

No.4 Commando operations at Flushing

by Lt. Col. Robert Dawson OC No.4 Commando



Operation Infatuate 1

No 4 Commando, including 1 and 8 troops (French) of No.10 (Inter Allied) Commando, assaulted at Flushing on the eastern side.

No.4 Commando, after a daring pre-dawn landing and nearly two days of bitter street fighting, succeeded in capturing the port and most of the town before being relieved by the 52nd Infantry Division. They were thus enabled to rejoin the rest of the Brigade, who without air or artillery support, had made a daylight assault landing at Westkapelle, in the face of heavy enemy fire from the formidable gun emplacements built into the sand dune dykes.

Operation Infatuate 2

Three RM Commando units, Nos.41, 47, and 48 Commando, with detachments from the Belgian and Norwegian Commandos from No.10 (IA) Commando, assaulted at Westkapelle on the western side, and had a range of sophisticated armoured amphibious vehicles in addition to the conventional landing craft.

Some Commandos from 2 troop and 3 troops of No.10 (Inter Allied) Commando also took part being dispersed among the units of the main commando force.

Lt. Col. Robert Dawson CBE, DSO, Legion d'Honneur, Croix de Guerre
Report to his superiors on Walcheren Operation.

4 COMMANDO OPERATIONS IN WALCHEREN - NOVEMBER 1944

PLANNING.

4 Commando's task at Flushing was to effect a landing and to seize as large an area as would enable follow-up units of 155 Brigade to complete the capture of the town and move towards Middelburg.

My assessment of the task was roughly as follows:

- (a) there was no alternative to a frontal assault on Flushing, cut off from the west by the breach in the sea-dyke, from the east by the harbour, and hemmed-in by floods covering about one-third of the built-up area.
- (b) the only landing point which appeared at all likely was the short stretch of dyke on the west side of "Uncle Beach" - which itself offered the only practicable touch-down area, after clearance of the beach obstacles, for follow-up units and supplies.
- (c) the configuration of the old town - the area between the shipyard and the sea - separated from the shipyard by a continuous high wall, was such that tactically it could be treated as a clearly defined area. We had however to recognise that the enemy, if alerted, could with relatively few determined defenders delay its capture, possibly for a considerable time.
- (d) the known defences were all disposed to seaward, and were manned by garrison units, not elite troops.

These factors argued overwhelmingly for a landing in darkness, followed by an immediate and rapid deployment to seize and secure the whole area from counter-attack, then eliminating the enemy inside it.

What made such a landing - on an initial frontage of less than twenty yards - possible was the availability of "navigational" landing craft capable of guiding us in with pin-point accuracy despite the very strong tidal currents in the 4-mile wide estuary.

Our approach was to be covered by a heavy bombardment of the whole Flushing waterfront by the massed corps artillery from the Breakens area, and a programme of harassing fire over the previous few days was arranged.

We were under command of 155 Brigade for the operation, and to return to 4 Commando Brigade as soon as we could be released. I was to be in local command in Flushing until the Brigade Commander landed with the second follow-up battalion (7/9 Royal Scots). The general lines of 4 Commando's task were laid down in joint planning, but I was given a free hand in planning our own operations, subject of course to co-ordination by 155 Brigade. Our decision to land in darkness did not greatly affect the operational planning of the units of 155 Brigade, as the timing, which was determined by tide considerations, would ensure their arrival and deployment in daylight.

Looking back now I am inclined to think that the timing of follow-up flights was rather too slow and deliberate, and that if they had come in as fast as the turn-round of landing craft allowed the opposition from the shore batteries, which seemed to increase during the day, might have been less effective, and the whole of Flushing might just conceivably been taken by the end of D-day. I venture this thought with many reservations.

I discussed my plan for a night assault with Junbo Leicester, who supported it, and with Monkey Sellar of Force 'T', who I seem to remember suggested using the special "navigational" landing craft which made the operation possible.

You mention the apparent disparity between the Flushing and Westkapelle operations in the emphasis given in planning to the German batteries. At Westkapelle and in the dunes, as I see it, the batteries were themselves objectives, being powerful, well-found, and, since the flooding, seemingly secure from attack. At Flushing our task was to seize the town and the road to Middelburg, and the batteries were out of our reach until this was done. They could not influence the battle in Flushing itself, though they could - and did - interfere seriously with the build-up. The task of dealing with them lay primarily with the artillery massed on the Breakens shore, and by and large this was effective, although the enemy guns inflicted casualties on craft crossing in daylight, and in the case of one flight caused it to turn back and try again later. Once Flushing was ours the German shore batteries were isolated, and, being subjected to constant harassment from shellfire and rockets from Typhoons, surrendered without being directly assaulted - on D + 1.

THE OPERATION.

The preliminary bombardment of the Flushing waterfront was very effective in keeping the Germans' heads down. Our first flight got ashore undetected, and the strongpoint on the east side of "Uncle Beach" was taken by surprise. The main body of the Commando, while afloat, came briefly under 20mm cannon fire from the strongpoint at De Ruyter's statue, and this probably accounted for the sinking just off the landing point of one of the two landing craft lost, the other being holed by an obstacle. The point of landing was covered from this fire, and we got ashore without loss either of our troops or of landing craft crews. Our 3" mortars and ammunition went down in the craft holed by gunfire, but were recovered and brought into action later.

Contrary to the practice in most landing operations we touched down on a falling tide, so as to give the naval beach obstacle clearance party a clear run and so that the following landing - on the flat beach instead of against the shelving dyke - would be on the rising tide.

