crerar outlined in his Despatch to the Minister of National Defence on 29 May 45

^x See Historical Reports 185 and 186.

...the C-in-C's plan was to cross the Rhine with two armies on a front to include Rheinberg and Rees, the Ninth US Army being on the right and the Second British Army on the left. Under Lt-General Dempsey's command, the 18th US Airborne Corps, comprising the 17th US and 6th British Airborne Divisions, was to execute the third and last great airborne operation of the campaign. The initial intention was to capture Wesel as a centre of communications. The bridgehead so gained would be expanded to ensure the town and its roads against any interference from the south and used as a base from which to seize Emmerich and the important crossing there. The whole area would then be developed in depth to enable further offensive operations to be mounted by all three armies east of the Rhine and north of the Ruhr.

(Hist Sec File AEF: 45/First Cdn Army/C/E; General Crerar's Despatch to the Minister of National Defence, 29 May 45, para 3; see also G.O.C.-in-C. file 1-0, C.-in-C. 21 Army Group Directive M 559, 9 Mar 45)

4. Ninth U.S. Army was to assault across the Rhine near Rheinberg protecting the right flank of second British Army and the bridging sites at Wesel. Lt-Gen Dempsey's forces were to cross in the areas of Xanten and Rees, while XVIII U.S. Airborne Corps would "drop in" north of Wesel (AEF: 45/21 Army Gp/C/F, Docket II: page 47). Thus the two attacking armies would secure a bridgehead east of the Rhine within the area bounded by the towns of Duisburg, Bottrop, Dorsten, Borken, Aalten, Doetinchem and Pannerden (General Crerar's Despatch, para 5). While the 21 Army Group plan called for First Canadian Army to take no active part in the assault, during this phase, the Army was to carry out several feints along the river on the left of Second Army and "to hold the river line from Emmerich to the sea, the security of the bridgehead over the Waal at Nijmegen and of the islands on the north side of the Scheldt Estuary being primary requirements". By 23 Mar the individual areas of responsibility were as follows: on the right, 2 Cdn Corps from the Cleve-Emmerich road to Milligen with elements of 2 Cdn Inf Div holding the river line; in the centre from Milligen to the juncture of the Maas and Waal 1 Cdn Corps was established with 49 (W.R.) Inf Div firm in front; while on the left, along the Maas westwards to the sea, 1 Brit Corps had under command 1 Pol Armd Div, 4 Cdo Bde, 116 R.M. Bde and the Royal Netherlands Bde. (See also Report No. 186, paras 169, 179, 184, 186). At the same time First Canadian Army was required "to make all preparations for bridging the Rhine at Emmerich and for taking command of our lodgement area to the north and north-west of that place when so ordered" (*ibid.*)

5. The second phase was intended to carry the Army Group's broader penetration into an area bordered by Hamm, Munster, Rheine, Almelo, Deventer, Apeldoorn, Otterloo and Renkum. The Canadian boundary with Second British Army would then include Emmerich, Doetinchem, Ruurlo, Borculo and Borne, and the direction of General Crerar's operations would be to the north. (G.O.C.-in-C. file 1-0, C.-in-C. 21 Army Group Directive M 559, 9 Mar 45)

6. General Dempsey's plan called for three well-timed assault crossings followed by the airborne "drop". The northern thrust would be made on D minus 1 by 30 Brit Corps against Rees while 3 Brit Inf Div held the west bank of the river along the Corps front; Lt-Gen Horrocks would then proceed to establish and build up his bridgehead with a view to passing

his armour through. Further to the south, Lt-Gen Ritchie's 12 Brit Corps was to execute a double punch; the first by 1 Cdo Bde against Wesel late on D minus 1 to capture the town and the bridges over the river Lippe and the Seiten Canal; the second on D Day by 15 (S.) Div on a two-brigade front from the area of Xanten. The western bank on this sector would be held by 52 (L.) Div, who had orders to hold a brigade group ready to reinforce the 15 (S.) Div. 53 (W.) Div, with under command 4 Brit Armd Bde, and 7 Armd Div constituted the build up forces for 12 Brit Corps. (AEF: 45/21 Army Gp/C/E, Docket II: Notes on Operations of 21 Army Gp, 6 Jun 44 - 5 May 45, section 7, pp. 47-49)

7. The Airborne operation, due to go in on D Day itself, was designed to seize the high ground about five miles north of Wesel and to help speed the capture of the vital bridging areas. 6 Brit and 17 U.S. Airborne Divs were to capture the Diersfordt Wood and Ijssel bridges in that area and establish contact with 12 Brit Corps; after that 6 Brit Airborne Div would be relieved by 15 (S.) Div, while its American counter-part would push on to the east, assuming temporary command of 1 Cdo Bde and having a priority call on 6 Gds Tk Bde. 17 U.S. Airborne Div would finally pass to Ninth U.S. Army when convenient. (Ibid)

8. As the left flank of 21 Army Group's forthcoming operations was to be a Canadian responsibility, General Crerar had agreed with Lt-Gen Dempsey that 2 Cdn Corps would be placed under the operational control of Second Army shortly before the actual assault was launched. The Canadian formation would then be passed over the Rhine at the appropriate time and would be used to extend the Rees bridgehead to the north-west toward Doetinchem and Aalten and to secure Emmerich as a centre of communications and as a bridge site. When the river had been bridged at that point 2 Cdn Corps would revert to General Crerar's command (General Crerar's Despatch, para 5). The prerequisite then to the First Cdn Army operations was the construction of a bridge at Emmerich, but this was not possible so long as the high ground to the north-west of Emmerich remained in the enemy's hands: This wooded feature, known as the Hoch Elten, rises to a height of some 240 feet and covers the roughly triangular area bounded by Elten, Kilder, Zeddum and 's Heerenberg. The Hoch Elten had long been an objective of high priority because of its dominating position and it was with the particular task of seizing it that the Canadians were to be passed through the left of Second Army over the 30 Corps bridges. The first main task of 2 Cdn Corps was to attack through the left of 30 Brit Corps, to advance on Zutphen (9494) and Deventer (9207), and in conjunction with an operation by 1 Cdn Corps against Arnhem, to regroup facing east for the thrust into Germany. (H.S. 215C1 (D351) G.S.O. 1 Ops file Op "PLUNDER", Vol 76, outline plan 2 Cdn Corps, dated 18 Mar 45). The operation by 2 Cdn Corps was to be known as "HAYMAKER" (W.D., G.S., H.Q. 3 Cdn Inf Div, March 1945: Appx 18, Op "PLUNDER" folio "FLANKS" 51 (H.) Div Op Instr No. 35, dated 22 Mar 45, para 28).

9. The full implications of the northward thrust from the Emmerich bridgehead were that with 2 Cdn Corps General Crerar would carry the defences of the Ijssel - prepared by the enemy to withstand an assault eastwards - by taking them in the rear from the east. After capturing Zutphen and Deventer,

he would seize Apeldoorn and the intervening high ground towards Arnhem. He would take Arnhem itself by an assault crossing over the Neder Rijn with 1 Cdn Corps while the enemy was already engaged with 2 Cdn Corps farther north. His engineers would then be prepared to bridge the river at Arnhem and open up communications from Nijmegen through that town to the north-east as soon as the progress of 2 Cdn Corps made this possible. (W.D., G.O.C.-in-C. First Cdn Army, March 1945: Appx 1, Directive, 10 Mar 45). "A secure flank facing west and running northwards from the Neder Rijn about Renkum would be formed. When these communications had been established, the axis of First Cdn Army's operations would then be turned towards the north-east". (General Crerar's Despatch, para 7).

10. In projecting the course of these operations General Crerar wrote,

...I decided that when the 2nd Canadian Corps had captured the Stokkammer Bosch and Hoch Elten features and was advancing to secure the front between Doetinchem and Panterden, the 1st Canadian Corps would drive the enemy from the south-eastern portion of the Nijmegen "island", and make contact with Lt-General Simonds' forces along the Panterdensche canal. As the latter advanced northwards and secured their left flank to the line of the IJssel between Doesburg and Westervoort, Lt-General Foulkes would clear the northern portion of the "island" and gain control of the left bank of the Neder Rijn for the purpose of establishing a bridgehead north of the river and west of Arnhem as a preliminary to the capture of the town itself. This crossing was to be planned to take place at the same time as, or slightly subsequent to, the crossing of the IJssel by the 2nd Canadian Corps, which would be made after Lt-General Simonds had gained the line between Delden, Holten and Deventer.

