



A SHORT HISTORY OF THE BELGIAN SPECIAL AIR SERVICE IN WORLD WAR II



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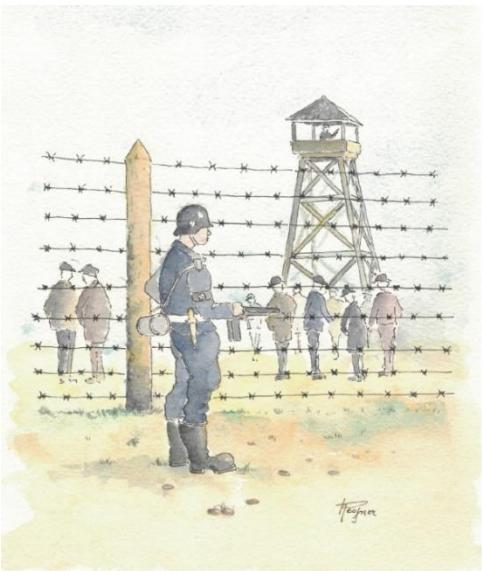
1. The formation of the Belgian Independent Parachute Company

"The Belgians who will form the Independent Parachute Company - the precursor of the SAS squadron - have the most diverse backgrounds. Origin, language and very different forms of education ensure that this unit will be one of the most heterogeneous of the Belgian Army in the United Kingdom. However, this diversity ensures extreme adaptability, a great deal of resourcefulness and a high level of operational resilience, a diversity that will further strengthen the keen awareness of the common goal, namely participation in the destruction of Nazism and especially the liberation of Belgium and Europe. Therein lays precisely the basis of a highly driven esprit de corps, and an unparalleled coherence and efficiency." (Edouard Blondeel)

Like all military units and formations, the men came from all walks of life. The Belgian Independent Parachute Company consisted of Belgian refugees and escaped prisoners of war, but also seasoned veterans from the French Foreign Legion, graduates from the Public Defence Force (*Force Publique*) of Belgian Congo, veterans of various other organisations such as the Special Operations Executive (SOE), as well as Belgians who resided in Great Britain or on the other side of the Atlantic, and responded to the call for resistance by the Belgian government in exile in London. The volunteers included a former world cycling champion, lawyers, farmers, labourers, lumberjacks, a circus acrobat, a professional wrestler and three barons. The commanding officer was a qualified engineer and dentist. The men who volunteered came from across the world to fight the enemy. Not all of them could even speak the same language. Some spoke French, some Dutch and others only English. These differences of upbringing, class, lifestyle and even language might have seemed problematic, but an esprit de corps developed within the unit. How all these Belgians ended up in Great Britain would lead us far too far. However, we want to emphasize that it was seldom or never a 'holiday trip' and that some risked their lives to achieve their goal, such as Dr. Frank Sevens, who crossed the anchorage outside the port of Gibraltar by swimming, or Jules Regner, who as a prisoner of war stationed in Stalag 1-A near Stablaak (East Prussia), reached England after an arduous journey. Another stunning escape story is that of René Krins. For some time the idea had been going through his mind to get to England



Edouard Blondeel, commander of the Belgian SAS (Collection F. Van Haezendonck)



Jules Regner in the prisoner of war camp, own sketch (Collection F. Van Haezendonck)

and to continue the struggle for the liberation of Europe. René left his home town of Verviers by bicycle on 10 May 1941. After two days, he reached the border and began his trip through France, first in the occupied part, then in the Vichy part. He managed to travel by train to his aunt in Paris. He then cycled 1000 kilometres towards Bordeaux. In the Langon area, he crossed the demarcation line and took the train to Toulouse, where he was arrested by French gendarmes. Then his stay in Vichy prisons began. He spent two weeks in a youth camp, then in another camp in Puy-l'Evêque, where he worked on a farm. However, his French boss was not satisfied and sent him back to Puy-l'Evêque. Krins

was considered an undisciplined case, refusing to work, and ended up in the Vernet concentration camp. Together with two other Belgians, he decided to escape and flee to Toulouse. When they arrived at the Belgian office in Toulouse, their countrymen first wanted to hand them over to the Vichy authorities, but were eventually guided through a local evasion network via Palavas-les-Flots across the Pyrenees in Spain, to reach the British consulate in Barcelona. In the station of Figueres they were arrested by members of the Guardia Civil, brought to the prefecture of Barcelona, interrogated and eventually ended up in jail. After being locked up in various prisons in Irún, Lerida, Saragossa, they ended up in the camp of Miranda de Ebro. Thanks to the help of the British consul, the supposedly Canadian citizens were handed over to the British embassy in Madrid. Accompanied by members of the British embassy, the Belgians were taken to the Madrid station, destined for Gibraltar. Once in Gibraltar, the Belgians sailed by boat to Greenock, Scotland. There, they were put under surveillance and taken to London by train. Following interrogations by the Intelligence Service, they were put in quarantine. After a few days of relaxation in London, René went to the Belgian embassy in Eaton Square and eventually joined the Belgian Independent Parachute Company. One year had passed since his departure from Verviers.

Also various legionaries joined the parachute unit at the end of May 1942. They were mostly young men who had fled from Belgium two years earlier, and had ended up in the Sainte-Marthe camp near Marseille, as prisoners of the French Vichy government. To redeem their freedom, they were forced to sign a five-year contract with the Foreign Legion and were stationed in the French overseas territories. Major Louis Legrand was sent to the Near East to negotiate the

dissolution of their contract, so that they could join the Belgian armed forces in the United Kingdom. Among other things, this resulted in the arrival of numerous former legionnaires in England in early 1942. However, upon arrival in Britain, most were disappointed, when they found that nothing came of the promises made. For example, there was no question of any promotion; many even had to renounce the rank they held in Syria, Dakar, Eritrea or Abyssinia. Although they were hardened and experienced fighters, they had to follow the entire training over again. A dozen of them would go to the parachute unit. Finally, there were of course all those who had heard the decision by the Belgian government in exile in London, disseminated by radio broadcast, which stipulated that compulsory military service applied to all Belgians who lived in the non-occupied territories. Various groups would join the Belgian parachute unit in this way: a group that had fled Belgium after the 18 Days Campaign and subsequently joined the Belgian unit formed in Tenby, alongside those whose parents resided in Great Britain and still others coming from North America. In February 1941, for example, twenty-eight volunteers arrived at the military camp of Cornwall in Ontario, Canada. Among them lieutenant Edouard Blondeel, who was finishing his studies of doctor in dentistry in Chicago, thanks to a scholarship. In July 1940, he was allowed to return to his unit, but the outbreak of hostilities on 10 May changed his plans. It was only in September 1944 - during SAS operations - that he would return to Belgium. Lieutenant Freddy Limbosch, an agricultural engineer, had migrated to Canada in 1938 and ran a farm in Ontario. Roger De Neef worked in the spotlight as a cyclist during the 'Six Days of Buenos Aires'. Paul Thonard, who worked as an engineer in Brazil, had participated in the battle of Houthulst as an 18-year-old second lieutenant in the artillery, in 1918. Since he had no documents in Canada that could prove the rank he held in 1918, he started from scratch in the military hierarchy. In England, he was given the rank of warrant officer. There was also private first class Leo Van Cauwelaert who spoke several languages, which gave him the chance to command the group of Belgians who spoke English, French or Spanish. He performed this task until the arrival of the first officers. On 8 April 1941, the group left the camp in Cornwall, Ontario, and moved into the Camp de la Joliette in Quebec. Joseph Ghys, who had been in Argentina for some time, also joined the group. Soon they consisted of 186 men, who boarded in Halifax, Canada, at the beginning of June 1941 under the command of Blondeel. They reached Greenock on 30 June 1941, and then moved on to Malvern where the 2nd Fusiliers Battalion was formed.

In November 1941, the War Office requested that every British or foreign combat unit made a number of men available to take part in special training, to subsequently conduct 'special missions' in the occupied territories. The Belgian

politician Hubert Pierlot was asked to provide twenty soldiers - two officers and eighteen other ranks - who were capable of following this unusual training. These men had to meet in a training centre on 11 January 1942. Their guidelines were

shrouded in secrecy. The first group, selected from the 1st Fusiliers Battalion, was commanded by lieutenant Jacques Wanty and lieutenant Marcel Leclef and was totally ignorant of the fact that this included parachute training. Of the twenty selected, only eight would receive their parachute wings, on 17 January, after performing five jumps. The first officially recognised Belgian paratroopers were lieutenant Leclef, sergeant Robert Schils, corporal Pierre Pus, corporal Albert Lesage and privates René Pietquin, John Budts, Constant Barette and L. Verelst. After the first parachute course came to an end,

Parachute training in Ringway (Pegasus Museum Diest)

Leclef wrote a report for the commander of the 1st Fusiliers Battalion, in which he stated the following: "*... since the course consists of numerous tests that are only aimed at obtaining a parachute qualification, it is necessary and unavoidable to come to the conclusion - as is customary in all similar foreign units - that the Belgian candidates for parachute training need a preparatory training lasting several weeks. Of the twenty candidates - who, by the way, all seemed perfectly suited - there are 10 injured, some are still in the hospital, others have been able to continue the training; 1 jump refusal; 5 jump refusers after the second jump, due to airsickness (in reality I think these men were totally exhausted and therefore did not like it anymore); in total, 8 men were able to complete the tests and obtained their certification. It is certainly thanks to the dedication of the instructors, who have made a special effort to give us a few extra hours of preparation - and this very often until late in the evening - that we didn't suffer more accidents. According to the guidelines communicated to me by British instructors, the preparatory training must consist of: a) a thorough medical examination; b) progressive training, fully focused on the physical aspect; c) theoretical lessons and demonstrations about the safety of the parachute; practical training on the harnesses and adapted drills for the different jump types; every participant must have complete confidence in his parachute and must know that if he uses it according to the rules, he is not in any danger; this cannot be learned in one day; d) theoretical lessons and practical application of regrouping on the ground, by day and by night. Everyone must have a good knowledge of all weapon systems, attack tactics, defence tactics, orientation, map reading and*

supplies and demonstrate a sense of initiative. Part of this program can be completed in detail after obtaining the qualification."

Limbosch learned the necessary lessons from the failure of the first group and had a complete set of training devices made in Malvern. He himself was responsible for the methodical training of twenty volunteers from the second group from the 2nd Fusiliers Battalion. They jumped on 26 February 1942; this session provided eighteen qualified men. On 15 March, a third group from the 1st Fusiliers Battalion, prepared by lieutenant Leclef, went to Ringway: eighteen parachute qualification wings were awarded, to the great satisfaction of the 1st Battalion. On 26 April, it was the turn of the fourth group, including captain Blondeel and lieutenant Raymond Van der Heyden. Everyone succeeded. These successes and contagious enthusiasm led the Belgian government to fully support the establishment of a parachute company, as had been suggested several months earlier. On 8 May 1942, major Jules Thise presented the hundred twenty men from 'A' company, 2nd Fusiliers Battalion, to the Undersecretary for Defence, who recognised them as '*officially established*'. The non-badged members were removed and the company was strengthened with the paratroopers of the 1st Fusiliers Battalion and with qualified personnel and candidates from other units. But the War Office, which designated the unit 'D (Parachute) Company, 2nd Battalion Belgian Fusiliers', did not share the Belgian point of view. One would eventually have to wait until July 1942 to officially use the name 'Belgian Independent Parachute Company'. Later, the parachute training also claimed the first victims in the company. On 19 April 1943, during a familiarisation flight, a plane crashed, resulting in the death of all passengers. Among them, Etienne Bataille and Florent Depauw. Both had become inseparable friends during the many troubles on their way to Great Britain.



Parachute drills in Friz Hill (Collection F. Van Haezendonck)

2. Training in the United Kingdom

In June 1942, the Belgian Independent Parachute Company left Malvern to move into the castle farm of Friz Hill. The Friz Hill camp was hidden in a picturesque corner of Warwickshire, a county with many ancient castles surrounded by age-old parks, sparsely strewn with forests and bathed in medieval silence. The camp was 12 kilometres from historic Warwick, of which the nobles were among the main protagonists of the Rose War, 15 kilometres from Leamington-Spa, one of the most elegant seaside towns, and 10 kilometres from Stratford-upon-Avon, the hometown of Shakespeare. The atmosphere in the quarters of Friz Hill could be best described as a strange mixture of satisfaction, companionship and anxiety. Satisfaction, because the paratroopers were all volunteers who followed a demanding training and all were impatient to be deployed.

