



# CANADA REMEMBERS THE BATTLE OF THE SCHELDT

Canada made many important contributions to help the Allies to victory in the Second World War. One of the most important—and most difficult—was the bloody Battle of the Scheldt which raged in Belgium and the Netherlands in the fall of 1944.

## TURNING THE TIDE

After having occupied much of Western Europe for more than four years, by the late summer of 1944 the Germans were finally being pushed back. A massive Allied force, which included more than 14,000 Canadian soldiers, had come ashore on the beaches of Normandy in occupied France on June 6, 1944—a date that has become known to history as D-Day. A bitter 11-week struggle ensued in Normandy before the enemy was finally forced to fall back in the face of the determined Allied armies.

The First Canadian Army—with some British, Polish and other nations' troops under their command—broke out north and east against the retreating German forces. Tasked with securing the coastline along the English Channel, our soldiers advanced through northern France, towards Belgium and the Netherlands. The Canadians' mission held extra importance because the Allies were in great need of a good port on the continent. They were still largely relying on the temporary docking facilities they had constructed on the Normandy beaches to supply their forces. If the Allies wanted to finally win the war, it was vital that they ensured the flow of their troops and supplies continued to reach the front lines of Northwest Europe.

## THE ALLIES ADVANCE

By early September 1944, the First Canadian Army had reached Belgium. Enemy resistance seemed to be faltering and large parts of western Belgium were quickly liberated as the Germans concentrated most of their defences in other key areas. The Allies decided to pin their hopes on delivering a knock-out blow to the enemy forces in Western Europe with a daring airborne assault in the Netherlands. Codenamed Operation *Market Garden*, this attack was launched on September 17 but unfortunately would be unsuccessful, dashing the chances for a rapid end to the war.

Capturing a major port now became a top priority for the Allies as establishing adequate supply lines for the prolonged conflict became even more important. The first ports liberated in Northwest Europe had been either too small or too damaged to be of much assistance. Antwerp, a major shipping centre in Belgium, was taken relatively undamaged by British forces in early September. The problem was that the city was some 80 kilometres from the open sea. Between it and the English Channel lay the West Scheldt estuary, passing through parts of Belgium and the Netherlands that were still controlled by the Germans. The vital task of clearing the enemy from the Scheldt and allowing Allied shipping to reach Antwerp would fall largely to the First Canadian Army.

## THE BATTLE OF THE SCHELDT

The geography of the Scheldt region made the First Canadian Army's mission very challenging. North of the Scheldt estuary lay the South Beveland peninsula. Beyond South Beveland was the island of Walcheren, which had been fortified into a powerful German stronghold. The south bank of the Scheldt was largely "polder country"—flatlands that were below sea level and enclosed by dykes. Indeed, much of the Battle of the Scheldt would take place over flat, flooded terrain that offered little protective cover for the advancing Canadian troops.

Clearing the Scheldt would involve four separate military operations. After some early unsuccessful opening actions in late September, the campaign began in earnest on October 2, 1944, when the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Division began advancing north of Antwerp, pushing back the German paratroopers who attempted to block the way. Casualties were heavy as Canadian troops attacked over open water-logged ground, but by October 16 they had seized the town of Woensdrecht at the entrance to South Beveland.

Meanwhile, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Division, supported by the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Division, would launch an assault over the Leopold Canal on the south side of the Scheldt. The attack began on October 6 against fierce opposition, and the Canadians desperately clung to their small bridgehead for three days before

an amphibious assault finally broke the enemy's hold on the canal. Allied troops and tanks poured in, and the fight began to clear the Breskens Pocket that laid beyond. The Germans breached the dykes and caused extensive flooding but the enemy was forced to withdraw into concrete bunkers along the coast. More fighting followed, but by November 3 the south shore of the Scheldt was secured. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Division would be dubbed the "water rats" by British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery—a nickname reflecting the hard operations its determined soldiers endured to triumph on those wet battlefields.

The First Canadian Army also had to clear South Beveland. The 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Division—which had been engaged in the fighting at the Leopold Canal—was moved north of the Scheldt and drove hard for the town of Bergen-op-Zoom to fully secure the approaches to the peninsula. By October 24, the entrance to South Beveland was completely breached and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division began the difficult advance into the peninsula, assisted by an amphibious landing by the 52<sup>nd</sup> British Division. After another week of hard fighting, the Allies had secured the entire area.

Walcheren, at the mouth of the Scheldt estuary, was the last obstacle to be tackled. To compromise its German fortifications, Royal Air Force bombers breached its dykes and flooded much of the island, but taking Walcheren would be very difficult. The only land link was a long narrow causeway from South Beveland. The



mudflats surrounding the causeway were too mucky for an attack on foot and lacked sufficient water to allow for an assault with boats.

The Canadians began pushing across the causeway on October 31 and established a foothold after a costly struggle. Then, in conjunction with amphibious attacks on the south and west sides of the island, the 52<sup>nd</sup> British Division continued the advance from the east. On November 6, the island's capital of Middelburg was liberated and by November 8 all enemy opposition there ended. The Scheldt estuary was then laboriously cleared of sea mines that had been left by the Germans and by late November the port of Antwerp was finally opened to shipping. Fittingly, the first Allied transport vessel to arrive was the Canadian-built freighter SS *Fort Cataraqui*.

### SACRIFICE

It has been said that some of the hardest fighting of the Second World War came during the Battle of the Scheldt. Victory there came at a high cost. More than 6,000 Canadians would be killed or wounded during the campaign. Many others returned home with injuries to body and mind that they would bear for the rest of their lives.

The brave Canadians who saw action in the Battle of the Scheldt were among the more than one million men and women from our country who served in the cause of peace and freedom during the Second World War. More than 45,000 of them would lose their lives.

### LEGACY

Many Veterans of the Battle of the Scheldt would tell the story of entire Belgian and Dutch towns coming out to joyously greet their liberators, showering Canadian soldiers with flowers as they passed through in dogged pursuit of the retreating Germans. While the fighting in Europe would not end until May 1945, victory in the Scheldt was an important step in allowing the Allies to continue the fight and keep the pressure on the Germans in the closing months of the Second World War. Canada's impressive wartime efforts remain a point of great national pride, many decades later.

### CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by those who have served—and continue to serve—during times of war and peace. As well, it invites Canadians to become involved in remembrance activities that will help preserve their legacy for future generations. To learn more about Canada's role in the Second World War, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada website at [veterans.gc.ca](http://veterans.gc.ca) or call 1-866-522-2122 toll free.

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