(Ibid, para 8: see also W.D., G.O.C.-in-C. First Cdn Army, March 1945: Appx 2, Directive, 24 Mar 45)

11. A regrouping of considerable proportion now took place to bind the agreement between Generals Crerar and Dempsey and to coincide with Second British Army's plan of assault scheduled for the night of 23/24 Mar 45 (H.S. 21501 (D351), G.S.O. 1 Ops file, Op "PLUNDER", folios 74, 76, 81). Lt-Gen Horrocks' 30 Brit Corps took over 3 Brit Inf Div in situ from 8 Brit Corps, while 2 Cdn Corps came under the operational control of Second Army at 1200 hours 20 Mar. On the same day 3 Cdn Inf Div was placed directly under the command of 30 Brit Corps, which in turn passed 9 Cdn Inf Bde to 51 (H.) Div. (Ibid: Folios 74, 76, 81)

12. The attack by 30 Brit Corps was to be carried out in three phases. In the first, 51 (H.) Div, with under command 9 Cdn Inf Bde, would secure the initial bridgehead, at the same time being responsible for passing Brigadier J.M. Rockingham's battalions over the Rhine and, when opportunity

■ See Appx "A" to this report.

offered, for committing them to action on the left. Following immediately behind 51 (H.) Div would be one infantry brigade and the Divisional Headquarters of 43 Inf Div, who would on arrival, take over 9 Cdn Inf Bde for build up and relieve the left brigade of the Highland Division. Then would come the remainder of 43 Inf Div followed by the rest of 3 Cdn Inf Div. Once these moves were completed and its operational strength was considered great enough, 3 Cdn Inf Div was to resume full control of 9 Cdn Inf Bde and of the left flank. At this point, the second phase, the development of a three-divisional front, would commence; with 3 Cdn Inf Div on the left, 43 Inf Div in the centre and 51 (H.) Div on the right, with a view to building up the lodgement area so that the third phase, an armoured break out along the axis Bocholt, Aalten, Groenlo, could be launched. (W.D., G.S., H.Q. 3 Cdn Inf Div, March 1945: Appx 15, folio "PLUNDER", Op Instr No. 49, 20 Mar 45; Hist Sec file 229 C2, 2(D7) "PLUNDER" R.A. 30 Corps Op Instr No. 35, 20 Mar 45)

13. 3 Cdn Inf Div was to remain under command of 30 Corps until such a time as adequate communications existed; when that stage was reached the commander of 2 Cdn Corps would take over the direction of Operation "HAYMAKER" on the left flank. (H.S. File 215C1 (D351), G.S.O. 1 Ops file, Op "PLUNDER", folio 76, Outline Plan 2 Cdn Corps, 18 Mar 45; also Folios 66, 67, 68, 69, notes by Col G.S. on conference with commander and C. of S. 2 Cdn Corps on Op "PLUNDER", 14 Mar 45). On 14 Mar, at a conference held at H.Q. 2 Cdn Corps to discuss the probable course of operations, Lt-Gen Simonds had indicated that in order to allow bridges to be erected at Emmerich, he considered that a bridgehead must cover an area of at least 4000 to 5000 yards' radius with its centre at Emmerich. To secure such a bridgehead was the initial task of 3 Cdn Inf Div, but the Corps Commander explained that if this operation proved at all "sticky", he would be prepared to reinforce it with part or all of 2 Cdn Inf Div. (Ibid: and folio 72, Op "PLUNDER", 17 Mar 45)

SUPPORT FOR THE OPERATION

14. The immediate air support for Operation "PLUNDER" was itself gigantic, and may be broken down into five definite phases. The first of these, the interdiction programme to isolate the Ruhr, had actually begun early in February. At that time eighteen bridges on the most important routes from central Germany were selected for destruction. The responsibility for these targets had been divided between the Allied medium bombers in the theatre and the strategic air forces in England. In solemn succession each of the chosen bridges was attacked, with the result that by 23 Mar 45 only three or at the most four of the original eighteen structures remained in use. Though not directly connected with Operation "PLUNDER" at that time, these onslaughts (to quote an official report) "provided an appreciable bonus thereto" (AEF: 45/21 Army Group/S/F "Air Action in Support of the Battle of the Rhine: May 1945") The second phase, this one specifically designed for Operation "PLUNDER", covered a long term interdiction programme begun early in March, with Bomber Command "going all out" to paralyze the enemy's transportation network in the rear of the battle area, attacking the area which included Zwolle, the Elbergen Bridge, Rheine, Neubeckum, Soest, Siegen and Siegburg. The

offensive included heavy bomber attacks on all existing viaducts, bridges and rail centres both in the above area and leading into it.

15. The third phase of the air operations comprised the pre-D Day bombing, the object of which was to reduce the enemy's will to fight, to hinder his defensive preparations and to disrupt his communications. The targets in this phase, insofar as 21 Army Group's front was concerned included, (as pre-arranged targets,) the towns of Haldern, Isselburg, Anholt and Praest. These places were high in priority to receive treatment; Haldern and Praest were to be heavily attacked during the last hours of D minus 1 by a strong force of fighter bombers, while the other two centres were earmarked for certain destruction by first light on D Day. The fourth phase, also a pre-arranged programme was planned to establish and maintain air superiority over the assault areas, the dropping and landing zones, with particular reference to those air-fields capable of handling jet propelled aircraft the appearance of which had, since the beginning of the year, increased enough to substantiate the fact that the German Air Forces were attempting a serious revival. It was of absolute importance that the assault across the Rhine should go forward without interference. Therefore all air strips were to be attacked on D minus 3 and on D Day by over 1400 machines of Eighth U.S.A.A.F. with extra sweeps by 2 Tactical Air Force and VIII Fighter Command of U.S. Army Air Forces. Other necessary items in the fourth phase included the neutralization of the enemy's flak defences, the provisions of fighter cover for the air-borne attacks, the close support for the assault and the prevention of enemy movement into and within the battle area. The last phase provided for the day to day support after the initial attacks across the Rhine. For this purpose adequate air support communications were allotted to all the assaulting units so that local air support could be called for on short notice. Most hostile batteries were already on the pre-arranged target list, but any other such interference observed would be dealt with on the spot. (Ibid; also W.D., G.S., H.Q. 3 Cdn Inf Div, March 1945: Appx 14, sub-appx "A" to Air Support, Confirmatory Notes, Conference 1600 hrs, 17 Mar 45, also Report by The Supreme Commander to the Combined Chiefs of Staff on the Operations in Europe of the Allied Expeditionary Force, 6 June 1944 to 8 May 1945, p. 99)

16. The artillery support was to be equally heavy. It was divided into four parts. The proper counter-battery programme beginning at H minus 4 involved the use of 746 guns, a portion of which would have already ranged and carried out some destructive shoots since 1300 hours (H-8). At H minus 3 most of these guns were to cease fire but 256 of them would continue to blast the enemy's positions until H minus 45 minutes. In addition, beginning at H minus 3, the counter-mortar programme was to continue until H Hour with 80 pieces hurling their projectiles to discourage the enemy from manning his own close

* One of the most important, the one at Bielefeld, had already been severely hit by R.A.F. Lancasters with the new 22,000 pound bombs on 14 Mar.

** Page numbers used in this report refer to the edition published by the U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington 25, D.C.

support weapons. Simultaneously, while 32 field guns from Gds Arm and 3 Cdn Inf Divs blinded the enemy's observation posts with smoke until H minus 90 minutes, the 30 Corps preliminary bombardment guns, 408 in number, were to fire in unison until H minus 4 minutes. A further weight of deadly metal was to shower the east bank of the river in a "pepper-pot" shoot controlled by 3 Brit Div, with under command C.H. of O. (M.G.), 3 Cdn A.Tk Regt and 4 Cdn L.A.A. Regt to begin at H minus 2 hours and to be carried on to H plus 5 minutes and be on call thereafter. This first "pepper-pot" would drench pre-selected targets on the left flank of the attack, excluding Rees. A second shoot, controlled by 51 (H.) Div, covered the right flank of the attack across the river and included Rees. The crescendo in this thunderous overture was to come at H minus 30, when, after 10 minutes' complete silence, 516 guns would belch forth to herald the supporting bombardment for the actual assault by the Highland Division. This was to go on until H Hour, after which a harassing fire programme by 80 guns (mostly 3.7 A.A. operating in a ground role) would come into effect to isolate the immediate battlefield. (H.S. File 229C2 2(D7), Op "PLUNDER": Fire Plan Table Cloth, 3rd edition, sheets 1 and 2; R.A. 30 Corps Op Instr No. 35, 20 Mar 45; AEF/3 Cdn Inf Div/C/F, Docket V, Folio 12, Appx 2, Op "PLUNDER", Trace "PEPPER-POT" gun areas).