Companionship, because these men faced a tough challenge together, demanding enormous efforts from them and giving them the impression of belonging to a separate class. Anxiety, because everyone lived away from home, received little news and feared the consequences of the German occupation for their families. On 11 July, major Thisé sustained a spinal



Castle farm at Friz Hill in 1942 (Collection E. Blondeel)

injury during his third jump, after which his deputy, Blondeel, 'temporarily' took over command of the unit. On 21 July 1942, on the occasion of the Belgian national holiday, the unit paraded in London, wearing maroon berets for the first time. Gradually the company organized itself and was provided with the necessary equipment. Depending on their origin, the men were divided into different platoons. The first platoon, commanded by lieutenant Limbosch, consisted of the 'Canadians'. The second platoon, commanded by Lieutenant Van der Heyden, contained the veterans of the French Foreign Legion and also some who had fled Belgium. The third platoon, commanded by lieutenant Emile Debefve, was composed of the last arrivals from Belgium. The men who came from the 1st Fusiliers Battalion were finally incorporated into the mortar platoon of lieutenant Gilbert Sadi Kirschen. Blondeel immediately had to deal with some problems. At the end of 1942, he was summoned by colonel Jean-Baptiste Piron, in charge of the reorganization of the land units. Blondeel was told by Piron that the government had made a grave mistake, that the establishment of the parachute company was a

serious error that did not fit into the traditions of the Belgian Army and that he had therefore decided to disband the parachute company, divide its personnel in three units, to be subsequently used separately as reconnaissance units. Blondeel, who disliked the proposal, then decided to send Padre (Jesuit priest) Robert Jourdain, to Prime Minister Pierlot. He knew the prime minister well, because on his initiative he had already parachuted into Belgium in 1941, to question the official authorities about their intentions with regard to their attitude towards the German occupation force. Padre Jourdain had to ask the prime minister to summon Blondeel, which eventually also happened. Blondeel asked the prime minister how he should inform his men: "...that the government had made a terrible mistake, that the unit had sustained two dead and many injured people during training, that this had all been in vain, that the great results that had been achieved, that all of this had served nothing..." Pierlot thanked Blondeel and asked for some time for reflection.



Belgian paratroopers at Friz Hill in January 1943 - Demonstration of the Sten gun (Collection F. Van Haezendonck)

The following week, Piron made an unexpected visit to Friz Hill and afterwards announced that the Belgian Independent Parachute Company was a good unit. Later on, lieutenant-general Victor van Strydonck de Burkel, commander of the Belgian armed forces in the United Kingdom, also visited the camp and discussed with Blondeel the possibility of integrating the

parachute company into the brigade-size '1st Group' commanded by Piron. The future of the unit was in the hands of the Belgian authorities, who ultimately decided to leave the Friz Hill unit unaffected. Blondeel would later learn that van Strydonck would have said to Piron: "*Don't insist, because you would have included a hedgehog within your group.*"

Friz Hill became a kind of home town for the paratroopers. For those who had not jumped yet, there was first the parachute training school at Ringway. A few then went to the Sherburnin-Elmet experimentation centre in the Leeds area. There they jumped from different types of aircraft, even from Horsa gliders. In August 1943, the entire unit went on training with the British 6th Airborne Division and was attached to the 8th Parachute Battalion stationed near Salisbury. During their stay, the Belgians participated in a manoeuvre in which the company conducted a 85 kilometre march for the first time. Despite Blondeel's wish to be definitively attached to this large airborne unit, he was informed that a battalion would be

welcome, but a company was too small to be of any value in a large conventional airborne formation.

On 2 December, a first group of paratroopers left for the special operations training centre at Inverlochy Castle in the Scottish Highlands. The one-month training course, which would also be followed by all the men of the company, consisted of consecutive three-day cycles, during which the intensity and difficulty of the exercises were gradually increased. The men were introduced to guerrilla warfare techniques, sabotage with explosives, clandestine bivouac, survival techniques, close quarters pistol shooting, long marches with equipment and night exercises. They were also trained as experts in land navigation. The 'assault course' at Inverlochy was probably one of the toughest tests that the paratroopers experienced during their training in Great Britain. The Belgians took every opportunity to follow all possible refresher courses with the British: intelligence about the German army, mortar shooting, fighting in built-up areas and night operations, although Blondeel received few instructions from the Belgian authorities in London. January 1944 brought major changes, also carrying a new risk regarding the cohesion of the unit. Returning from a manoeuvre in Friz Hill in January 1944, Blondeel was visited by two delegates from the Ministry of Defence. They came with the intention of recruiting ten paratroopers for the Special Operations Executive (SOE), a special operations organisation formed in 1940 under the British Ministry of Economic Warfare. All kinds of promises were made to them: ranks, operations, etc.... Once again, Padre Jourdain was sent to the Prime Minister to request a meeting with Blondeel. In the end, eighteen men were assigned to the SOE. As a compensation, thirty-five new volunteers were recruited from Piron's 1st Group. Through a selection team consisting of a doctor, an interviewer, a physical training instructor and a psychologist, thirty-five people were eventually recruited from the hundred candidates who had applied. Then joyful news followed on 4 February, when it was announced that the Belgian Independent Parachute Company was to become part of the British Special Air Service Brigade.

3. Integration into the British SAS Brigade

On 5 February 1944, the Belgian Independent Parachute Company was officially integrated into the British Special Air Service Brigade and renamed the Belgian Special Air Service Squadron, also known as '5th SAS'. A new organisation was introduced: the former 2nd and 3rd platoons now became 'A' troop with Van der Heyden, Debefve and Ghys as officers. The former 1st platoon and the mortar platoon together became 'B' troop, with Limbosch, Paul Renkin and Kirschen as officers. Both troops consisted of different sections (squads). Major Etienne Delelienne and major Jean Cassart were assigned to the staff of the SAS brigade as liaison officers. On 15 February, the SAS squadron installed itself in Loudoun Castle, an old castle located near Galston (Ayrshire) in Scotland that was inhabited

by the Campbell clan since the 13th century. In 1941, around the time the British Army claimed the castle, it was badly damaged by fire; however, its silhouette continued to dominate the immense park. Nearly forty barracks in wood and corrugated sheet iron were built near the castle, where the Belgians would move in. In this new place, the new SAS members mastered the tactics of working in small, isolated groups.

They learned to drive cars and ride



Natengel and Lamiroy in front of Loudoun Castle, 1944 (Collection Y. Brasseur)

motorcycles, perfected their navigation techniques, and specialized in shooting at short distances, sabotage, coding and decoding and the identification of enemy military ranks. Signallers were also trained. Van der Heyden summarized the training as follows: "*The unforeseen always pops up, so we prepare ourselves for the unforeseen!*" During this period, important technical changes occurred. Whitley bombers were almost never used any more to conduct parachute jumps; instead, Stirling, Albemarle or Halifax bombers were mostly used. Containers with individual equipment were replaced by a kit bag attached to the parachutist's leg. Unlike the Americans, who had a reserve parachute, the Belgians jumped with a British 'Type X' parachute, without a reserve parachute, developed by combining the technology of Irving Air Chute Company and GQ Parachute Company. On 26 March 1944, the brigade organised an inter-allied jumping competition: sections of six men had to leave the aircraft in a minimum of time. The Belgian squadron achieved the top two places and their commander received official congratulations from brigadier Sir Roderick McLeod. This magnificent result, the success of all the manoeuvres in which the Belgians participated, the unit's discipline and the strong

personality of Blondeel ensured that the Belgian squadron was particularly appreciated by the brigade's staff. In the December 1994 edition of *Mars and Minerva*, the Special Air Service Regimental Journal, a number of impressions from McLeod were published: “...Everyone spoke English and some, recruited in Canada, spoke very little French or Dutch. Their discipline was remarkable and was highly praised by my staff. Their commander, Eddy Blondeel, was one of the best force commanders I have ever worked with; there were never any problems with him. The members of the SAS had to be tightly controlled. As you can imagine, the orders were interpreted differently by the three groups. In general the Belgians did what they were asked to do. The British did what they were asked if it suited them. The French lost the orders or claimed they never received them ... But after a while ... everything was fine and my staff worked out techniques to deal with non-coordinated and highly individualistic teams...”

The new squadron adopted its definitive structure on 15 May 1944. The training sessions of the sections focused more and more on decentralised operations, especially at night. The unit took part in manoeuvres in Scotland on a weekly basis, always starting with a night jump. A few days before D-Day, Blondeel was informed

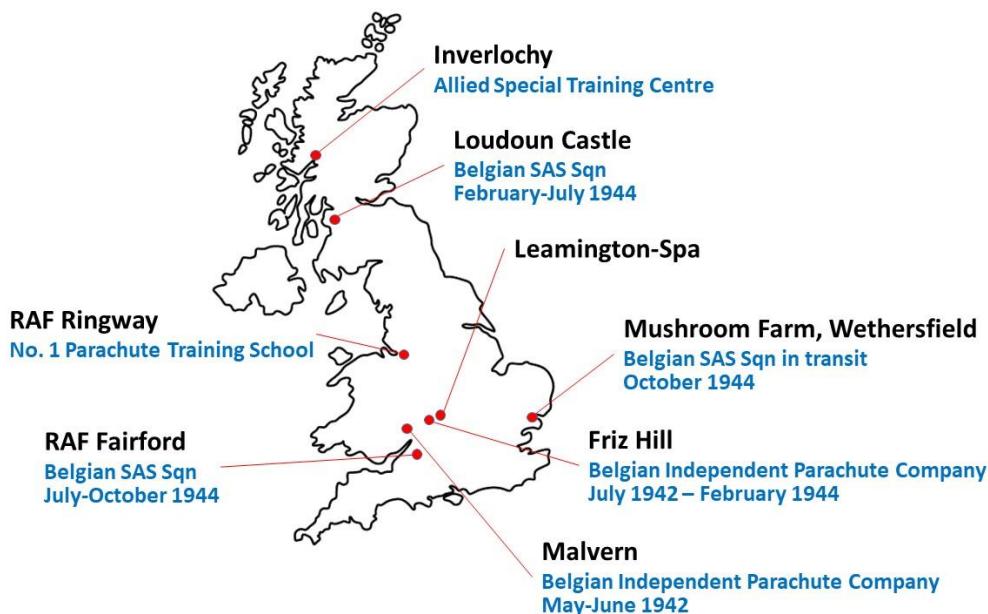
by brigadier McLeod of a possible mission for his unit. Two SAS teams would be parachuted in the east of Belgium to set up two operational bases. In addition, twenty groups of six men would be dropped in the vicinity of certain objectives, such as railways, telephone lines and fuel depots. Once their mission accomplished, the sections would withdraw to the bases, from where they would set up a network of observation posts while waiting for



Group photo in Loudoun Castle (Collection Y. Brasseur)

the order to carry out harassment and interdiction operations. The operation would be named 'Bergbang'. On 26 May, the brigade commander was confused when he got the message that “*the Belgian SAS would be most useful in Belgium, but the Belgian government in London seems to oppose parachuting the Belgian unit.*” The mission for the Belgian squadron was put on hold and the unit would have to wait. While the Allies landed in Normandy on 6 June, the Belgians had once again left for field exercises. Suddenly, on 11 June, the reconnaissance teams were ordered to be ready to leave within 24 hours. Blondeel took the night train to the tactical headquarters and returned to Scotland with the plans for operation

'Bergbang'. On 16 June, he received a confirmation by telephone that the operation had been approved, but the next day, the orders were overruled by the Belgian government, who remained opposed to the employment of the Belgian SAS in an operation! To deal with its growing impatience to see action while the battle in Normandy continued to rage, brigadier McLeod visited the squadron around mid-July at Loudoun Castle. He explained to them in detail what the French and British SAS had achieved so far and confirmed that the Belgians would soon have the opportunity to take part in the fighting.