The move through the old town was virtually unopposed, and the various troops were at their objectives by first light, the main position being at the road junction at the western end of the shipyard. We occupied this vital position in some strength, while other troops got to grips with the enemy strongpoints along the waterfront. Most of our subsequent fighting was centred round these, and there was no significant fighting in the old town other than in the vicinity of these enemy positions. Their total strength, not counting the HQ at the Britannia Hotel, must have been around two hundred.

Every device of street-fighting was used - including "mouse-holing" all the way down one side of a street, an activity which our Frenchmen indulged in with enormous zest! The last of these strongpoints, and the toughest, surrendered late on D+1. This was the one nearest to the Britannia Hotel, and had enjoyed a covered line of communication with the hotel along the beach under the sea-wall until this was taken by the Royal Scots at about the same time - in a very gallant but costly attack.

The main enemy counter-action from outside was directed at our pivot position on the cross-roads at the western end of the shipyard. It was sharp but spasmodic, and we suffered some casualties. The Germans made considerable, and at first somewhat disconcerting, use of the tall gantries of the shipyard cranes, which in some cases overhung nearby streets of the old town, as nests for snipers.

We suffered few casualties from this activity, but the follow-up battalions, which had not previously experienced sniper fire, were not so lucky. The nuisance was finally dealt with by the Lowland Division's pack howitzers, a troop of which had been landed, the gunners training their pieces on the gantry cabins, aiming directly through the barrel. After a couple of direct hits the snipers desisted.

The pack howitzers proved most versatile, and played a useful part in close support in street fighting, often from positions on the upper floors of buildings.

The Commando had the greater part of the fighting in Flushing itself apart from the action to capture the German HQ in the Britannia Hotel. We were continuously in action from first contact until the collapse of resistance of the seaward strongpoints late on D+1. There was little resistance in the flooded areas, but it developed again as 4 KOSB approached the beginning of the causeway to Middelburg.

With regard to the battle for the Britannia Hotel, where 7/9 Royal Scots attacked with great courage, I would agree with an observation made to me by Bill Boucher-Myers (2i/c of 4Cdo) that if the assault had been timed to take place at low water the attackers would have enjoyed far more room for manoeuvre and very possibly had lighter casualties.

Most of the actions in Flushing took place without artillery support, because of the nature of the fighting. In any case it was not practicable to call down fire on small well-protected targets set on the edge of an inhabited town. On the other hand Typhoons, which were available on D+1 and at one time maintained a "cab-rank" over the estuary, were accurate and effective, and above all destructive of enemy morale. We did call for artillery fire on targets outside the built-up area, particularly on the German batteries when they opened up on the craft approaching from Breskens. Our very delightful French Canadian artillery liaison officer (POO?) felt that his powerful resources were under-used, and when our RSM was wounded by small-arms fire from across the harbour he wanted to punish the perpetrator by bringing down a dose of "super-heavy, scale twenty!!"

Your question about alternatives to landing at "Uncle Beach" is most pertinent but difficult to answer. To the west of the beach there were none, and, while a lodgement further to the east could have been effected, we should have been at a great disadvantage, far from our main objectives, with the 'strangulation' of the promontory in the "Uncle Beach" area to negotiate against an almost certainly (by then) alerted enemy. The opening up of "Uncle Beach" for the landing of follow-up flights might have been seriously delayed. Fortunately the situation did not arise!

We landed at Flushing with four British and two French troops, and we had been together since the previous March. For operational purposes the troops were completely interchangeable, and all signallers were either British or fluent in English. At Flushing the French were given the task of reducing the westernmost strongpoint (nearest to the Britannia Hotel), which proved the largest and most awkward of all. They set about the task with dash and great ingenuity, and stuck to it tenaciously. To me it was always a pleasure to see these Frenchmen in action, as they showed endless resource and contrivance, and were masters of individual action. There was no task allotted to 4 Commando to which I would not have committed the French troops with the same confidence as I had in the British.

The two sergeants from the Dutch Troop of 10 IA Commando as interpreters proved invaluable. The town was full of civilians, many of them refugees from the flooded areas. They were most friendly, and wanted to be helpful, but in fact they were a considerable problem, as they would wander into areas where fighting was going on. Our two interpreters got the Dutch police to move civilians away from danger points, and to arrange for the evacuation of sick and wounded civilians to Breskens in returning landing craft - the bombardment of the town had caused a number of casualties.

OUR FINAL OPERATION IN THE NORTHERN DUNES.

There is little to add about this. 41 Commando and the Belgian Troop were in contact with the enemy in the dunes to the east of Domburg. Our task was to outflank the German positions, taking a line along the flat ground south of the dunes and along the edge of the flood which air photographic cover showed to be fairly thinly defended. Our night march along this line brought us to within a mile of Vrouwenpolder by first light, without having met any enemy. I halted the leading troop so as to look at the ground and issue orders for the further advance, and during this time the BSM took the battle HQ party into a small copse, where he found the entrance to a dug-out. He surprised the Germans inside, amongst them a lieutenant. I then availed myself of the field telephone to have a chat with the Colonel in Vrouwenpolder, following which he sent a car to take me and Ken Wright, the IO, to his HQ, where he quickly agreed that further fighting was pointless. The tactic of penetration by night was really the same as we had used at Flushing, but this time the Germans were cornered, isolated, and exhausted.

*Provided to the Commando Veterans Archive by Elizabeth Dawson,
daughter of Lieutenant Colonel Robert Dawson CBE, DSO, Legion
d'Honneur, Croix de Guerre.*