17. D Day for the operation was to be 24 Mar, with H Hour for 30 Corps at 2100 hours D minus 1, However, even up to 1600 hours on 23 Mar this colossal and carefully planned attack was subject to postponement if weather conditions were not favourable. Special code words were devised to define whether the operation was "on" or not. (W.D., G.S., H.Q. 3 Cdn Inf Div, March 1945: Appx 18, 51 (H.) Div Op Instr No. 35, 22 Mar 45)

TOPOGRAPHY OF THE BATTLEFIELD

18. In making a topographical study of the ground north and east of the Rhine which includes Emmerich, Bocholt and Wesel, the area may be divided into four types of country:

- (a) The Rhine flood bed.
- (b) The Rhine flood plain.
- (c) The stretch of low sandy plateau between the Ijssel and the Rhine.
- (d) The valley of the Oude Ijssel River.

The Rhine flood bed is bounded by the main dyke which follows the north bank of the Oude Rijn and the Alter Rhein. It is subject to complete submersion at time of high water. The countryside, which is found below the level of the river, is mostly pasture land with fields geometrically shaped and frequently hemmed by drainage ditches. Hedges and trees are few. In the immediate vicinity of the river there are numerous stretches of dead water, patches of low scrub and peat bogs; in addition, much of the ground liable to flood remains marshy even in dry weather. The surface soil is either red or blue clay based on sand or gravel; this same surface being traversable to all vehicles in dry weather. After rain however it becomes generally impassable to wheeled vehicles and quite difficult for

tracks. (W.D., G.S., H.Q. 3 Cdn Inf Div, March 1945: Appx 15, folio "30 Corps" Op "PLUNDER": 30 Corps Int Dossier No. I, 13 Mar 45, Part IV; G.S.G.S. 4414, Maps 1/25000, sheets 4002-5, 4102-5, 4203-5)

19. The Rhine flood plain is mainly the area which would be flooded if no dykes existed. It is frequently intersected by meanders and streams which represent the original course of the river; in many places around these are found small lakes or patches of stagnant water. Generally it is low slightly undulating country, mostly arable with some pasture. The population live in small villages and isolated farms which stand for the most part on the higher ground. These communities are connected by a network of secondary narrow roads of uncertain surface which could not be expected to stand up to much heavy traffic. The clay soil would immediately make cross-country going difficult during and after wet weather; the small marshes and peat bogs would be further obstacles. It is on the eastern edge of a single sand plateau which forms an island on this flat plain that the town of Emmerich lies. Emmerich itself is dominated, immediately to the northwest, by high wooded ground - known as the Hoch Elten feature. The capture of this feature would be essential to anyone wishing to hold the city securely, and enemy firmly entrenched on Hoch Elten would fight strongly to hold it and would be difficult to dislodge. (Ibid; and 30 Corps Int Dossier No. I, 13 Mar 45, as above)

20. The low sand plateau exists as a minor ridge dividing the Oude Ijssel valley from the Rhine and runs roughly from Wesel to Anholt; it is also to be found around Bocholt as well as north and west of 's Heerenberg. In general this type of country is higher than the flat plain and has fine sandy soil. On the ridges are many small woods surrounded by arable land, and the people live mostly on farms and in hamlets which have sprung up at the numerous road junctions. (Ibid)

21. The valley of the Oude Ijssel is flat and open with many pasture fields running right up to the river's bank; most of the land is arable. There are few hedges, the fields being bounded by ditches which are sometimes as much as 15 to 20 feet wide. These are in themselves firm obstacles, especially formidable north of the river where the ditches are deeper. The soil in this region is loam, which would allow a free passage for most vehicles in summer and some in winter, though any heavy group of vehicles might be liable to bog down. (Ibid)

22. Communications in the flood bed and plain generally depended upon the secondary road system, which was poor and unable to take heavy loads. However, the other roads in the sand plateau and the Oude Ijssel valley, though still not good, were more developed and of better quality. The autobahn marked on most maps was only in the earliest stage of construction. It appeared then, that the majority of movements beyond the Rhine would be confined to these roads. The main obstacles would obviously be the dykes, the rivers, the woods and the Wesel - Emmerich railway. Around these obstructions, the enemy, a proven master in delaying action, could be expected to put up a stiff resistance. (Ibid)^x

^x For a detailed topographical study of the area see Inter-Service Topographical Department, I.S.T.D./C/403/P1, Western Germany: Frontier Zone, Sheet P1, Topography, Roads, and Bridges (Copy available at Joint Intelligence Board).

THE ENEMY SITUATION

23. Having got the remnants of his forces back across the river in comparatively good order after Operation "BLOCKBUSTER", the enemy might be expected to make frantic preparations to meet the coming storm. But the question of how he would dispose his forces on the east bank was not an easy one to answer, mainly because from 11 Mar to 15 Mar there had been almost complete lack of contact. On 16 Mar, however, some air photographs gave indication that the enemy was continuing to build up his strength in the angle of the Rhine and the Ijssel rivers, particularly in A.A. positions.

The latest air cover shows new positions from Emmerich (E96) to Zutphen, at Dolten (A07) and at each side of the Hoch Elten (E96) feature. Further field artillery also is being emplaced in the gun areas centered at Hoch Elten. A corresponding reduction in A.A. is seen north and east of Zaltbommel (E26). There is no further clue to the formations to be employed on our immediate front except that 116 Pz Div still appears to be hovering in the background east of Emmerich.

(First Cdn Army Int Summary No. 259,
16 Mar 45)

24. Since the task of exactly placing the German formations was only accomplished by the thorough investigation of the existing sources, the piecing together of the jig-saw was slow; but gradually the information trickled in, was analyzed, confirmed and passed on. It became clear that a heavy concentration of guns had been assembled under cover of the woods on the dominating feature of Hoch Elten, from which the low-lying river country could be overlooked for several miles upstream. Along the front west of Emmerich our observers had spotted some 160 cannon (W.D., Historical Officer, H.Q. First Cdn Army, 18 Mar 45, based on First Cdn Army Int Summary No. 262, 18 Mar 45). Battered though his troops might be, harried and urgently reinforced from his depleted depots and training establishments, the enemy was seeking anxiously to deploy the wasted strength of his formations to the best advantage along this last great water barrier in the west. (Ibid)

25. By 2400 hours 19 Mar Lt-Gon Dempsey's Intelligence Staff reported that:

On the lower Rhine front above Nijmegen the enemy shows considerable nervousness and a great sense of urgency in carrying out his preparations. This is indicated by several factors, including road movement in the general area North of the Lippe and a somewhat aggressive attitude in the air, designed both to ascertain Allied movement and to disrupt communications. It is fairly clear that First Parachute Army crossed the Rhine reasonably well to plan and in fairly good order. It is also certain that the bulk of the equipment of this Army was got across the Rhine and the enemy's primary concern, in so far as Second Army is concerned, is to prepare for a crossing over the Rhine below the Ruhr - an area which he considers to be a very feasible one from the point of view of assault river crossings...

(AEF: 45/Second Army/L/F, Docket I:
9 Feb - 29 Mar 45; Int Summary No. 289,
19 Mar 45)

26. At this same time it was confirmed that 2 Para Corps was the right-hand corps of First Para Army. 6 Para Div was known to be under command 2 Para Corps on its right, inclusive Emmerich, exclusive Rees; in the centre between Rees and Xanten, 8 Para Div held its line; while on the left, from Xanten to Wesel, was 7 Para Div. The centre corps was probably 86 Corps, with 84 Div on the right and 180 Div in the centre. The left flank here could not be considered beyond speculation. One point, however, was fairly clear. The sector from Wesel to Duisburg was large, possibly too large for a single corps, and on the face of this it appeared that 2 Para Div on the left flank of First Para Army might belong to another corps, the right-hand division of which might be 190 Inf Div. Waiting behind to the rear, 47 Pz Corps was located. This corps, which consisted of 116 Pz Div and 15 Pz Gren Div, had been carefully traced in its movement after it had covered a good part of the withdrawal across the Rhine, and could be found in a northerly direction through Borken up as far as the line Aalten - Zelhem (0580). The Intelligence staff accounted for 47 Pz Corps in these words:

It is fairly clear that the task of this Corps is mobile reserve to Army Group H and possibly to Twenty-Fifth Army as well, and it is so placed as to be able to meet an emergency either in the Vesel-Emmerich sector or further North across the Ijssel.

(Ibid)

27. Besides 47 Pz Corps, there were known to exist a number of Wehrkreis Battalions*, most of which appeared to be in the area of Borken. The task of these battalions was apparently to prepare the towns in their own area for all-round defence and to combat any air landing attempt. These somewhat inferior troops were backed by several mobile flak units, whose primary role was anti-air landing, but who would come into operation in a ground role if the local situation demanded it. On local defences the First Cdn Army Intelligence Staff commented:

It is quite clear that defences designed to stop us crossing the Rhine are not in an advanced stage of preparation. The main trends of activity are in the areas of the crossing places of Emmerich, Rees, Xanten and Wesel. The tendency here is for the existing defences to fan out in all directions and eventually, were they allowed to proceed, some semblance of a line along the river, or standing back from it, might emerge. It is this preparation, with the somewhat doubtful assistance of civilians and Volkssturm that is going on daily and in feverish haste.