Locations of basing and training areas of the Belgian parachute company and SAS squadron in the United Kingdom

4. First combat operations behind enemy lines in France

To clarify the situation why certain circles in London continued to oppose dropping the Belgian SAS in Belgium, Blondeel went to London. However, he did not succeed in clarifying the matter, as everyone shifted responsibility to someone else. Blondeel later learned that the 2nd Office of the Ministry of Defence, responsible for the operations of the Secret Army in Belgium, opposed his operations, fearing that the SAS would be interfering with their actions. Eventually lieutenant-general Marie-Pierre Koenig, commander of the French Forces of the Interior (FFI), agreed to parachute the 5th SAS into France. Two months after the landings in Normandy, the Belgians were still waiting to be deployed on the mainland. The exercises succeeded each other, but in July, Blondeel granted his men a few days off to manage their impatience. Just during this leave the long awaited order finally arrived. Blondeel received the message to prepare three teams for an operation in eastern Normandy. The three teams were led by Radino, Debefve and Kirschen. On the way to the Fairford transit camp, Radino became involved in a serious traffic accident resulting in a fractured shoulder and was replaced by Ghys, who had to return from leave. Kirschen was on leave in London. At the Mont Royal hotel, where he was staying, he received a message from Debefve in which he received orders to return to Scotland as soon as possible. In the mistaken belief of being the victim of a bad joke from his friend, Kirschen just spent the night at the hotel. The next morning, however, he was awakened by a call from Loudoun Castle, asking when he was ready to leave and being instructed to immediately select five men to accompany him in the upcoming operation, including two radio operators. In the evening, Kirschen was leaving to Scotland by train, accompanied by Limbosch. On his arrival in the transit camp, Blondeel went to brigadier McLeod and waited for the arrival of Ghys, Debefve and Kirschen to give them a detailed briefing. The mission of the three officers was to focus on enemy troop movements along some major traffic axes and to identify objectives for possible air attacks. As the Allies were still fighting in Normandy, it was extremely important to know in which direction the Germans withdrew, and to which sectors they sent their reinforcements. There were three main roads to focus on: the southern route Orléans-Bretagne, the central route Paris-Brittany and finally the northern route Paris-Normandy. The first group to be dropped was that of Ghys (operation 'Chaucer'). The departure of the first team was planned for 26 July, but had to be postponed by 24 hours. This was mainly due to the fact that despite all efforts, only one reception party of the local resistance could be called upon in the area of the most southern route, where the 'Caramel' dropping zone was located. Ghys had to jump on 'Caramel' that same evening after the briefing, had to make contact with the resistance and had to head north immediately.

afterwards. After three days, the distance to the central road from Paris to Brittany had to be completed. Once on his objective, Ghys had to immediately prepare for Kirschen's arrival and had to send the coordinates of a suitable dropping zone. Debefve also had to be dropped above 'Caramel' within one or two days (operation 'Shakespeare'). Kirschen had to wait in the transit camp, until Ghys reported that the drop zone had been prepared. Once in France, he had to start operations along the Paris-Brittany axis and then move some fifty kilometres to the north, in the direction of the Paris-Normandy region (operation 'Bunyan').

4.1. Operation 'Chaucer'

Lieutenant Ghys, staff sergeant Willy Klein, corporals Marcel Demery and Daniel Demoer and trooper Albert Petit took off from Keevil airport, near the transit camp, on 27 July at 10.39 p.m. The team flew towards La Charte-sur-le-Loir, in the department of Sarthe. Around 1 a.m. on 28 July, they were ordered to attach their equipment bag to their leg and belt. The green light went on. The despatcher pushed the officer out of the aircraft, after which he helped the other overloaded paratroopers, who were unable to follow quickly enough. The paratroopers landed safely on the drop zone, as did their twenty-four containers. They assembled quickly. A group of French resistance fighters waited for them and brought them to a shelter, where they could rest for a few hours under their protection. Once Blondeel learned that the dropping of the first group had gone well, he returned to the transit camp and prepared a message for the entire squadron: "*Greetings to all members of the squadron. I am now in a position to reveal to you that your comrades were the first Belgian soldiers to reach the western operating theatre, ready to strike the enemy in the heart. I am sure that they will perform their assigned duties in an honourable way and thus contribute to the fame of the Special Air Service, which the enemy has learned - after bitter experiences - to fear and respect. I know how much you all look forward to follow in their footsteps and join them in the hunt for the hated enemy. At this for us historic moment, I am obliged to repeat the often-given advice: be patient, take care of your condition before the fight, because the day will come for you too to realise your expectations and put the SAS slogan 'who dares, wins' into practice.*" Once they landed at the drop zone, the Ghys team had to mark the dropping zone for the Kirschen group and then had to move north to reach its objective area in the Nogent-le-Rotrou region. It soon became clear that they had to take the unexpected into account and that everything would not go according to plan. For example, the first section of 'Chaucer' found that the equipment bags attached to the leg of every parachutist were far too heavy. Two became undone and crashed, the other three could not be dropped. During the landing, Klein was injured on the ankle and would be hindered for the entire duration of the

operation. Ghys explained the activities after their landing: “*A substantial number of containers were dropped after us. Given the late hour, we found that despite the help of the members of the resistance, we would run out of time. We were told that the parachutes were made of camouflage fabric. So we decided to cover a few containers with it. The night was pitch dark and it was difficult to work, we didn't even see what we were doing. At dawn, I crawled out of my sleeping bag and went to take a look at the edge of the forest. I noticed huge red spots on the drop zone. A mistake ... our containers were dropped with parachutes intended for the infantry. The striking red colour of the parachutes was intended to ensure a smooth collection of the containers.*” After they had settled in a bivouac, the SAS party spent the day camouflaging the containers. They were protected by a group of resistance fighters who left at the end of the day with the equipment intended for them. Their promise to return with a guide who would accompany them to Nogent-le-Rotrou failed to materialise. However, in the company of two civilians, Klein succeeded in contacting a chief of the local resistance, who provided them with the necessary information to reach the zone. He warned them that the Vibraye forest was occupied by a German division and that it was wiser to avoid it. Because of the closeness of the enemy, as well as the poor condition of Klein, whose ankle was quite swollen, the movement continued very slowly and discreetly. The section would arrive in the area of Nogent-le-Rotrou on 3 August. The next day, Ghys contacted residents of the area and from then on, the team could count on the effective support of the resistance, which provided information about the enemy at regular intervals.

4.2. Operation ‘Shakespeare’

For operation ‘Shakespeare’, Debefve, Albert Mestdagh, François Siffert, Roger Carrette, Charles Mathys and R. Geldof also had to be parachuted on the ‘Caramel’ drop zone, on 31 July. However, contrary to what was planned, the section was dropped on drop zone ‘Tornado’, forty eight kilometres south of La Chartre-sur-le-Loir. On 1 August, at 1.30 a.m., the section had landed. The team set up a temporary camp in a forest north-east of the dropping zone. When the radio operator wanted to contact London, it was found that only the emergency frequency could be used, due to damage to the crystals of the transmitter. Two days later, contact could be made with London. A message with information about the presence of a train carrying nitro-glycerine wagons in Château-du-Loir, as well as Gestapo agents and four hundred armed Frenchmen, was sent. When contact was restored on the normal frequency, following a resupply drop, the team received orders to move to the ‘Caramel’ dropping zone as quickly as possible. Debefve recalled the arrival of the section: “*The French resistance provided a warm welcome. Nevertheless, we*

could not count on an efficient form of assistance, except food, which was always accompanied by an inflated bill." It was impossible to set up an efficient intelligence network in the space of two or three days without the help of the local population, but that help was lacking. Since the 'Caramel' drop zone was thirty miles further north, the six started their infiltration immediately after nightfall. Debefve wanted to avoid any enemy contact, since the reinforcements for harassing the enemy had not yet arrived. He avoided built-up areas and moved through fields and more covered areas, paying particular attention not to wake up dogs that would betray his presence. The section reached La Chartre-sur-le-Loir on the night of 5 to 6 August, around 2 a.m., then contacted the local resistance and made preparations to receive the reinforcements of sergeant Dom, the next day. The establishment of a clandestine lying-up place in a small forest did not mean the end of the activities. Citizens warned that ammunition trains left the Villiers railroad station all night long in the direction of Le Mans and that the trains usually stayed in the station for several hours before leaving. Debefve sent two men to check the accuracy of the information, but they bumped into Germans, were shot at, and had to adjust their mission. On 8 August, around 9 a.m., the team witnessed a firefight, less than a kilometre from their bivouac site. Debefve decided not to intervene in order not to jeopardise the dropping that was planned the same night. Later they would find out that about fifty German soldiers, who had moved into a farm five hundred meters from their location, had been attacked by French resistance fighters.

4.3. Operation 'Bunyan'

During operation 'Bunyan', Kirschen, Barette, Joseph Moyse, Pietquin, Regner and Jean Geysens had to be parachuted in the vicinity of Saint-Calais, where they would



Dropping in France (Sketch by J. Regner)

be received by Ghys. As the latter could only progress far too slowly and the jump could not be postponed, it was decided to conduct a 'blind' drop (i.e. without a reception party on the ground) on the 'Toffee' drop zone, in the Les Menus region, on 3 August, at 0.30 a.m. Apart from Geysens experiencing a hard landing, the 'blind' drop

was not too bad. The first tasks once on the ground, were to empty the equipment bags and camouflage the basket with the radio equipment and the parachutes. No one, however, was eager to dig, so the parachutes were folded, stowed in the parachute bags and left in the middle of the cornfield. Only later, the SAS team would realise later that it had been dropped 15 kilometres west of the planned location. The team left the drop zone and moved north, to the forest of Senonches. After a while, it was noticed that the terrain didn't match their expectation, nor any signs for Senonches, Les Menus, Fontaine-Simon or Neuilly could be found. The radio operators then contacted London and communicated their presumed position. Meanwhile, the team discovered that the largest German depot in Normandy was in the Senonches forest and that the Germans had set up checkpoints everywhere in the surrounding villages. On 7 August, the signallers reported the location where two enemy anti-aircraft artillery batteries were positioned, as well as the location of three hidden airfields. During their last radio contact, London sent them a message announcing the dropping of additional reinforcements.

4.4. Reinforcements

On 9 August, the three reconnaissance teams were reinforced with fifteen-man combat groups, led by lieutenant Van der Heyden (operation 'Chaucer'), lieutenant Limbosch (operation 'Bunyan') and sergeant Josy Déom (operation 'Shakespeare'). Their main task was to carry out harassment and interdiction operations. Every combat group had to stop the enemy and harass him by all means to turn their retreat into a chaotic flight, make maximum use of the firepower of the Royal Air Force, by reporting targets via the radio, and report on the local resistance's capabilities and movements. The dropping zone for 'Chaucer' was located southwest of Dreux, for 'Shakespeare' north of Tours and for 'Bunyan' north of the forest of Bercé, near Longny. On the night of 8 to 9 August, the teams left from Great-Britain. Each team was transported by two Stirling aircraft with ten containers of supplies each. The reconnaissance teams who were already on the drop zones provided reception parties.

The reinforcements for operation 'Chaucer' consisted of lieutenant Van der Heyden, staff sergeant Denis Devignez, sergeants Jacques Goffinet and G. Ratinckx, corporal P. Polain, and troopers Jacques Hambursin, Jacques Gilson, Alfred Becquet, Marcel Chauvaux, F. Hendrickx, Th. Clamot, U. Deprez, Charles Lemaire, Jean Demery and Willy De Heusch. Attacks on the enemy were sometimes carried out jointly with the French resistance. On 11 August, the resistance decided to expel the Germans who were still in Nogent-le-Rotrou. The French launched the attack while receiving help from two Belgian sections. When leaving the city, the

Germans placed mines on the road. The section of Ghys neutralized around sixty. Meanwhile, the Van der Heyden section tried to block the withdrawal route of the Germans in the north of the town. When American tanks reached the city on 14 August, all access routes were cleared and they could safely enter the city. On 15 August, the teams of Ghys and Van der Heyden made contact with the staff of the American 3rd Army and were brought to the port of Arromanches. In the night of 8 to 9 August, Debefve and his men, supported by about twenty members of the resistance, waited for reinforcements for operation 'Shakespeare' under the command of Déom. At 1.30 a.m., they heard a plane overhead and switched on the signal lights. The parachutes opened, then collapsed on the ground after a few seconds. But Debefve soon discovered that a mistake had happened. Instead of Déom's team, he found Limbosch's group on the drop zone. The 'modified' reinforcement for operation 'Shakespeare' consisted of lieutenant Limbosch, staff sergeant Georges Verberckmoes, corporal Charles Sas, and troopers Victor Debuf, Alphons Peere, Henri Derath, Jean Switters, Maurice De Serrano, Andre Marginet, Jean Veroft, Lucien Goessens, Leonard Roegist, Emile Lorphèvre and Krins. At the gates of La Chartre-sur-le-Loir towards La Flêche, an enemy convoy was ambushed by the Debefve team, on the night of 9 to 10 August. When the firefight ended, thirty bodies were scattered on the ground and several vehicles were completely destroyed. However, when Roger Carrette was shot, the Belgian SAS suffered its first killed in action. On the night of 10 to 11 August, the Limbosch section learned that a German column was moving from La Chartre. With his team, Limbosch guarded the Le Mans road. When a hostile vehicle approached, the fire was opened, killing three Germans. Roegiest was hit in the leg during the action. The group of 'Shakespeare' was also responsible for escorting and evacuating more than one hundred and thirty-two escaped Allied flight crew members who were in the forest of Fréteval near Châteaudun, on 14 August. On 17 August, all elements were again with the SAS brigade in Great Britain.