(Ibid)

Thus we see the picture of the First Para Army sorting itself out, its undermanned divisions reinforced in an area that was not as yet ready to stop our penetration across the Rhine. Nevertheless, whatever the state of preparation, whatever the strength of his divisions and however weak the mobile armour back of them might be - these paratroops could be expected to fight as fanatically as ever. (Ibid)

* Wehrkreis Field replacement units in training under command Military District Staff. Used in emergency as local defence forces.

28. Subsequent interrogation of many of the German Commanders concerned has been possible, and it has established that the appreciations of our Intelligence Staffs were substantially correct. First Parachute Army was commanded by General Alfred Schlemm, a fighting man of "undoubted military ability". (AEF: 45/First Cdn Army/L/F, Docket III: Special Interrogation Report General Alfred Schlemm). He told his interrogators how he had prepared to defend the Rhine, filling up his ranks - depleted by the Rhineland fighting - with 50,000 to 60,000 reinforcements, "the reserved category workers, convalescents and too-old and too-youngs". He claimed that he foresaw our use of airborne troops to assist in the crossing, anticipating that such landing would take place east of Wesel. This was in the area defended by 86 Inf Corps, commanded by General Erich Straube, whose ability was held in contempt by his brother generals. The actual area of the expected airborne landing was defended by 84 Inf Div, led by Major-General Heinz Fiebig, a man who gave his interrogators the impression that he was "a charming fellow to have at a party; the last man to lead a division in the field". (Ibid: Special Interrogation Reports, General Erich Straube, and Maj-Gen Heinz Fiebig)

29. The right of Schlemm's army was in more capable hands, for to the north of 86 Inf Corps stood the tough paratrochutists of 2 Para Corps, under the command of General der Flieger Eugen Meindl, whose "reputation had been enhanced by words of praise from both his seniors and subordinates". (Ibid: Special Interrogation Report, General Eugen Meindl). This red-faced little veteran of Norway, Crete, Russia and Normandy had about 10,000 to 12,000 fighting men in his corps and, according to his recollection when interrogated in the spring of 1946, about 80 field and medium guns, as well as 60 dual-purpose 88-mm anti-aircraft. Like his immediate superior, Meindl was concerned at the prospect of an allied landing from the air, but he appreciated that such a landing would take place near Rees. With 88 Inf Corps of 25th Army on his right and 86 Inf Corps on his left, Meindl awaited the attack. He deployed his corps with 6 Para Div holding the shore on the right, 7 Para Div on the left, and 8 Para Div in the centre. (Ibid)

30. Typical of the three generals who led the parachute divisions is Lt-Gen Hermann Flocher, Commander of 6 Para Div. In the forceful personality of this sound professional soldier is a clue to the fierce, skilful fighting of his paratrochutists. A highly qualified airman and soldier, he had served 14 months in the Spanish Civil War as a member of the German "Condor Legion". With 6,000 to 7,000 men he held the east bank from Emmerich to just north of Rees. As the roads leading out of Emmerich were not very good, Flocher thought the attack would come, not against his sector, but at Rees. (Ibid: Special Interrogation Report Lt-Gen Hermann Flocher).

31. Whatever depths of dejection the rest of the German forces had reached, these men of the parachute divisions still intended to fight to the end. At a later date prisoners from a paratroop division gave this impression of high morale to their American captors:

They are proud of belonging to an elite branch, however exterminated it may become in the meantime. They are, as a rule, younger and physically better qualified than other troops. Their relations to the Army are without a stigma, in contrast to the notorious SS gang. They like to consider themselves the successors

of the crack troops which invaded Holland in 1940, Crete in 1941, and made a last-ditch stand in Cassino. Actually, only a handful have survived these "memorable" days and, considering the quality and length of Para training now given, only very few would equal those accomplishments.

Practically all of them have been made to believe that Hitler has restored law and order, greatness and equality to the German people. The Hitler myth has taken so strong a hold on them that many refuse to consider even the possibility of a German defeat. Hitler's promise of a victory and of secret weapons to achieve it with is accepted by many like a guaranteed from a higher being. Others think that Nazi Germany was a good thing until the war but that Hitler should never have challenged the entire world as he did.

(First Cdn Army Int Summary
No. 271, 28 Mar 45)

32. Behind the non-flying parachutists and their infantry and Volkssturm satellites was the First Para Army reserve, 47 Pz Corps, commanded by the imposingly named General Heinrich Freiherr Von Luttwitz. When interrogated later, the corps commander claimed that his two formations were only 30 per cent of normal strength, and possessed only 35 tanks when they retired across the Rhine. They constituted the sole remnants of German armour still facing 21 Army Group. Reinforcements brought them up to 50 per cent strength in men, but no additional tanks were received. The corps was deployed in defence of the line of the Rhine, with 15 Pz Gren Div north of Bocholt, and 116 Pz Div centred around Ruurlo, while the General had established his headquarters at Silvolde. Luttwitz placed the corps in these positions to deal with a parachute landing which Army Group "H" feared would be launched along the Ijssel in conjunction with a surface assault across the Rhine. (AEF: 45/First Cdn Army/L/F, Docket III; Special Interrogation Report, General Heinrich Freiherr Von Luttwitz)

33. The enemy's total reserves capable of intervention against "PLUNDER" could be divided into two categories,

- (a) Armour and infantry in the west.
- (b) Reserves from outside.

Apart from 47 Pz Corps, the following information was available about the Panzer type formations: The portion of Pz Lehr Div which was not already committed against the Remagen Bridgehead might well be sent down there very shortly to assist 9 and 11 Pz Divs and 106 Pz Bde, none of whom was having an easy time. 3 Pz Gren Div was in the slow process of refitting. 2 Pz Div was, according to a recently acquired prisoner, somewhere south of the Moselle, but since this formation had not had any rest for some weeks, it was not likely that it would interfere in our forthcoming operations. Thus the chances were that on D Day all armour except 116 Pz and 15 Pz Gren Divs would be engaged elsewhere. It might, however, be expected that as in "VERITABLE", some odd regiments would filter into the battle area slowly.

34. It was estimated at this time that none of the units which had been engaged during the last few days on the west bank would be strong enough to be moved away from their present

sectors. Potential reserves must therefore be sought at either end of the western front, on the eastern front, or even in Norway, Denmark or Italy. The three last sources were fair possibilities, the Russian front was not, for Marshal Stalin's men were putting on far too much pressure to permit the release of any divisions for employment elsewhere. (W.D., G.S., H.Q. 3 Cdn Inf Div, March 1945: Appx 15, "30 Corps" Planning Int Dossier No. 1, 13 Mar 45)

DISPOSITION AND PLANS OF 2 CDN CORPS

35. Immediately prior to the opening of the Army Group's offensive, 2 Cdn Corps held the river front on General Crerar's flank between the Cleve - Emmerich road and Millingen with elements of 2 Cdn Inf Div (H.S. file, AEF: 45/2 Cdn Corps/C/F: Weekly Summary of Cdn Ops and Activities, 18 to 24 Mar).[#] In the centre 49 (W.R.) Inf Div passed at noon, on 15 Mar, to the command of 1 Cdn Corps, which then assumed responsibility for the Nijmegen sector between 2 Cdn and 1 Brit Corps. "Thus", wrote General Crerar, "for the first time the two Canadian Corps were operationally committed under my command and an historical consummation had been realized" (General Crerar's Despatch, para 4). On the far left, the line of the Maas river westwards to the sea was held by 1 Brit Corps with 1 Pol Armd Div, 4 Cdo Bde, 116 Royal Marine Bde and the Royal Netherlands Bde under command, 1 Cdn Inf Div and 5 Cdn Armd Div.^{**} Lately arrived from the Italian theatre of operations, remained in Army reserve to be employed according to the G.O.C.-in-C.'s plan and as the situation indicated. (Ibid)

36. The outline plan for 2 Cdn Corps was itself divided into four phases. In the first, 3 Cdn Inf Div, having attacked through the left of 30 Corps, was to seize Vrasselt (0159) with the leading brigade, Emmerich and the surrounding woods (9662 - 9762) with the second brigade, while the third went on to capture the Hoch Elten feature. If, however, Emmerich was too strongly held, the town would become the objective of the third brigade and Hoch Elten was to be taken on by an additional brigade from 2 Cdn Inf Div. With this end in view 2 Cdn Inf Div was to have one brigade concentrated at Rees as soon as possible and another alerted and ready to cross at Rees as bridge space became available. Maj-Gen A.B. Matthews' third brigade was to take up a position northeast of Cleve and be prepared to carry out a scramble crossing of the river at Emmerich if the town was found unoccupied; if there was any opposition at all in Emmerich no such crossing was to be attempted. On completion of Phase One, the troops of 2 Cdn Inf Div on the east bank would become responsible for the Corps right flank; and while this phase was still proceeding, the balance of 2 Cdn Inf Div and 4 Cdn Armd Div were to begin crossing the Rhine. (H.S. file 215C1 (D351); G.S.O. 1 Ops File, Op "PLUNDER", folios 75 and 76, Outline Plan 2 Cdn Corps, 18 Mar 45)

37. The assault on Emmerich would have the full support of the guns of 2 Cdn Corps. Their devastating fire was to be directed against the town, the Hoch Elten feature, and

See Hist Sec Report No. 186, paras 179, 184, 193.

** See Operation "GOLDFLAKE", Report No. 181.

any of the enemy's batteries which attempted to interfere with the security of the bridgehead. The operation against Emmerich was not to be dependent on air support; it would go in regardless of weather conditions, although if air support was possible, it would be used against the enemy's "choke points" to prevent the movement of reserves, and against his gun areas. (Ibid; and folios 66-9, 72, "Notes by Col G.S. on Conference with Commander and C. of S. 2 Cdn Corps, Op "PLUNDER", 14 Mar 45)

38. The second phase would see 2 and 3 Cdn Inf Divs thrusting northward side by side, the former directed on Doetinchem, the latter to the line of the railway north of Hoch Elten. In the third phase, 4 Cdn Armd Div would make its appearance on the right to push on to Ruurlo and Lochem while the infantry formations continued their advance to Zutphen (9494), Bronkherst and Wichmond. The last phase was to be a pivot movement, with 2 and 3 Cdn Inf Divs advancing across the Twente Canal to the line Holten (1009) - Deventer (9207) while Maj-Gen Vokes' armoured division moved on Delden (3007). If, after all these objectives had been achieved, the enemy was still resisting at Arnhem against 1 Cdn Corps, Lt-Gen Simonds would assault westwards across the Ijssel River against Apeldoorn (8003), probably using 1 Cdn Inf Div. In the same 2 Corps Order the allotment of armour for the operation was announced. From the start of the second phase, one regiment (10 Cdn Armd Regt) of 2 Cdn Armd Bde was to be under Maj-Gen Matthews' command; another (27 Cdn Armd Regt) would be under command 3 Cdn Inf Div. (Ibid)

39. In its own corresponding instructions for the battle, H.Q. 3 Cdn Inf Div allotted the tasks ahead. After Phase One (the initial breakout towards Emmerich by 9 Cdn Inf Bde under command 51 (H.) Div), 7 Cdn Inf Bde was given the job of enlarging the bridgehead and 8 Cdn Inf Bde the capture of Emmerich itself (W.D., G.S., H.Q. 3 Cdn Inf Div, March 1945: Appx 18, folio "2 Cdn Corps": H.Q. 3 Cdn Inf Div Confirmatory Notes of Conference, 1600 hrs, 17 Mar 45). It had been previously decided that the assaulting brigades should consist of four battalions, each brigade taking in the leading battalion of the follow-up formation. In this way H.L.I. of C. became part of 154 Bde from the planning stage onwards. (W.D., H.L.I. of C., 15 Mar 45; AEF: 45/3 Cdn Inf Div/C/F, Docket V: Folio 20, Op "PLUNDER", Report prepared by Hist Offr, 30 Apr 45). H.L.I. of C.'s special assignment under the Highland brigade was to capture the hamlet of zu Bienen* (0558) and patrol north-eastwards to the area of Am Millingerbruch (0659) as well as towards Praest (0359) to the north-west. 9 Cdn Inf Bde proper was then to launch its leading battalion (Nth N.S. Highrs) through to assault Praest, while S.D. & G. Highrs seized the ground about Millingen (0757). It was expected that H.L.I. of C. would get across the river by 0200 hours on D Day with its two sister battalions trailing over some seven or eight hours later. (W.D., G.S., H.Q. 3 Cdn Inf Div, March 1945: Appx 18, Op "PLUNDER", 9 Cdn Inf Bde Op Instr No. 1, 22 Mar 45) See Appx "A".

40. As D Day approached, the concentration and marshalling of troops and equipment presented new problems of camouflage and concealment. The whole picture was a keen

* Notice in subsequent paragraphs (i.e., 61) plans very often must be changed to meet tactical demands: i.e. (a) H.L.I. of C were committed against Speldrop: (b) It was 7 Cdn Inf Bde who took Emmerich.

reminder of the days prior to the Normandy Invasion. The high-level planners accepted the fact that the enemy knew of our intention to cross the Rhine, but the greatest care was taken to see that the time and the place of the assault were not revealed. The actual concentration of the fighting men and machines was far from easy, for the broad pincer movement recently carried out by Ninth U.S. and First Cdn Armies had resulted in a wide dispersal of units which had to be sorted out in all too short a time. (AEF: 45/Second Army/C/D, Docket I). As far as the administration was concerned, the build-up of ammunition and engineer stores presented an even greater difficulty, for the only way into the area between the rivers was over First Cdn Army's heavily laden and already sagging road system about the Reichswald. (Ibid)

41. The immense work of preparing for the battle was only accomplished by the complete cooperation of all services. It took place behind a dense smoke screen which covered the whole front and even extended into the flanking sectors of both Canadian and American Armies. This smoke programme, originally started by 2 Cdn Corps during Operation "VERITABLE", was to prove most successful. When Second Army took over the Rhine bank on 10 Mar to begin to build-up for "PLUNDER", the screen was intensified as fitting naturally into the large scale deception plan to make the enemy believe that our attack was aimed directly at Emmerich. The screen was operated by a smoke control organization and timed to agree with the needs of the corps involved; only Headquarters Second Army could alter these timings in case of need for further air photography. (AEF: 45/First Cdn Army/C/F, Docket III, Vol 1, Folio 16, Smoke Screen Op "PLUNDER"; Folio 19, Report on Smoke Screens Carried out by First Cdn Army, p. 33)

42. As a good part of Second British Army had been operating under Gen Crerar during Operation "VERITABLE"; it became essential that no hint of our regrouping be given the enemy. To this end, a wireless deception plan, Operation "TRANSCEND", was arranged; this together with the actual placing on the ground of dummy equipments drew the German's attention towards Emmerich, and away from the real effort which was to be made further south. The camouflage plan, itself a master-piece of organized concealment, was carried out by the Camouflage Staff Pool of 21 Army Group, assisted wholeheartedly by experts from 12 U.S. Army Group and First Cdn Army. Like the smoke screen, it was the biggest undertaking of its kind on the western front. It included the complete camouflage of all our assault equipments, gun positions, ammunition dumps, engineer stores and concentration areas, in fact every last thing that would give the enemy the slightest clue as to the point of origin of the real attack. From these vast labours the rewards were most promising; on D minus 1 a very thorough aerial check showed little to indicate either the time or the place of our impending attack. (AEF: 45/Second Army/C/D,

* Op "TRANSCEND". This was a high-level wireless scheme in which links were established between First Cdn Army's main and rear H.Q. and 30 Brit Corps' main and rear H.Q. These links were to operate daily until the assault was underway, to give the appearance that the groupings of 21 Army Group had not been substantially changed.

Docket I; also W.D., G.S., H.Q. First Cdn Army, April 1945:
Appx "JJ", folio Op "TRANSCEND", 8 Mar 45)

43. By this late hour the enemy's positions on the east bank were being subjected to the fiercest air bombardment since the Normandy landings. In addition to the effort by our fighter and fighter bombers, Air-Marshal Sir Arthur Harris' Bomber Command had by D Day flown 5,243 sorties dropping 24,983 tons of high explosives. Eighth and Ninth United States A.A.Fs. contribution was correspondingly large, with 24,500 tons being dropped in 11,067 sorties. A highlight of this destructive programme was to come at 2230 hours on D minus 1. At that time, 200 Lancasters were to swamp the town of Wesel and pave the way for the attack of 1 Cdo Bde. (AEF: 45/21 Army Gp/C/F, Docket II, Vol 1: Notes on the Operations of 21 Army Group, 6 Jun 44 - 5 May 45, p. 51)

44. More than a month of heavy fighting through the confined region between the Rivers Maas and Rhine, in the face of a desperate defence and under appalling conditions of weather and terrain, had left our own troops utterly weary. And yet, notwithstanding their fatigue, morale was splendid: "...a tremendous feeling of esprit de corps was evident. The spirit... was that of troops resting after a job well done". The soldiers were convinced, moreover, that final victory was not far off, and in the brief period of rest before the resumption of operations beyond the Rhine they showed their eagerness to begin the last great battle. (Hist Sec File 205 A21.023, 21 Army Group Censorship Report for period 16-31 Mar 45, Cdn Army Overseas)

45. When dawn broke on 23 Mar the troops and their machines were ready for the great adventure. The hours before the assault were ones of orderly preparations; to the more seasoned soldiers it was like the D Day of June 1944; all realized that the time to perform a very necessary operation had arrived. Their feeling of confidence was strengthened by the C.-in-C.'s personal message.