The advance party of operation 'Bunyan' waited on the drop zone to receive Limbosch's reinforcements. Kirschen described the now familiar scenario: "*I turned to the nearest newcomer and asked him where Limbosch was. Trooper Balsat answered with a question, since he was looking for Mac Bef [lieutenant Debefve] himself. After a rather confused explanation, we realised that this group was in fact intended to reinforce Debefve and that consequently, Limbosch and his men had landed on a different drop zone as part of operation 'Shakespeare'. This situation, of course, caused some minor drawbacks: first, I did not know these men well who were parachuted here, because they were part of a troop other than mine. In addition, they did not have any maps of the area, and they were not accompanied by an officer. The highest ranking was sergeant Déom, about whom I was very satisfied.*" The final

reinforcements for operation ‘Bunyan’ consisted of three sections of five men: sergeant Déom, lance corporals Jacques Levaux, Jos Levaux, troopers L. Boch, and Daniel Rossius; sergeant Roger Parmentier and troopers Yves Brasseur, H. Breuze, Jean Thévissen and J. Quirain; sergeant Jules Crèvecœur and troopers Marcel Moreau, R. Balsat, A. Bouillon and H. Flips. Déom subsequently found that he had some injured. Sergeant Parmentier had two wounded transferred to a farm. Brasseur had a sprained ankle and Breuze a broken leg. After Kirschen and radio operator Moyse became isolated from the rest of the team, there was no radio contact with London for a few days. When everyone was again reunited, they could start harassing the Germans, together with the resistance. ‘Bunyan’ was divided into three groups: one under Kirschen, a second under Déom and a third under Crèvecœur. The local resistance formed two groups of five to six men. They all had the task of attacking and destroying equipment storage sites with short-duration surprise attacks. Crèvecœur and his men were operating on the track from Neuillysur-Eure to Marchainville: “*We have destroyed a tracked vehicle and believe it is time to break contact with the enemy. We cross a lane that ends up on a road. At that moment, Moreau knocks on my shoulder. The entire team stops. A silhouette appears! We call the password ... nobody answers. I tell him [Moreau]: "Fire!" ... The shadow wavers, withdraws, waving, then crosses the road. The team approaches and recognises the wounded. It's Jules Regner! The whole event is of course based on a mistake ... which eliminates one of our people who knows the area perfectly. The lieutenant comes rushing in, looks at his leg and walks to an adjacent house, where nobody comes to open the door. The team discovers a wheelbarrow and transports the injured person to a large farm, where the reluctant resident is requested to take care of the injured person. Jules accepts the sulfamide powder, but refuses a morphine syringe.*” Déom and his men were not back in their base until 14 August, where they were told that the Germans had a storage facility of 30,000 liters of gasoline in a castle. The advance of major-general Patton went so smoothly that the supplies for his columns could not follow quickly enough. The Germans seemed to want to surrender. When the Déom team arrived, however, the Germans had changed their mind. A firefight started at the exit of the castle, resulting in four enemy victims and two vehicles destroyed. As soon as Kirschen was informed of the successful operation, he had the castle guarded so that the fuel could be transferred to the Americans. On the same day, the SAS team learned from the BBC radio that Patton was thirty kilometres from Longny. A patrol was sent out to see whether or not the Germans occupied the village and, if not, to find out in which direction they had withdrawn. Crèvecœur and Levaux reached Longny by bicycle and were greeted there by exuberant locals. But enemy contact with an armoured vehicle soon developed and both had to return to safety. On 15 August, an American column entered Longny. At 4 p.m., the SAS detachment was left to enjoy the liberation

parties in Longny. The next day, they left for the port of Arromanches to be transferred to England by landing craft. In the transit camp, the team was warmly congratulated by Blondeel. He granted them five days' leave and promised them that they would soon be deployed in Belgium.

4.5. Operation 'Haggard'

The fact that the Belgian SAS did not encounter major problems during their first operations was due, among other things, to their knowledge of the French language, which made contact with the population easier. On the other hand, some British SAS elements failed in some of their tasks because they were not able to establish contact with the local resistance networks. For that reason, the command of the SAS brigade decided to add French-speaking operators to British teams. Two signallers, corporal Raymond Holvoet and lance-corporal Jean Temmerman, were attached to major Lepine's B Squadron, 1st SAS. On the night of 10 to 11 August, the two Belgians, along with five Britons, were dropped as a reconnaissance party for operation 'Haggard' in the forest of Ivoy, near Bourges. Operation 'Haggard' took place east of Vierzon, from 10 August to 23 September. It involved B Squadron, 1st SAS, whose mission consisted of reporting on enemy troop movements and causing mayhem along the Vierzon-Tours and Orleans-Vierzon lines of communication. The 'Haggard' radio base worked on average eight hours a day until the end of the operation. On top of their work as a signaller, the two Belgians also had to act as interpreters during the many contacts the British had with the French resistance. Major Lepine had forbidden them to participate in the actual harassment and interdiction operations, but because they continued to insist, he eventually allowed one of them to participate in the actions while the other manned the radio. This would allow Holvoet to participate in the sabotage of a railway, the destruction of which was ordered by London. At the beginning of September, the two Belgians learned that Brussels was liberated. Strangely, when their family members were in a region occupied by the enemy, they had been training in a free country; now that their family was liberated, they were in an area that was occupied by the Germans. Operation 'Haggard' ended for the Belgians on 15 September. They hoped to be able to drive to liberated Brussels and spend a few days with their family. A message from London, however, told them that a RAF aircraft was going to pick them up at Briare airfield. A flattering report, prepared by Lepine and sent to Blondeel, confirmed the extraordinary ability of the two Belgian radio operators: "*the best signallers I have had*".

4.6. Operation 'Trueform'

The German army withdrew in north-eastern direction to the Seine in August 1944. Given the situation, the SAS brigade staff was ordered to parachute teams north and east of the so-called Falaise pocket, to discover and destroy fuel dumps and to report on the withdrawal routes of the retreating German troops. Operation 'Trueform' used British and Belgian SAS teams. The operation was planned in less than two days and as a result of the rush, the staff was no longer able to identify secure dropping zones. For that reason, the French SAS refused to execute the mission, which forced brigadier McLeod to ask Blondeel, who was prepared to take the risk. On the night of 16 to 17 and 17 to 18 August, ten men from the 1st SAS, forty from the 2nd SAS and fifty-seven from the Belgian SAS were dropped on 'blind' dropping zones. The Belgians were divided into six groups. Teams 1, 2 and 3, each consisting of five men, were dropped on the first night. Teams 'G', 'H' and 'M', consisting of eleven, sixteen and fifteen men respectively, were to be dropped the second night. Only one group ended up in the anticipated drop zone. Some were dropped at eighteen kilometres from the planned drop zone. Some groups got split into different elements upon landing and became separated. Two teams landed in a forest.

Group 1 consisted of lieutenant J.C. Heilporn, staff sergeant Schils, corporal Georges Patyn, and troopers Victor Vivey and Albert Clasen. On 18 August, Heilporn sent a patrol to a main road to mount an ambush and scatter caltrops. But the only German units they noticed there had tanks; caltrops and small arms were of little use. Heilporn moved his camp to the Mérey forest, east of the village of Bretagnolles. The next day, he learned that American outposts were already east of the Seine River. On 19 August, a citizen informed Heilporn that the Germans had set fire to a fuel depot in Boisset-les-Prévenches, two days earlier, and that the enemy was destroying warehouses and the airfield in Evreux. Later, the torrential rain impeded reconnaissance operations. In the hamlet of La Boissière, the team was attacked and withdrew. On 23 August, they contacted elements of the vanguard of the American army. Schils described how the chaotic, rapidly changing situation almost turned into a drama: *"We have been dropped too late, in the sense that the German troops who are still in the pocket of Falaise only wish to surrender. On the other hand, different groups are parachuted without being given a precise description of their area of operations. I remember one day along the road we noticed a soldier. We thought it was a German who was laying mines and we opened fire. At that time the Germans also attacked the unfortunate one. Only then did we realise that it was Ravet from team 'H'. Fortunately, this mistake did not have any nasty consequences. Ravet came out unharmed."*

Group 2 consisted of sergeant Henri Verschuere, lance corporal August De Belser, and troopers François Helleghards, Karel De Belser and David Kowarski. Verschuere landed in a forest and did not find any member of his group during the night. Only the next evening did he meet another team member. The two then decided to attack the enemy traffic between Evreux and Pacy-sur-Eure. Caltrops and explosives stopped three trucks, and in the countryside, a dozen telephone lines were cut. The information collected - destruction of a railway tunnel by the Germans, the presence of Russian collaborators in Saint-Germain-de-Fresnay, etc. - could not be transmitted because they did not have a radio. The team managed to reunite on 23 August.

Group 3 consisted of sergeant Maurice De Vulder, lance corporal Franciskus Huybrecht and troopers V. de Saint-Guillain, Camiel Verfaillie and Jan Vos. In the vicinity of the forest of Saint-Just, the team encountered major problems to assemble. On 18 August, De Vulder contacted a local FFI chief who guided the section to an abandoned farm along the road to Gaillon. There was no trace of the enemy in their area of operations. On 22 and 23 August, the team came under intense artillery fire, which forced them to hide in a cave until the arrival of the Americans. The other Belgians were also completely isolated and could do little, other than wait for the Americans.

Group 'G' consisted of major Deleienne, staff sergeants A. Delagaye and Maurice Flasschoen, NCO candidates José Tinchant and Daniel Pécher, corporal Jean Gigot, warrant officer Rudolphe Groenewout, staff sergeant Jacques Doome and troopers Jules Fraix, Alphonse Delsaer and Jean Lox. The problems started around the time of embarkation on the evening of 17 August. Two groups, including group 'G', were taken to an aircraft that was not intended for them. As a result of the first mistake with Limbosch's group during operation 'Shakespeare', the instructions for the group commanders were modified, requiring them to check their destination together with the pilot. The error was discovered and the flight went smoothly. Deleienne became completely isolated after his landing and was taken prisoner shortly after his jump. He would end up in the Brunswick prisoner of war camp until the end of the war. The members of his group, who were searching the dropping zone, would not know what had happened to him until the end of the war. The other team members also got dispersed. Delagaye was seriously injured on the left leg and left arm and decided to hide in a grove where he spent the night and the next day. After finding another hiding place, he remained in hiding until the arrival of the first Allied troops. Groenewout managed to find Doome, Delsaer and Flasschoen. The latter was injured at the foot and leg. During the day, the team hid itself a hundred meters from the village of Amfreville-la-Campagne. In the

evening, the SAS team left its hiding place and managed to destroy two trucks. They then decided to look for Deleienne between Bacquepuis and Quittebeuf. During their movement, they were noticed by the enemy and fired upon. While breaking contact with the enemy, the men were separated from each other. Doome and Groenewoud eventually made contact with American ground forces four days later. After his landing, Tinchant did everything to find the others in his group. He was eventually united with Pécher, Fraix, Lox, as well as with a British sergeant and three soldiers. They discovered that they were north of Saint-Amand-des-Hautes-Terres and that the area was occupied by a German armoured unit. A Frenchman guided them to the forest of Elbeuf, north of Mandeville. Despite the fact that no radio communication was possible, the mission remained clear: to harass the enemy. Multiple trucks were destroyed. However, daylight movement was now impossible and even movement at night became next to impossible due to the enemy presence. On 22 August, following a reconnaissance, it was assessed that the Germans had left almost the entire region. Nevertheless, in Saint-Cyr-la-Campagne, the team made prisoners, mostly Poles and Russians, who were handed over to the Americans on the Neubourg-Elbeuf road.

Group 'H' consisted of sergeants Pus, Jacques Levaux, Marcel Visée and André De Rechter, corporals Marcel Engelen and Maurice Ongena and troopers Roger Natengel, Alexander Lamiroy, Albert Ravet and Emile Delvign. During the landing, De Rechter noticed that he was completely isolated together with Engelen and Ongena. Pus needed twelve hours after the landing to gather his men back and check their kit: the communications equipment turned out to be lost. The group finally arrived in La Lande, where they scattered caltrops on the road from Saint-André-de-l'Eure to Pacy-sur-Eure. On the night of 20 to 21 August, the SAS team blocked the Neuville-Mousseaux-Fresney road. On 22 August, the Belgians fell under American mortar fire. On 24 August, the team got contact with the enemy, as German reinforcements approached; American mortars came into action and bombarded the Germans. After the arrival of the American units, the mission of group 'H' also ended. Later on, the team found out from an American intelligence officer that the caltrops had done their job: when two trucks with enemy soldiers crossed each other, one vehicle was hit, causing the occupants of both vehicles to fire at each other, resulting in dozens of Germans to die as a result of the confusion.

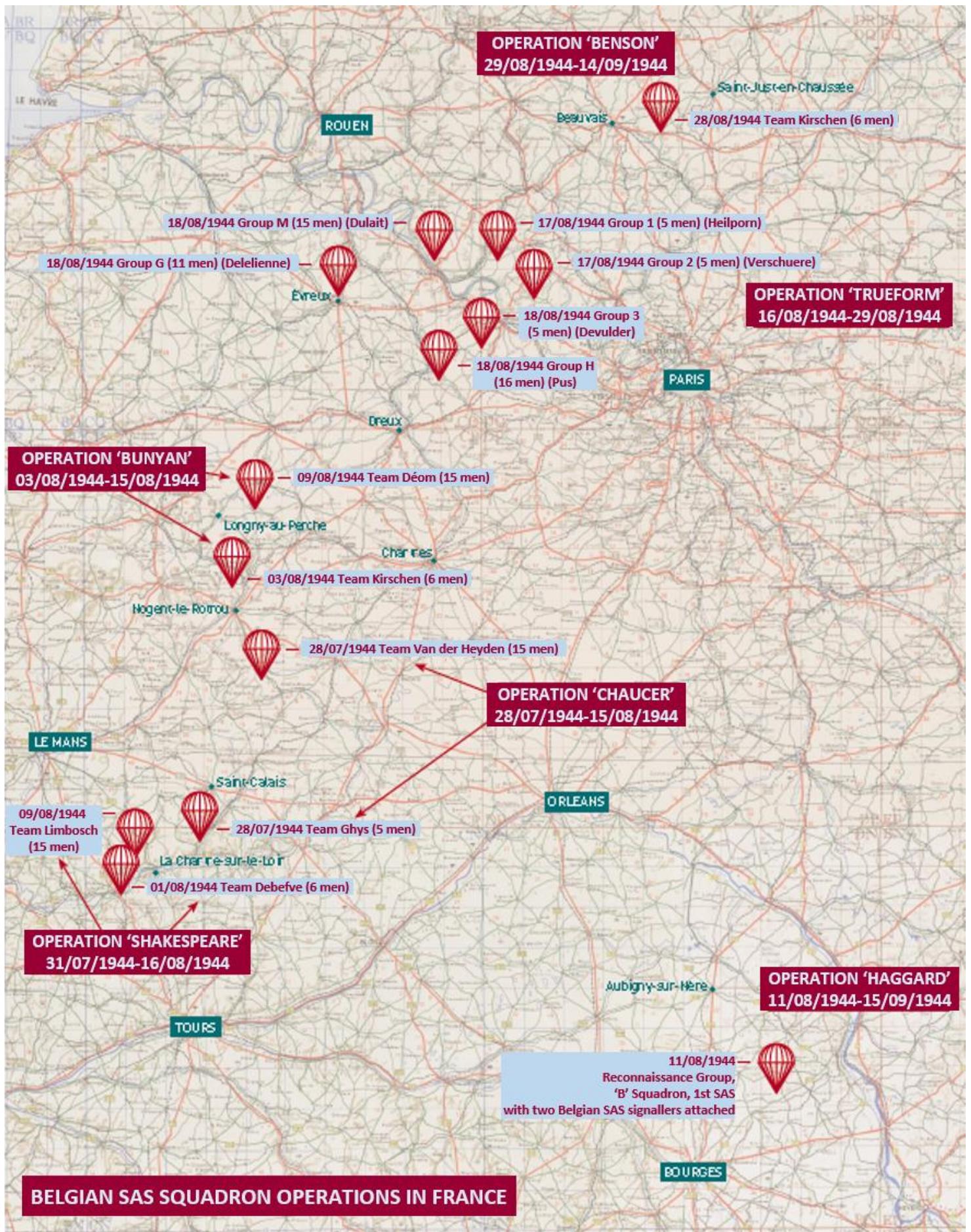
Group 'M' consisted of captain J. Dulait, lieutenant Thonard, staff sergeant René Mombel sergeants Andre Stevens, François Van Uffelen, Freddy Emonts-Pohl, corporal Michel Mas, lance corporal A. Meisch and troopers Jacques Oosters, J. Flasschoen, André Houet, Henri Sougné, Arthur De Lison, Roger Nizet and Jean Hebette. Thonard, 48, was the oldest of the unit, and was Dulait's second-in-

command. The team was dropped on the night of 17 to 18 August 1944. Dulait encountered various problems. Due to severe wind and a dropping from a too low altitude, several team members were injured; some ended up in trees and had the greatest difficulty in getting safely to the ground. Dulait eventually managed to assemble a dozen team members, quickly left the drop zone, and set up a base in a forest three kilometres west of Louviers. As his radio set was damaged, Dulait could only send 'blind' messages. These included information about the presence of an SS command post in La Haye-le-Comte, enemy troops in Saint-Etienne-du-Vauvray, an anti-aircraft battery in the area of Porte-Joie and the crossing of the stream by the Germans in Herqueville. On 24 August, the Belgians found that at least one report had reached London, because allied aircraft bombed the German headquarters very early in the morning. The Americans reached their positions on 25 August, ending the SAS mission. In the evening of 29 August, all elements that had participated in operation 'Trueform' were back in the Fairford camp. Although operation 'Trueform' was carried out after a very short preparation, with mainly 'blind' droppings and thus considerable risks, it had nevertheless contributed to creating an environment of insecurity for the enemy.

4.7. Operation 'Benson'

The main task of operation 'Benson' was to monitor the roads that linked Paris to northern France and the Reims region, to identify enemy convoys and to identify anti-aircraft batteries that prevented Allied airplanes from carrying out effective raids. The section used for this operation was composed of lieutenant Kirschen and troopers Bouillon, Flips, Moyse and Pietquin. The team was accompanied by French lieutenant Franck, who knew the area well. On 28 August at 1.30 a.m., they were parachuted in the vicinity of Saint-Just, between the Somme and the Seine. Once on the ground, the first problems appeared. Kirschen was injured; Moyse sprained his ankle; lieutenant Franck sustained a foot injury. Kirschen described the situation as follows: "...*It was so dark that we had a hard time assembling; in addition, the reception party did not seem to be on the appointment and we wondered what to do with the 24 containers that were dropped after us and that were intended for the resistance...*" The team noted that they had been dropped in Valescourt, a dozen kilometres from the planned dropping zone. When radio communications with the brigade headquarters was established at 5 p.m., the team got authorisation to operate in the actual area. On 29 August, Kirschen received important information from a French doctor. It concerned a sketch with an overview of all the German divisions on the Somme, in particular a part of the Kitzinger Line, the line of defence that extended from Abbeville, via Langres and Dôle to the Swiss border. However, the transmission of this information was

disrupted by a German patrol that discovered the Belgians, which led to a firefight. Only the next day this valuable information could be forwarded to London. The Belgians celebrated the liberation of Saint-Just on 1 September. The team drove to Paris and was ordered to return to England on 3 September. At the completion of the last Belgian SAS operation in France, almost everyone from the Belgian SAS Squadron had participated in at least one intelligence or offensive operation, some even in two. A large number of them would be deployed again, in Belgium or in the Netherlands.



5. At the forefront of the fighting in Belgium

The advance of the Allies towards the north made it possible to prepare for the impending liberation of Belgium. In this context, four SAS operations were carried out on Belgian territory as from 15 August 1944. Operations 'Noah' (around Gedinne), 'Brutus' (around Durbuy), 'Bergbang' (around Spa) and 'Caliban' (around Peer).

5.1. Operation 'Noah'

On 15 August 1944, a team of nine fully equipped operators, including two signallers, from the Belgian SAS Squadron left England: lieutenant Renkin, sergeant Jack Krokowski, and troopers Fernand Noël, Philippe Gérard, Albert Bogaerts, G. Casier, Claude de Villermont, Jean Mal and Armand Maréchal. For everyone it was their first SAS operation. Their mission was to reconnoitre a suitable base on Belgian territory in the area of the Belgian border and to prepare for the arrival of troops that would enter Belgium at the appropriate time. Blondeel explicitly asked to avoid any contact with the enemy and to contact the chief of the local resistance. On the night of 15 to 16 August, the team was dropped not far from Croix Scaille, near the Vieux Moulins de Thilay, in the zone of French resistance under the command of *commandant 'Prisme'* (code name of future General Jacques Pâris de Bollardière). Two out of the nine men, Renkin and de Villermont, drifted in the direction of Franc Bois. The two were, albeit unintentionally, the first Belgians to enter their national territory in uniform. Shortly after landing, contact with 'Prisme' was established and Renkin requested to be brought in contact with the chiefs of the Belgian resistance. On 17 August, the SAS team and the French resistance group of Prisme moved near Linchamps. Afterwards, various visits were made to inspect camps of the Secret Army. A general conclusion was that these camp sites were well organised, but that the members of the resistance were not well versed in the field of weapon handling or sabotage actions. Renkin decided to set up a base more to the north, in Gedinne-Beauraing, where the Secret Army's Group C headquarters was located. Blondeel, in turn, asked brigadier McLeod to join the Renkin section and prepare the organisation of a base. Blondeel was parachuted during the night of 28 to 29 August, not far from Croix Scaille, near the Vieux Moulins de Thilay, in the zone of French resistance under the command of north of Rienne and east of the Rienne-Vencimont road, together with six men: sergeants G. d'Oultremont, J. Van Broekhuyzen and De Neef, corporal Fred Van Haezendonck, and lance corporals Jean Bernard and Fernand Grétry. The entire team of Renkin served as reception party for Blondeel's team. At the Barbouillon camp, two kilometres from Vencimont, the Secret Army's Group C chief, lieutenant

Barthélemy, was waiting for Blondeel. He briefly explained how his organisation operated: three hundred men, divided over campsites a few kilometres apart. The staff had a sabotage section, a signals section, a security platoon and administrative staff. After his explanation, Blondeel decided to set up his base in this camp. An increase in enemy troop movements was noticeable on 30 August, suggesting that a withdrawal was underway. The next day, a first ambush with caltrops was mounted south of Vonnêche. This first mission went according to the book: three trucks had to stop and the following convoys were diverted for two hours. That same night, a third group consisting of three sections, under the command of Debefve, was parachuted near the forest of Fagnel. The first section consisted of sergeant Déom, corporal Gaston Heylen and troopers Rossius, Boch and Levaux. The second section consisted of sergeant Goffinet and troopers Becquet, Hambursin, Gilson and Lemaire. The third section consisted of sergeant Ratingckx and troopers Chauvaux, Hendrickx, Clamot and Deprez. Eleven ambushes were carried out as from 1 September. During operation 'Noah', about a hundred Germans were eliminated and thirty vehicles were destroyed. A fourth dropping was carried out on 5 September, using the same drop zone as that used for the Debefve team. A dozen SAS personnel, including Padre Jourdain, lieutenant Dr. Jean Limbosch, corporal Ongena, sergeant Van Uffelen and troopers D. Frison, H. Bonne, Meisch and Edgar Vieuxtemps, were dropped, as well as 25 containers. However, this last dropping would be of little use, since the link-up with the Americans took place less than 24 hours later. Nevertheless, the jeeps would facilitate reconnaissance operations in the direction of the more eastern regions. During the operation, Blondeel made contact with the commander of the Secret Army's Sector V, major Albert Bastin. After the liberation of Brussels, Blondeel received orders to go immediately to the capital to receive new directives from the liaison officer of the SAS brigade, major The Earl of Hardwicke. He informed Blondeel that he had to return immediately to Fairford to prepare for new operations. Upon arrival in Fairford, Blondeel received the order to prepare three reconnaissance teams to be parachuted into the Netherlands.