1. On the 7th February I told you we were going into the ring for the final and last round; there would be no time limit; we would continue fighting until our opponent was knocked out. The last round is going very well on both sides of the ring--and over-land.

2. In the West, the enemy has lost the Rhineland, and with it the flower of at least four armies--the Parachute Army, Fifth Panzer Army, Fifteenth Army, and Seventh Army; the First Army, further to the South, is now being added to the list. In the Rhineland battles, the enemy has lost about 150,000 prisoners, and there are many more to come: his total casualties amount to about 250,000 since 8th February.

3. In the East, the enemy has lost all Pomerania East of the R Oder, an area as large as the Rhineland; and three more German armies have been routed. The Russian armies are within about 35 miles of Berlin.

4. Overhead, the Allied Air Forces are pounding Germany day and night. It will be interesting to see how much longer the Germans can stand it.

5. The enemy has in fact been driven into a corner, and he cannot escape. Events are moving rapidly. The complete and decisive defeat of the Germans is certain; there is no possibility of doubt on this matter.
6. 21 ARMY GROUP WILL NOW CROSS THE RHINE. The enemy possibly thinks he is safe behind this great river obstacle. We all agree that it is a great obstacle; but we will show the enemy that he is far from safe behind it. This great Allied fighting machine, composed of integrated land and air forces, will deal with the problem in no uncertain manner.
7. And having crossed the Rhine, we will crack about in the plains of Northern Germany, chasing the enemy from pillar to post. The swifter and the more energetic our action the sooner the war will be over, and that is what we all desire; to get on with the job and finish off the German war as soon as possible.
8. Over the Rhine, then, let us go. And good hunting to you all on the other side.
9. May "the Lord mighty in battle" give us the victory in this our latest undertaking, as He has done in all our battles since we landed in Normandy on D-Day.

(W.D., 2 Cdn Fd Hist Sec, March 1945:
Appx 1, Personal message from C.-in-C.,
21 Army Gp, March 1945)

Thus inspired, the assault troops gathered in their hideaways for the final briefing and waited anxiously for the order to "get on with the job". That order, signalling the commencement of the last great offensive of the European war, came from Field Marshal Montgomery at 1530 hours on 23 Mar, for as he explained later, "the weather was good". (Field Marshal, The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G., G.C.B., D.S.O., Normandy to the Baltic, p. 204)*

46. A British officer touring the crowded assembly areas at this time noted:-

Driving round, I saw very odd sights: Pioneer Corps companies with bridging material and the R.A.S.C. making dumps, both in the front line; our medium and heavy artillery deployed within enemy mortar range; some gun-crews stripped to the waist digging frantically for victory, while other soldiers wandered past them on bicycles and even on horseback (there was no shelling this morning); odd men milking cows; thirty dead cows in a minefield; some ownerless and rather skinny pigs scavenging round; masses of tanks and lorries containing bridging material moving forward; many notices put up by 3rd Division asking us to minimize our dust... The Huns seem to have been evacuated from here... It was all

* Normandy to the Baltic; the page numbers referred to in this report are those of the edition published by Hutchinson and Co.

a mystery to me as I strolled around in the sunshine, no smoke screen on this last and most vital day, and yet no shelling either.

(Lt-Col Martin Lindsay, D.S.O.,
So Few Got Through, p. 232)

47. This almost disturbing quietness was finally broken late that afternoon. At 1700 hours on 23 Mar, heavy gunfire roared out from the artillery positions concealed on the west bank of the Rhine. (W.D., H.Q. R.C.A., 4 Cdn Armd Div, 23 Mar 45). The intensity of this preliminary bombardment increased with each passing minute, and as darkness fell the leaping muzzle flashes presented an unforgettable picture. (Ibid; W.D., H.Q. R.C.A., 2 Cdn Inf Div, 23 Mar 45).

It was a very impressive show, for there seemed to be a solid row of guns firing from our side of the Rhine from Nijmegen bridge stretching miles to the south. The whole sky would burst into flame as hundreds of guns seemed to fire salvos continuously and hurled hundreds of tons of shells into the Boche's last defence line.

(History of the 12th Canadian Field Regiment, p. 58)

THE ASSAULT, 23 MAR 45

48. At 2100 hours, as the massed guns thundered their encouragement, the curtain rose on the opening phase of the last major battle of the European war. The L.Vs.T. carrying the life-belted Scots of 51 (H.) Div, picked a way across the flats toward the dark waters of the Rhine. Opposite Rees the river, visible in the dull glare reflected by the searchlights from the low clouds, was entered without undue trouble, and the snorting vehicles turned their bows to the east bank. Seven minutes later the suspense and anxiety of those waiting at the various headquarters on the west bank was broken, and the report came through that the first waves of infantry were safely ashore on the far side. (AEF: 45/21 Army Gp/C/F, Docket II: Notes on the Operations of 21 Army Group, 6 Jun 44 - 5 May 45; W.D., H.Q. 9 Cdn Inf Bde, March 1945: Appx 3, Ops Log, 23 Mar 45, Serial 13)

49. 51 (H.) Div attacked with two brigades up, 153 Bde on the right with 5/7 Gordons and 5 B.W. leading, while on the left 154 Bde's thrust employed 7 A. & S.H. and 7 B.W. as spearheads. Immediately behind the infantry came the first squadron of Staffs Yeo in D.D. tanks. This success was quickly followed by the crossing of the Commandos at Wesel. Their effort began at 2200 hours and within thirty minutes the troops were formed up outside Wesel waiting for the R.A.F. to commence bombing only 1500 yards away. They did not have long to wait; the bombs came down, the veteran commandos dashed in, and by 0600 hours were all well into the battered town, struggling fiercely with the German garrison. To the left of the Commando Bde, 15 (S.) Div having crossed at 0200 hours, had seized all their initial objectives. Still farther to the south the Americans of Ninth U.S. Army were pouring over the Rhine on a front of two divisions. (Notes on the Operations of 21 Army Group, op cit, p. 51; H.Q.C. 206-227-1-T51 (D.W.D. 2) Military Operation Research Unit Report No. 12, "The Assault on Wesel")

50. While the Highland Division was establishing its initial bridgehead about Rees, the main body of H.L.I. of C. which was to be the first Canadian battalion to cross, was being marshalled north-east of Calcar. (W.D., H.L.I. of C., 23 Mar 45; W.D., Nth N.S. Highrs, March 1945: Appx 5, 9 Cdn Inf Bde Op Instr No. 1, Op "PLUNDER", 22 Mar 45, para 5). The advance party, already with elements of 154 Bde on the east bank, consisted of nine other ranks commanded by Capt Donald Pearce. Their task was to become familiar with the ground in order to lead the battalion to its assembly area when it arrived on the far side. These men were thus the first Canadians to cross the Rhine. (AEF: 45/9 Cdn Inf Bde/C/D, Docket II: Interview with Lt-Col R.D. Hodgins, O.C., H.L.I. of C., 20 Apr 45). At 0345 hours, the battalion received orders to move, and by 0425 hours the fighting men of the four rifle companies with lifebelts "Mae West" slung round them, and laden with 24 hour ration packs, were piled into their Buffaloes. (W.D., H.L.I. of C., 24 Mar 45; W.D., G.S., H.Q. 3 Cdn Inf Div, March 1945: Appx 18, Confirmatory Notes - Conference 0930 hours, 19 Mar 45, Op "PLUNDER"; 51 (H.) Div Op Instr No. 35, Op "PLUNDER", para 6). Under sporadic shelling the amphibians carried the unit to its landing place on the east bank about four kilometres west of Rees. The guides led the battalion to the assembly area, a progress which was enlivened for "C" Coy by the capture of 30 members of the Volkssturm. (W.D., H.L.I. of C., 24 Mar 45)

THE AIRBORNE ATTACK, 24 MAR 45

51. The substantial bridgehead produced by the night's fighting was soon increased in the most spectacular manner by our airborne forces.

...The two mighty air fleets converged near Brussels and made for the Rhine. Over the bridgehead area an air umbrella was maintained by nine hundred fighters, while deeper into Germany fighter formations kept enemy aircraft away from the battle zone. A great weight of artillery fire from the west bank of the Rhine prepared the way for the airborne drop, and a few minutes before 1000 hours the ground troops saw the aircraft of the first parachute serial arrive.

(Montgomery, Normandy to the Baltic, p. 205)

From that time on thousands of aircraft flowed across the great river in the clear morning air to pour down their loads of men and equipment exactly as planned. From one Canadian gun position it presented a dramatic spectacle.