5.2. Operation 'Brutus'

On the night of 1 to 2 September 1944, major Fraser, liaison officer of the SAS brigade, was parachuted on the drop zone of Somme-Leuze, 5 kilometres from Durbuy. He was accompanied by officer candidate Mathys and corporals Barette and Demery, who had to protect the British major and were also responsible for establishing communications with London. The main objective was to make contact with the Secret Army and to find its combat readiness. On 3 September, the resistance organisation was ordered to take action. As part of this mission,

reinforcements were dropped at 2 kilometres from Bois Saint-Jean on the night of 5 to 6 September. The first airplane dropped nine men during a strong gust of wind, but the other Halifax aborted the drop and returned to England. The team consisted of staff sergeants Delagaye, Visée and Mombel, NCO candidates Tinchant and Pécher, and troopers Geldof, Lox, Gigot and Clasen. Extra reinforcements were sent on the night of 9 to 10 September: captain Dulait, warrant officer Groenewout, staff sergeant Schils and troopers De Lison, Doome and Fraix. The newly arrived men linked up with the resistance fighters and the Delagaye group. Together, they established a base in the vicinity of the drop zone and a series of combat and intelligence missions were planned. On 10 September, the resistance fighters and the SAS team were instructed to repel a German attack. The Belgians noticed a group of Germans and opened fire. After a firefight of an hour and a half, the Germans withdrew and left six dead and a large number of wounded at the site. Lox was deadly hit in the neck and the back, Tinchant was seriously injured on the back. Lox died and was buried the following day in the park of Bois Saint-Jean, in the presence of Blondeel. Also on 10 September, Schils carried out a patrol with two members of the resistance. Suddenly a German patrol surfaced, both members of the resistance were able to break contact, but Schils was captured, disarmed and searched, after which he was brought to a neighbouring forest by two enemy soldiers, in order to be executed. Fully aware of the fact that he had to do everything in his power to get out of this situation, he took advantage of a moment of inattention by his guards, assaulted the first, pushing a corkscrew in his throat, which hadn't been noticed during the cursory search. Before the other German could react, he collapsed almost immediately after a strong kick in the abdomen. Schils disappeared into the forest and was able to join his team again the next day. On 11 September, Mathys patrolled the Marche-Aywaille-Liège road all night. The next day, it was decided that Mathys was to be sent to Malmédy with two jeeps, to reconnoitre the road conditions. They moved as far as Bütgenbach, but the teams were ordered to return to Brussels on 12 September. On the 13th, almost all SAS members of operation 'Brutus' were back on the Grand Place in Brussels.

5.3. Operation 'Bergbang'

On 2 September, the advance party of a detachment tasked with harassment and interdiction operations in an area between southern Liège and the German border was to be dropped further to the east. The advance party consisted of major Cassart, signaller Demoor and troopers De Heusch, Geysens and Thévissen. Since the planned drop zone could not be identified, it was decided to conduct a 'blind' drop above the 'Plaine Sapin' drop zone, near Somme-Leuze. However, assembling the section took some time. On 3 September, contact was established with the

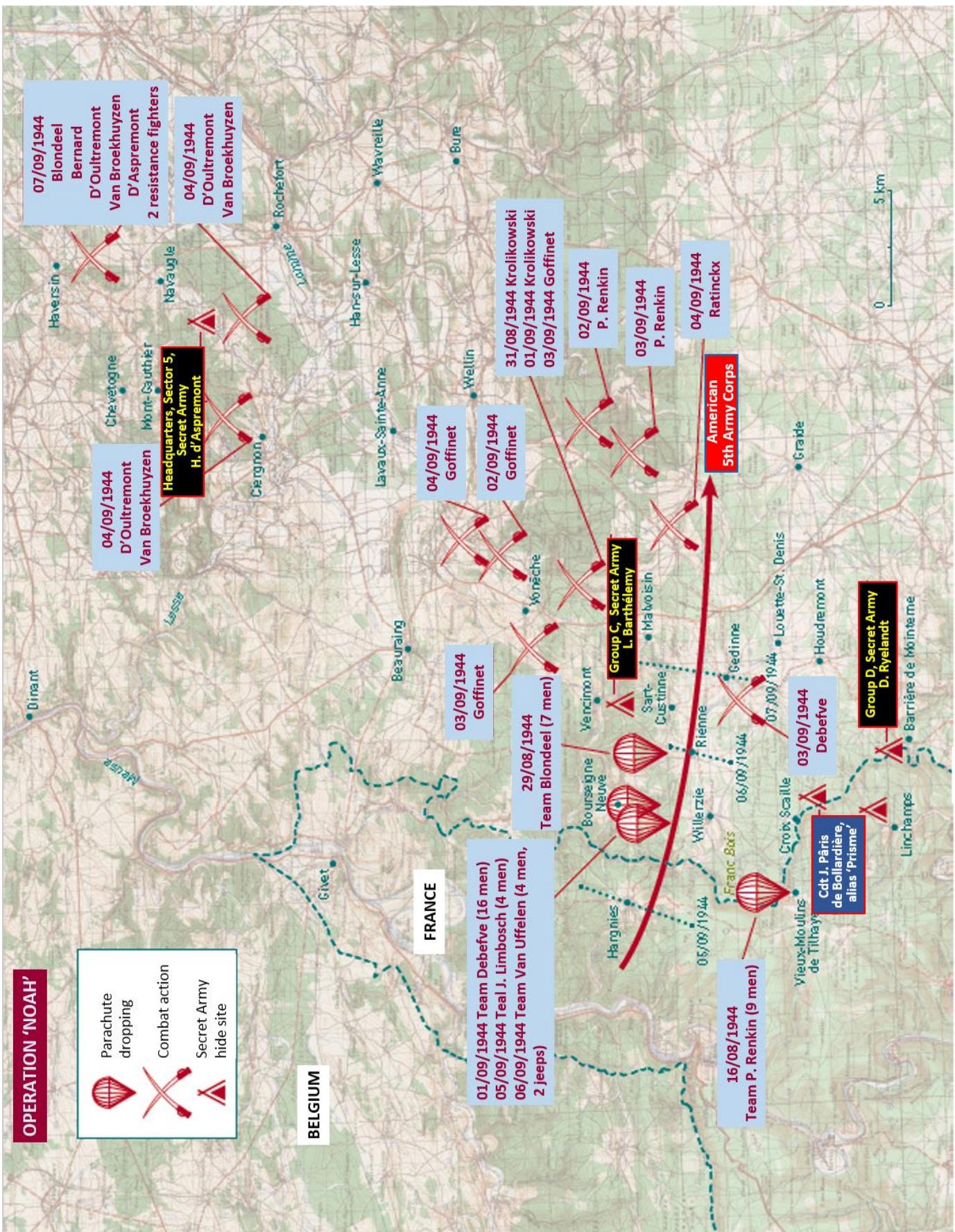
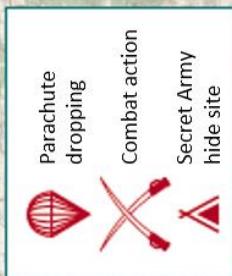
Secret Army Zone V. The next day, the group bumped into fifteen Germans and a firefight started. A lieutenant of the resistance was killed and Cassart was captured. He was taken to the Durbuy police station to be interrogated, but was able to escape. On 6 September, a team of eleven men was dropped to join Cassart's advance party: lieutenant Van der Heyden, sergeants Crèvecœur, Emonts-Pohl and Flasschoen, corporal Polain and troopers Demery, Moreau, Balsat, Devignez, J. Oosters and Mas. During the flight, they were attacked by a German fighter aircraft, forcing the pilot to conduct an evasive manoeuvre, resulting in a dropping away from the planned drop zone. On the ground, they found that they were three kilometres from Monschau, near the Siegfried Line, and that, unintentionally, they were the first Allies in uniform to reach German territory. The team returned to Belgium to execute their mission, and the section finally arrived in Solwaster on 9 September, after an infiltration of more than twenty-two kilometres through extremely difficult terrain in enemy-occupied territory. An ambush was sprung on the road from Sart to Francorchamps, killing several Germans. Their action also caused the withdrawal of two artillery batteries that covered the avenues of approach coming from the north and from Theux. The psychological effect resulting from the ambush should not be underestimated: the 2nd SS armoured division quickly withdrew to Germany. The SAS brigade decided to drop two more SAS teams in the area, on 9 September, to carry out harassment and interdiction operations: one under the command of Heilporn (11 men), the other under sergeant Pus (12 men). The following soldiers were part of these two groups: sergeants Peere, Verschuere and Parmentier and troopers Derath, Patyn, Nizet, Saint Guillain, Verfaillie, Gilbert Stroobants, Hendrickx, Mestdagh, Krins, Lamiroy, P. Laurent, Lorphèvre, Flasschoen, Natengel, Quirain, G. De Block, Ravet and P. Machiels. Between 10 and 12 September, these groups carried out a series of reconnaissance missions and offensive actions in the region of Spa. Some twenty Germans were taken prisoner.

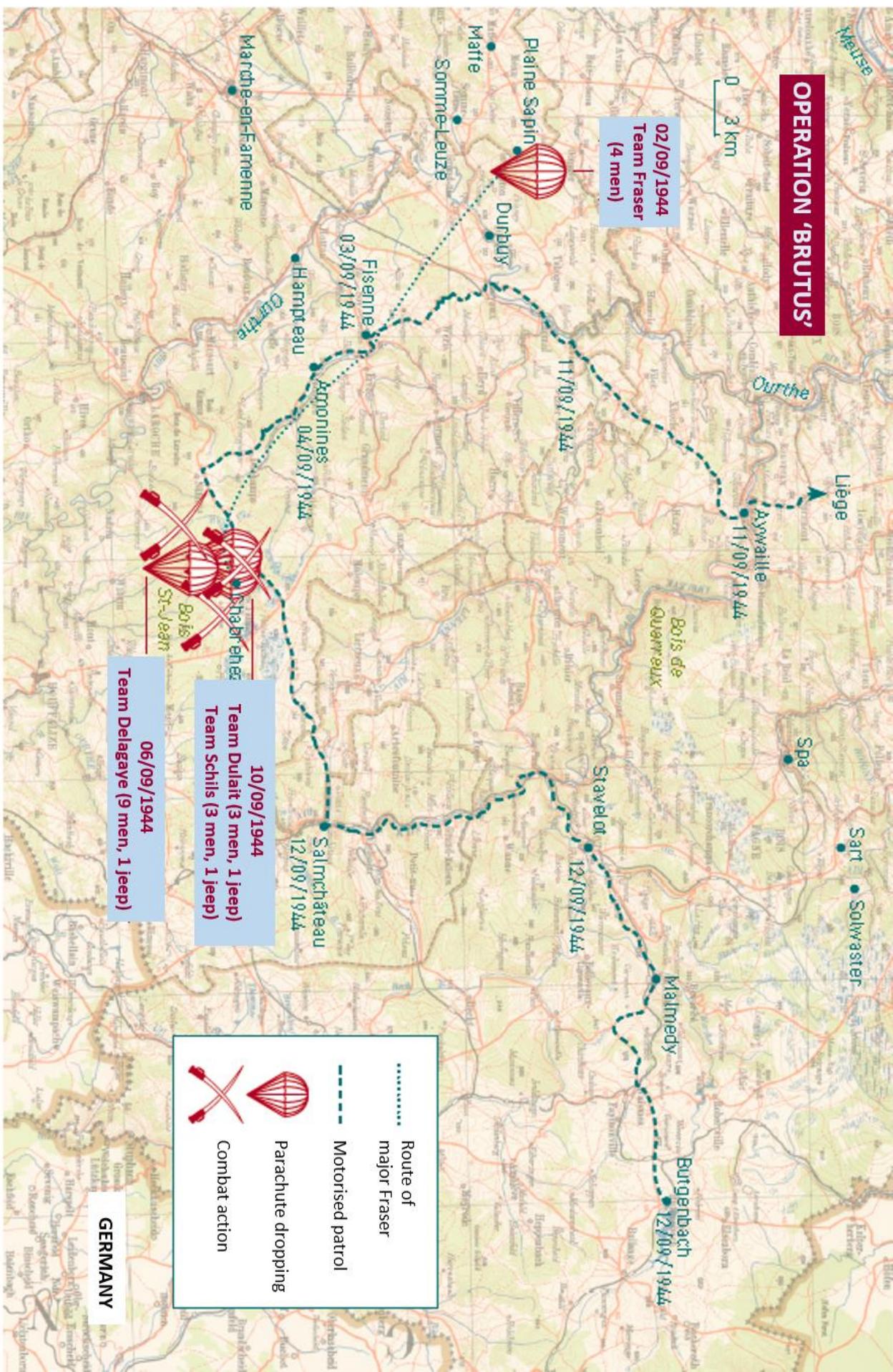
5.4. Operation 'Caliban'