A spectacular sight indeed was the Airborne operation. The entire Bty saw planes and their gliders flying overhead in a seemingly never ending stream and then the tugs breaking loose leaving the gliders on their own. One Hamilcar glider broke loose prematurely and glided down to a very smooth landing near our position. One "tug" and all the occupants suffered a quick death when it turned completely over and executed a vertical dive to earth.

(H.S. File 142.97, 013 Docket I:
History of 1 Cdn Rocket Bty, R.C.A., p. 26)

The tug, which the Canadian gunners saw thus plunge to destruction was probably one of the many victims of the enemy's flak.

52. In the earlier stages of the airborne assault casualties were light, but by the time that the gliders began to arrive (at about 1030 hours) the enemy gunners had recovered their balance as well as their courage and were once again manning their weapons. Curiously enough, although many gliders and tugs fell victim to the flak, so successful had been the air attacks on the German landing grounds, that there was no attempt at interference by the enemy's fighters. (AEF: 45/Second Army/C/D, Docket II: p. 352; AEF: 45/21 Army Gp/S/F: Air Action in Support of the Battle of the Rhine, p. 5, para 16). Immediately after the initial phase there followed a daring, low-level re-supply mission by 240 American Liberator bombers, which delivered 540 tons of petrol, food and ammunition. Fourteen of the four-engined giants were shot down but luckily about 85 percent of their cargoes were accurately dropped. (Ibid; and Montgomery, Normandy to the Baltic, pp. 204-205)

53. By midday the success of the airborne operation was apparent. The British 6 Airborne Division had landed right on its objectives, and Diersfordt Wood, Hamminkeln and the bridges eastward on the River Eissel were soon seized. (AEF: 45/Second Army/C/D, Docket II: p. 353; and 3 Cdn Inf Div Ops Log, 24 Mar 45, Serial 30). Among these dashing, red-berretted shock troops were the men of 1 Cdn Para Bn, who jumped with 3 Para Bde to the north of the Diersfordt Wood. Brigadier S.J.L. Hill, D.S.O., M.C. commanding the brigade wrote Lt-Gen P.J. Montague* from his headquarters in Germany on 9 Apr:

...I thought you would not mind my writing to you direct to tell you what a very wonderful show the Battalion has put up since our operations over the Rhine on March 24th last.

They really put up a most tremendous performance on D Day and as a result of their tremendous dash and enthusiasm they overcame their objectives, which were very sticky ones, with considerable ease, killing a very large number of Germans and capturing many others.

Unfortunately the price was high in that they lost their Colonel, Jeff Nicklin, who was one of the best fellows that I have met, and was the ideal man to command that Battalion as he fairly used to bang their heads together and they used to like it and accept it. He is and will be a tremendous loss to the Battalion and of course to me. I only hope that the people back in Canada appreciate the really wonderful job of work he has done in producing his Battalion at the starting line in such outstanding form.

(AEF: 45/1 Cdn Para Bn/C/D, Docket II: Folio 5)

54. The battalion's dropping zone lay along the northern edge of Diersfordt Wood. Owing to the high speed of the aircraft there was considerable dispersion in the jump, and the zone itself was found to be under heavy fire. Nonetheless

* At that time Chief of Staff at C.M.H.Q. London.

the battalion quickly concentrated, and before midday had cleared its objectives on the western edge of the wood and captured a large number of prisoners. In the afternoon contact was made with reconnaissance elements of 15 (S.) Inf Div. (W.D., 1 Cdn Para Bn, 24 Mar 45).

55. That the veterans of 6 Gds Tk Bde, whose task it was to give the airborne troops armoured support, felt their responsibility keenly is recorded in the Brigade history:

It was difficult at the time to forget the tragedy of the previous September when another tank formation of the Brigade of Guards had been given the task of joining up with another airborne force. Would this be a second Arnhem?

From the beginning, however, the adventure seemed destined to success. Soon after the landing took place, the Scots Guards picked up the 6th Airborne Headquarters on the wireless and during the late afternoon and early evening they moved down by stages to the banks of the Rhine near to the village of Wardt. There, in the middle of the night, the tanks were driven onto rafts and towed across the river to the further side. Left Flank immediately drove off in an easterly direction and, after going four miles, linked up with the 6th Airborne Division in a clearing of the Diersfordt Wald. The paratroopers were thus provided with armoured reinforcements little more than twelve hours after their descent.

It had all seemed so easy that it came as a shock to learn that the 6th Airborne Division had suffered terrible casualties soon after they had landed. Within a few hours of leaving England, they had been plunged into a inferno of desperate hand-to-hand fighting. But they had emerged victorious, having trapped the German paratroopers (old enemies of the Brigade) and routed them completely. Now they were as keen as ever to continue the battle.

(Forbes, 6th Guards Tank Brigade, p. 123)

56. The American drop was equally successful in spite of 513 Regimental Combat Team being dropped north of its correct zone. The Americans made contact during the afternoon with 1 Cdo Bde in the area north of Wesel and 6 Airborne Div linked up with 15 (S.) Inf Div. By midnight 24/25 Mar, the two airborne divisions were on their objectives and had established firm contact with 12 Corps. (AEF: 45/Second Army/C/D, Docket II: p. 353; and Montgomery, Normandy to the Baltic, p. 206). The impact of the airborne attack had completely overwhelmed the enemy in the area of the dominating Diersfordt Ridge, disrupting the control of his artillery and of his rear positions. In 14 hours the airborne corps took 3500 prisoners, mostly troops of 84 Inf Div, but with 7 Para Div yielding a small share. (AEF: 45/Second Army/C/D, Docket II, p. 353). The Commander of 84 Inf Div, Maj-Gen Heinz Fiebig, admitted that his division was practically completely destroyed, for its forward troops received the full impact of the 12 Corps attack and thousands of paratroopers landed right in his rear area. So sweeping was the Allied

success that only a few signals, engineer and anti-tank units survived. (AEF: First Cdn Army/L/F, Docket II, Folio 19: Special Interrogation Report, Maj-Gen Heinz Fiebig).

57. Much of the success achieved so far must be attributed to the tremendous Allied air effort, summarized by the Supreme Commander as follows:

Prior to the arrival of the transport planes and gliders, the Ninth Air Force and the Second Tactical Air Force planes attacked the enemy flak positions, with the result that interference with the airborne elements from this source was considerably reduced. Also, in immediate co-operation with the armies, medium bombers attacked 18 towns which were either strong-points or communication centers. Gun and mortar sites and the enemy forward positions generally were relentlessly strafed and bombed, while armed reconnaissance was maintained against the German supply lines. The whole weight of the Eighth Air Force bombers, apart from one division of Liberators used for airborne resupply, was employed in the attacks on the jet airfields.

(Report by the Supreme Commander, op cit, p. 99)

In addition, General Eisenhower continued:

...diversionary air operations were also conducted during the day. One hundred and fifty bombers of the Fifteenth Air Force, with five groups of fighters, flew 1,500 miles from their Italian bases to Berlin and back, while other forces from Italy were raiding airfields in the south. Over Berlin itself fighters of the Eighth Air Force provided cover. This raid successfully fulfilled its object of drawing enemy fighters away from the Rhine battle area. The second diversion was carried out by RAF Bomber Command, which attacked the rail center of Sterkrade as well as oil targets in the Ruhr. In all, during the four days, 21-24 March, American and British air forces, based in Britain, Western Europe and Italy, flew over 42,000 sorties against Germany.

(Ibid)

A special word of praise must be added for the Allied photographic reconnaissance planes which had provided our forces with highly accurate intelligence;

Conversely, the enemy's failure, from D Day onward, was partly due to his own lack, by reason of his air weakness, of the facilities which the Allies enjoyed in this respect.

(Ibid, pp. 98-99).

58. That the enemy's air force was not able to interfere effectively with the Allied assault is substantiated by the fact that although on 24 Mar alone the Allies flew some 8,000 aircraft and 1,300 glider sorties, fewer than 100

enemy aircraft appeared in the air. (Ibid, p. 121). No one appreciated the air support more than the ordinary soldier who had to face the enemy with his personal weapons, and every fighting man's thoughts must indeed have been re-echoed in Field Marshal Montgomery's personal message to Air Marshal Sir Arthur Harris of Bomber Command in which the C.-in-C. expressed his thanks:

My grateful appreciation for the quite magnificent co-operation you have given us in the Battle of the Rhine. The bombing of Wesel last night was a masterpiece and was a decisive factor in making possible our entry into that town before midnight.