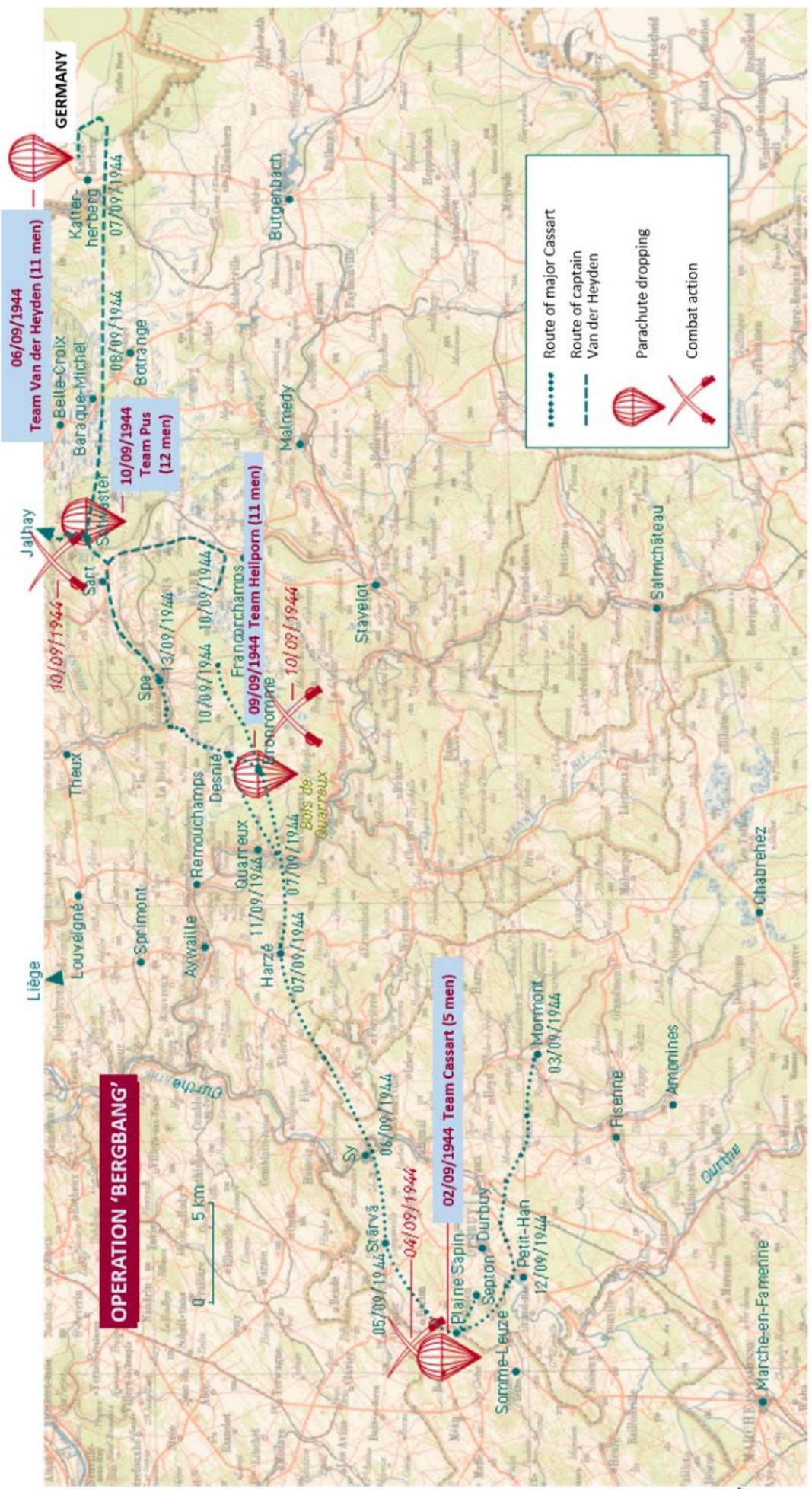
This operation, in north-eastern Belgium, was commanded by lieutenant Limbosch, with lieutenant Ghys as second-in-command. The mission consisted of providing the British with information about the German withdrawal from a base near the Peer traffic junction, and to be prepared to carry out harassment and interdiction operations. It was extremely important for the Allies to know the intentions of the enemy behind the Albert Canal. On the night of 5 to 6 September, two groups were dropped in the area of Meeuwen and Peer. The first group consisted of lieutenant Limbosch, staff sergeants Verberckmoes and De Rechter, sergeant Jean Melsens, corporal Sas, troopers De Serrano, Switters, Marginet,

Veroft, Goessens, Debuf, Vos, Engelen and D. Kowarski. The second group consisted of lieutenant Ghys, sergeants De Vulder, Klein and Siffert, and troopers Delsaer, Petit, Hellegards, Vivey, A. De Belser, K. De Belser and Bernard Kowarski. On 8 September, observation posts were established along the Bree-Helchteren road. When observing enemy troop concentrations capable of mounting a counter-attack, Limbosch sent out patrols to inform the Allies. Assisted by a local guide, he also tried himself to reach the British lines, but made contact with the enemy and was killed when covering the guide's retreat. He kept firing until he had expended his last round. Various ambushes were mounted. On 10 September, a German artillery battery was attacked, along the road from Helchteren to Bree, killing more than fifty Germans. Sergeant Melsens was killed when he ran out of ammunition while covering the withdrawal from the ambush. On 11 September, the British captured Peer and made contact with the Belgian SAS.

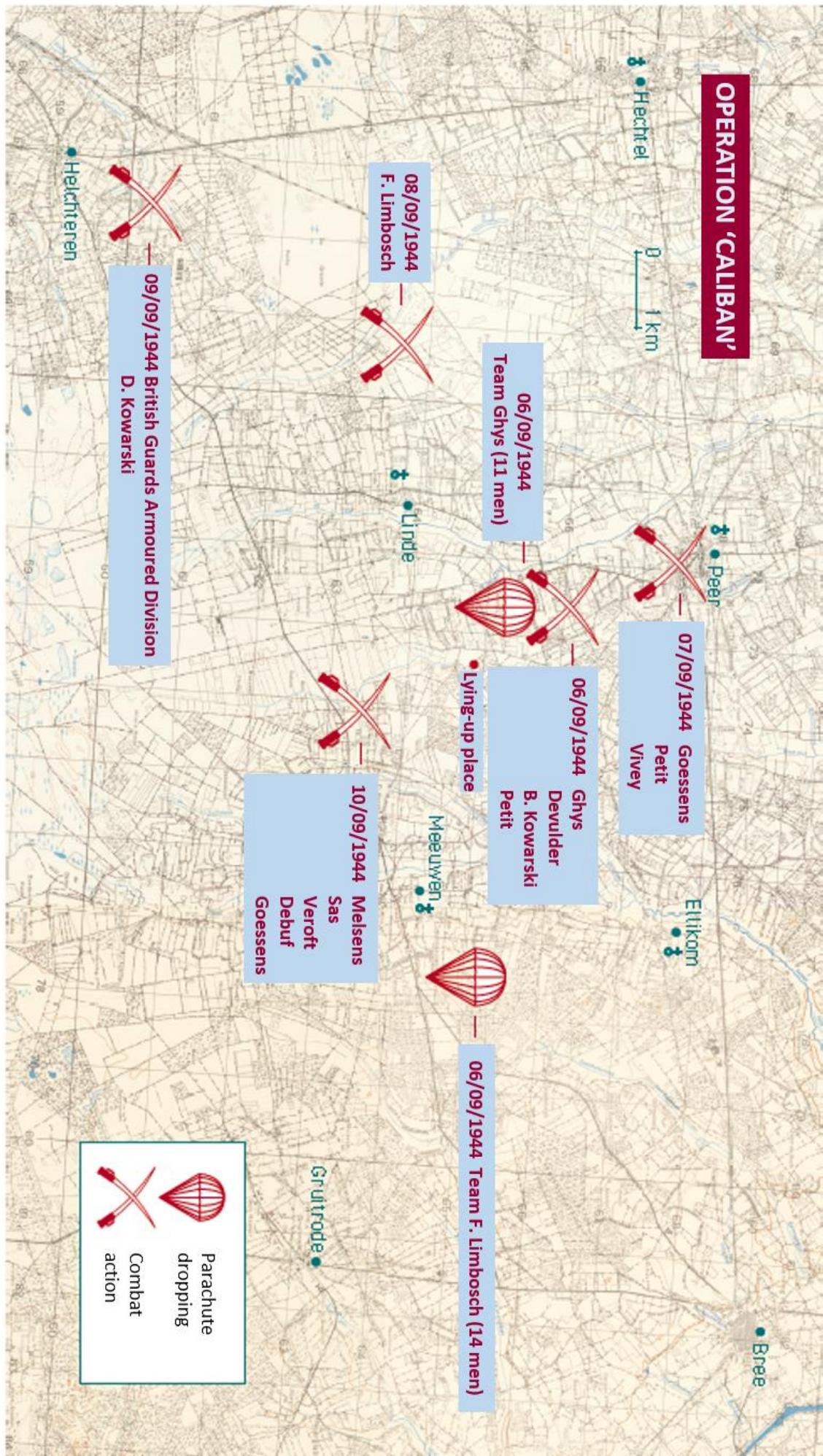
OPERATION 'NOAH'







OPERATION 'CALIBAN'



6. Behind the German lines in the Netherlands

After the successes in Normandy and the liberation of most of France and Belgium, the Allies were able to reach Alsace and the German-Dutch border by mid-September 1944. In the hope of being able to capitalize on such successes in the Netherlands, the large-scale joint ground and airborne operation 'Market-Garden' was launched on 17 September 1944. The main objective was to seize various bridges in the Netherlands, to encircle the German troops in the west of the Netherlands and to finally push the German forces in the direction of the Ruhr area. Although most bridges were taken intact by the Allies, the Rhine bridge in Arnhem could not be seized. Only the northern side of the Rhine bridge was held by the British 2nd Parachute Battalion under the command of lieutenant colonel John Frost. Despite a heroic defence, the British paras were exposed to heavy German counterattacks. Since the Allied ground forces were not able to link up with the British airborne forces as planned, the Allied supreme command ordered the withdrawal of the 1st Airborne Division on 25 September. Of the nearly 12,000 British and Polish troops around Arnhem, more than 3,900 would eventually succeed in being evacuated safely. However, the loss of Arnhem would have serious consequences. Not only was the Allied advance largely halted, an extension of the German occupation to the north of the Rhine would also oblige the Allies to change their plans, implying the need to set up additional intelligence networks in the Netherlands. Six days before the launch of 'Market-Garden', the Belgian SAS Squadron was urgently recalled to Great Britain. In the Netherlands, the squadron would carry out four operations behind enemy lines: operation 'Regan-Fabian', operation 'Gobbo-Portia', operation 'Timon' and operation 'Friesland'; the first two operations in the context of the airborne operation 'Market', the other two with the aim of assisting the Dutch resistance and obtaining information.

6.1. Operation 'Regan-Fabian'

On the night of 15 to 16 September 1944, Kirschen, Regner and signallers Moyse and Pietquin were dropped in the vicinity of Nijkerk, some ten kilometres north-east of Amersfoort. There were met by a reception party from the Dutch resistance. On 17 September, the SAS brigade informed the team of the start of operation 'Market-Garden': "*To Regan 705: Allied airborne force landed midday today area Arnhem E 77. Information from you now highest importance. Use emergency link.*" On 19 September, Kirschen received the following message: "*Airborne H.Q. here unable to establish contact with troops at Arnhem. Try to send to HQ First Division E.740780 and pass message through your set. Password for you to allied troops: Nancy.*" Kirschen suggested that Regner should establish contact and return with

an officer from the 1st Airborne Division. Together with a Dutch resistance fighter, Regner headed for Arnhem. In Driel, Regner swam across the Rhine to go to Oosterbeek, where he learned that the situation in Arnhem seemed hopeless. Given the change in the situation, it was decided to return to Nijmegen and cross the Allied lines. At the beginning of October, Regner and his Dutch guide returned to Brussels. In the meantime, on 21 September, Kirschen received important information about a V2 launch base which was sent to London. On 24 September, the British radio reported that the last airborne troops had left the area of Arnhem. On 2 October, two soldiers who had evaded from Arnhem were handed over to the Belgian SAS team. On 4 October, Kirschen attached the plans of the German defences north of the Rhine to two pigeons, but neither arrived in England. On 15 October, two other pigeons were released, again carrying the plan, as well as the list of British airborne troops who were hiding in the region. On 16 October, the team received the following message: "*Thanks for the plans and for the list of paratroopers, transferred by Zig.*" About one hundred and fifty soldiers that had evaded from Arnhem were still hiding in the area of operations of the Belgian SAS team. Kirschen went to Ede, where major Digby Tatham-Warter, officer commanding of 'A' Company of the 2nd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, hid himself and whom he asked to take charge of the group. Tatham-Warter accepted Kirschen's proposal and with the support of the Dutch resistance, the Belgian SAS safely evacuated one hundred and thirty-nine soldiers over the Lower Rhine near Renkum during operation 'Pegasus I', on the night of 22 to 23 October. On 22 October, radio operator Pietquin returned to the Allied lines and subsequently to England, since he had planned to marry a Scottish woman. The success of the first evacuation prompted the Allies to plan for a second attempt, operation 'Pegasus II'. Unfortunately, the security of this operation was compromised when a reporter impersonated an intelligence officer and interviewed several evaders from the first operation. The news story alerted the Germans, who strengthened their patrols along the river. The operation largely replicated the original, but was due to take place 4 kilometres from the earlier site, starting on the evening of 18 November. A party of 130 people would attempt to cross the river, but stumbled into a German patrol. Several were killed in the resulting firefight and the evaders were scattered. No one was able to cross that night, although seven people crossed during the next two days. On 6 December 1944, Kirschen and Moyse were ordered to return to Allied lines. However, it would be mid-March before they were able to do so. During their 6-month assignment, 419 messages had been sent to London.