(Harris, Marshal of the R.A.F., Sir Arthur, Bomber Offensive, p. 255)

59. The degree of surprise which our assault gained may be gathered from the remarks of the German Generals who were responsible for the sector against which our attacks were directed. General Eugen Meindl admitted that he had been gravely concerned regarding a parachute offensive but, as he informed his interrogator, he had little with which he could counter it. (Meindl's appreciation of our intentions must of course be accepted with reserve, for his statements were made after the war was over.) Nevertheless he felt that the main attack would be made against Rees. On the other hand he claimed that General Alfred Schlemm, the commander of First Parachute Army, expected an assault on Emmerich or Wesel. As it was, the actual attack came two days before Meindl expected it, and thus he was not prepared to meet it. (Special Interrogation Report, General Eugen Meindl). During his own interrogation Schlemm explained that:

...A parachute drop over the Rhine was considered inevitable, and efforts were made to determine the most probable spot. Schlemm had captured an Allied report analyzing the parachute drop at Arnhem in September 1944, and from this document he learnt that Allied views were now against a paratroop landing too far away from the ground troops destined to contact it. By plotting the areas that were topographically suitable for a parachute drop and not too far from the Rhine, Schlemm claims the most likely area seemed to be just east of Wesel. It was in this neighborhood that he therefore expected the crossing attempt would be made...

(Ibid, General Alfred Schlemm)

Schlemm's views however were not considered sound by his superiors at Army Group "H" or by Field Marshal Von Rundstedt:

...The expected northern crossing was to take place, according to these latter opinions, in the neighborhood of Emmerich. The assault would be directed north-east and designed to take the Ijssel line in the rear. Since this was to be the big attack, Schlemm was ordered to send a large part of his artillery to Twenty Fifth Army who would be faced with this new offensive...

As subsequent events will prove, this was a miscalculation of some significance. (Ibid)

THE EXPANSION OF THE BRIDGEHEAD BY 51 (H.) DIV, 23-25 MAR 45

60. Meanwhile the Highland Division, while still hard bent in its effort to breakout of the bridgehead, had suffered a serious loss. Its brilliant G.O.C., Maj-Gen T.G. Rennie, an outstanding veteran of the North African Campaign, was killed by mortar fire while visiting his men on the east bank. Nevertheless, despite the loss of their leader the "Jocks" gained ground steadily. On the right especially, the operation by 153 Bde to capture Rees was progressing favourably, for while 5 B.W. had isolated that place by their thrust on Esserden and 5/7 Gordons established themselves on the island south-east of the town, 1 Gordons deployed to advance on Rees itself from the west. Additional pressure was brought to bear in this sector by the subsequent arrival of 152 Bde which, led by 2 Seaforth with 5 Camerons in close attendance, cut in between Esserden and Rees to straddle the main road leading north from the town. On the left however, 154 Bde had run into difficulties. While 7 B.W. moved north towards Reesward to clear the western flank and 7 A. & S.H. held the narrow road linking Esserden and Rathshof (0452), 1 B.W. was passed through to seize Klein, Esserden and Speldrop. Within a short time the opposition in the former had been dealt with but Speldrop soon became a centre of serious trouble. (3 Cdn Inf Div Ops Log, 23 Mar 45, serials 15, 16 and 20; 24 Mar 45, serials 1, 2, 4, 6-10, 18, 29, 43 and 45)

61. A careful examination of the ground in this area shows that the exit from the bridgehead is bounded by the Millinger Meer and the Alter Rhein. To expand northward therefore the villages of Speldrop and Bienen must be taken. Speldrop itself lies at the heel of the great horseshoe of which the Alter Rhein is the western side. Bienen at the northern end is the toe of the horseshoe and the waters of the Millinger Meer form the eastern side. A breakout could only be accomplished by securing Bienen, but Bienen could not be taken so long as the Germans held Speldrop. The enemy had fully appreciated the tactical value of these places, and although 1 B.W. managed to enter Speldrop they were very quickly counter-attacked and driven out with heavy losses. (H.S. File 235C3 013(D6), Op "PLUNDER", Report by Hist Offr, H.Q. 3 Cdn Inf Div, Capt R.F. Gray, 30 Apr 45). A second attempt by the Black Watch did not prove completely successful and by 1400 hours it was decided to withdraw as many of the Scots as possible and send H.L.I. of C. in to take Speldrop, instead of Bienen their original task (Ibid: AEF: 45/3 Cdn Inf Div/C/F, Docket V, Folio 15: 14 Cdn Fd Regt, R.C.A., Artillery Notes of Ops "PLUNDER"; also W.Ds., H.Q. 9 Cdn Inf Bde, 24 Mar 45, and H.L.I. of C., 24 Mar 45). Under cover of a smoke screen the battered members of the Black Watch withdrew, leaving their wounded sheltered in the cellars. One platoon which could not be extricated was advised by wireless to take what cover they could from our artillery fire. As we shall see, this first Canadian commitment east of the Rhine was to be no easy task. (W.D., H.L.I. of C., 24 Mar 45; AEF: 45/9 Cdn Inf Bde/C/D, Docket II, Folio 1: Memo of Interview with Lt-Col R.D. Hodgins, O.C., H.L.I. of C., 20 Apr 45)

62. The attack by H.L.I. of C. was to be well supported; six field and two medium regiments, as well as two heavy batteries (7.2s) were available to back up our attempt to gain the village of Speldrop. At 1600 hours, behind

a series of linear artillery concentrations and with the left flank screened by smoke to give protection against the German fire from the north, "B" Coy H.L.I. of C. went in from the west. (Interview with Lt-Col Hodgins; W.Ds., H.Q. 9 Cdn Inf Bde. and H.L.I. of C., 24 Mar 45; AEF: 3 Cdn Inf Div/C/F, Docket V, Folio 15: Artillery Notes on Op "PLUNDER")

63. The Canadians pressed on across 1200 yards of flat, open fields, which despite our smoke screen were swept by the enemy's machine guns, artillery and mortar fire. Hugging the shelter of our own barrage, the leading company reached the outskirts of the built-up portion of the town but immediately ran into stiff resistance. "A" Coy was then passed through to meet the determined paratroopers who were defending the fortified houses. A bitter fight followed, but even the resolution of these well trained toughs melted before the horrid jets of flame which the Wasps sprayed among them, and the backbone of their resistance was broken. Another company, ("C"), succeeded in clearing the southern part of the town and liberating the trapped platoon of 1 B.W., while the fourth rifle company sent patrols north of the town and captured several machine gun crews who were, curiously enough, asleep at their guns. It was evident that the past 24 hours of almost continual attack and bombardment had rendered the German infantry completely exhausted. (W.D., H.L.I. of C., 25 Mar 45; and Interview with Lt-Col Hodgins, H.S. File 235C3 013(D6), Op "PLUNDER", op cit)

64. While H.L.I. of C., was mopping up around Speldrop, 7 A. & S.H. were ordered to pass through 1 B.W. at Klein - Esserden and to capture Bienen. (3 Cdn Inf Div Ops Log, 24 Mar, serials 46 and 50). The Scots attacked Bienen at 2000 hours, but were so heavily opposed that it became clear that additional forces would be needed to reduce the village. This necessary support, however, was already on its way, for by this time 9 Cdn Inf Bde's other battalions were on the east bank of the Rhine. S.D. & G. Highrs had crossed first in Buffaloes and concentrated near the river south-east of Speldrop. Nth N.S. Highrs followed at 1700 hours using the storm boat ferry service, and concentrated in the area recently vacated by H.L.I. of C. (W.D., S.D. & G. Highrs, 24 Mar 45, and March 1945: Appx 4, marked map 2; W.Ds., Nth N.S.-Highrs and H.Q., 9 Cdn Inf Bde, 24 Mar 45)

65. During the night of 24 Mar a reshuffle to further the Canadian commitment on the left took place. S.D. & G. Highrs relieved 7 B.W. and occupied the area of Reeserward between the main river and the Alter Rhein. The position was very exposed, but the troops, taking advantage of whatever cover the moonlit night offered, moved in. Once in place, they found themselves occupying the unique position of the extreme left of the whole allied force which had crossed the Rhine. (W.D., S.D. & G. Highrs, 24 Mar 45; and AEF: 45/3 Cdn Inf Div/C/F, Docket V: Report 9 Cdn Inf Bde, Op "PLUNDER", 15 May 45). The relief completed, 7 B.W. returned to concentrate northwest of Rathshof, leaving S.D. & G. Highrs to plan an attack on Grietherbusch for the early hours of 25 Mar. (W.D., S.D. & G. Highrs, 24 Mar 45; 3 Cdn Inf Div Ops Log, 25 Mar, serials 5, 6, 9 and 31)

66. By first light on 25 Mar, the situation, though still strongly contested, was improving all across the front. On the far right, 5/7 Gordons were exerting pressure on Rees from the south while 1 Gordons strove energetically to clean up the last defenders in the town. To assist in this, 5 B.W.