6.2. Operation 'Gobbo-Portia'

This mission started on the night of 26 September. Debefve, Demoer, Siffert, Heylen and J. Levaux were parachuted in the area of Drente. The main objective was to gather information about enemy troop movements and to determine the feasibility of establishing a clandestine SAS base. Contact was made with the local Dutch resistance reception party. On 27 September, the SAS men were visited by the leaders of the local resistance, who enthusiastically offered their cooperation. In the evening, the Belgians were taken to a farm at Orvelte, which would serve as their headquarters until the end of October. From this location, information was sent to London regarding troop movements, positions of the V1 and V2 reprisal weapons, ammunition depots and training centres of the army. After a while, the situation became very difficult. Following information obtained by the Germans by local informants, some 30 SS men approached the farm on 21 October. Notwithstanding the fact that they found buried food cans and that they checked the straw bales covering the entrance of the secret hiding place the Belgians managed to reach just in time, the SAS team was not discovered. As the Germans had no intention of leaving this place quickly, the team waited for the night to leave the farm. Although they were successful and could flee unnoticed, they had to leave much of their equipment, with the exception of weapons and a radio receiver. Contact with the resistance was now completely lost. The team then moved for the next ten days and arrived close to Ommen, in the province of Overijssel, completely exhausted. To reduce the risk of discovery, they contacted a farmer who, luckily, turned out to be in contact with the Dutch resistance. Debefve split his team into two groups, who would be positioned a few kilometres apart. The resistance took on the task of finding hiding places. Siffert and Heylen were accommodated in Kloosterhaar; Demoer, Levaux and Debefve moved into a trailer in Vroomshoop. This region offered more possibilities than the one that the team had left. It contained roads, railways and canals running from east to west that directly connected Germany with the Netherlands. The messages were written and coded by Debefve and were then sent by Siffert and Demoer. In the evening of 6 December, all five were in the trailer and were discovered by the Germans. A firefight broke out, hitting Debefve in the right hand, but all Belgians were able to escape again during the night. The increased pressure on the SAS team didn't go unnoticed in London and the brigade finally ordered an end to their mission. However, personnel could now no longer be returned to friendly lines as was the case in October. The SAS team was forced to wait for a favourable moment to make an attempt to cross the Rhine and the Meuse. Only after two months, they were finally able to reach friendly lines, having spent 173 days in enemy-occupied territory in the Netherlands.

6.3. Operation 'Timon'

At the end of September 1944, the SAS Brigade asked the Belgian SAS Squadron to designate a signaller who spoke Dutch fluently, in order to be able to contact the Dutch resistance again. Holvoet, who had just returned from the operation in the Bourges area, volunteered and was parachuted a few days later, under the pseudonym 'Bacon', together with the Dutchman du Bois, also known as 'Ham', in the area where the section of Kirschen operated. His mission consisted of relaying information from the Dutch resistance and of helping the evaders of 'Market-Garden' who tried to reach Allied lines. In early November, Blondeel was told that Holvoet was captured while he was coding messages and subsequently imprisoned by the Germans. After being tortured and transferred from one prison to another, Holvoet was finally shot on 10 April 1945 in Hattem, and was thrown into the IJssel River. His body was to wash up in Wilsum on 25 April. All this took place a few days before the end of the Belgian SAS campaign in the Netherlands. Being interrogated under torture, he continued to resist during many months and did not release any useful information to his interrogators. His squadron commander honoured Holvoet: *"Only after six weeks of operations behind the enemy lines, does he leave again as a volunteer for a particularly dangerous mission related to the airborne operation in Arnhem. His courage and outspoken intelligence, his value as a parachutist in combat, coupled with the excellence of his training, made him a soldier of the highest order. He contributed to the rescue of hundreds of paratroopers from the 6th Airborne Division, and to their return to Allied lines. When his teammate succumbs while performing his duty, he continues to perform the planned tasks, knowing that the enemy is chasing him. After being caught by surprise while performing his task, he still tries to destroy his equipment and escape the enemy; he is wounded and quickly caught and imprisoned. He refuses any care. Thanks to his exceptional courage and unparalleled physical strength, he heals from his injuries, and during the many months of his imprisonment he does not deviate in any way from his commitment. The 'Signal Troop' can be proud of him..."* Three days after receiving the bad news, Blondeel received another message asking him to take care of a volunteer who had to replace Holvoet. Temmerman volunteered. After a long wait, the radio operator was flown to the Netherlands on 13 December. The flight, however, went extremely badly: the aircraft was forced to ascend due to explosions of anti-aircraft artillery; Temmerman began to suffer from the environmental conditions at high altitude and became unwell. In addition, the pilot could not find the coast and had to return to England, where Temmerman was sent to hospital. After his rehabilitation, Temmerman waited until 25 January 1945, for a second attempt. Despite the fact that the dropping zone was found without any problems, there was no sign of a reception party, so it was decided to return to

base. A third attempt was made on 15 February, but again the dropping was cancelled, after contact with a German fighter. There would be no fourth attempt because Temmerman was sent back to Belgium, having been appointed by Blondeel to attend officer training at the newly established Infantry School in Tervuren, where he was commissioned as 2nd lieutenant at the end of 1945.

6.4. Operation 'Friesland'

On 8 October 1944, Groenewout, along with three Dutch NCOs, was dropped above Friesland. The task of the weapons instructor was to teach the local resistance how to use their armament. Groenewout was dropped from too low a height and crashed heavily into the trees, sustaining various injuries. The warrant officer stayed in Veenhuizen for eight days to have his wounds healed. Once recovered, Groenewout started training the Dutch resistance fighters in Swichum. He stayed successively in Bolsward, Finkum, Dokkum, Tjinje, Heerenveen, Dronrijp, Terzool and finally in Hempens. He taught them how to handle small arms, machine guns, grenades and explosives, in combination with basic tactics. In total, he would train some seven hundred members of the Dutch resistance. On 3 February 1945, a chief of the local resistance was imprisoned while in possession of a photo and papers from Groenewout, with a document on which his later movements were marked. Groenewout cancelled his planned programme of instruction and stayed in Hempens with a group of fifteen men, with the intention of starting the fight together, when the signal would be given by London. On 22 April, the Allies freed Friesland after heavy fighting. Groenewout immediately reported to the intelligence officer of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, and got assistance to move back to Belgium. He arrived in the Two Lions Barracks in Tervuren on 24 April.



7. The Battle of the Bulge

7.1. In the motorised reconnaissance role

After the liberation of Belgium, brigadier McLeod informed Blondeel that it was unlikely there would be parachute insertions during the upcoming operations, and that a written order would follow for the Belgian SAS Squadron to be converted as quickly as possible into a reconnaissance unit, equipped with partly armoured jeeps. The official order, issued on 2 October 1944, stated: "*The Belgian squadron has to refit in Britain. With a view to a new mission type, the unit will be equipped with jeeps and the entire unit will move to Belgium, where it will establish its base. Regarding the equipment: on October 2 and 3, thirty-five jeeps will arrive in Bicester, which will be transferred to Mushroom Farm. The equipment, of which the Belgians have made a list, will be brought together at Mushroom Farm by 7 October. A supplement of five more jeeps, intended to arrive at a number of forty vehicles as planned, will be collected in Brussels. The armour of the forty jeeps will be fitted in Brussels. The protective armour plates will be supplied by the SAS troops ...*" For the Belgian SAS Squadron, which had returned to Great Britain in mid-September 1944, a training programme was established, based on the orders issued to Blondeel. In October and November, the reorganisation of the unit and the training of new recruits would require an enormous effort from all veterans: in the 'King's House' on the Brussels' Grand Place, the recruitment committee was installed, led by Thonard; in Tervuren, Dulait prepared the future operational base and the recruits received their equipment before they left for England; in Leamington-Spa, England, basic training for recruits was conducted, led by Ghys, Heilporn and Mathys; parachute training was still conducted in Ringway, led by British instructors; in Mushroom Farm, Renkin was responsible for the jeep training, while Van der Heyden was preparing the transfer of the unit to Belgium. Additional personnel would join the unit. Some of them came from various services of the Belgian armed forces in the United Kingdom, as well as from the Middle East, but the majority of these reinforcements consisted of young men aged 18 to 20 who were recruited in Belgium during the third quarter of 1944. In mid-December 1944, the three hundred and twenty Belgian SAS members were divided as follows: sixty-nine men took part in the training in Leamington-Spa, sixty-six men attended the training in Tervuren, thirty men were detached, hospitalised or deployed in operations, one hundred and fifty-five men (the largest group of veterans and the first new recruits) made up the bulk of the squadron in Tervuren. Now fully motorized with forty jeeps and a few trucks, the squadron consisted of a staff troop, 'A' Troop and 'B' Troop. The Staff troop was composed of a signals section, a transport section, a quartermaster section, a defence section and a

reconnaissance section. 'A' and 'B' troops had respectively sixteen and ten jeeps, each with a three-man crew.

7.2. Reconnaissance patrols along the Meuse and to Marche-en-Famenne

On 16 December 1944, German ground forces launched a desperate offensive under the name operation 'Herbstnebel' in the Belgian Ardennes. The main objective was to quickly conquer the bridges over the Meuse River, then push through to the north-west and eventually gain control of the port of Antwerp, to disrupt the logistical supply of the Allies. The German attack surprised the Allies by its ferocity and the volume of deployed resources. On the evening of 19 December, lieutenant Radino, who was in charge of the Belgian SAS unit in Tervuren, received a message



The jeep of Van der Heyden is being prepared (Collection M. Backx)

from the 21st Army Group: "*Eighteen armoured jeeps with full armament and with crews, equipped with rations for three days, have to leave Tervuren on December 20 at 1:00 a.m., to report north of Gembloux at 3:00 a.m.*" At 9 p.m. the 21st Army Group adjusted the 'eighteen', with the mention "all jeeps" and "all available combat personnel with a maximum of rations". The troops were organised as follows: 'A' Troop: five jeeps under the command of Van der Heyden (commander of 'A' Troop); five jeeps under the command of Renkin; four jeeps under the command of Thonard. 'B' Troop: four jeeps under the command of Radino (commander of 'B' troop and also acting squadron commander); three jeeps under the command of lieutenant J. Romnée; three jeeps under the command of Krolkowski; two trucks with the rest of the combat personnel. On 20 December at 1 a.m., the unit left Tervuren and headed for Gembloux. Its mission was to check the condition of the bridges over the Meuse River between Liège and Givet, to report on the troops defending the bridges and, if necessary, to prevent the German advance elements from crossing the bridges. The plan seemed fairly ambitious: patrolling from Liège to Givet with 24 jeeps over more than a hundred kilometres of winding roads.

To cause confusion among the Allies, the Germans had deployed *Panzerbrigade 150*, commanded by SS-Obersturmbannführer Otto Skorzeny. His 2,500 strong unit had olive-painted vehicles with American markings, mostly German equipment, but also some American vehicles, while its personnel were partly dressed in American uniforms. The SAS patrols would experience a lot of difficulties, not so

much because of enemy action, but because the Americans sometimes saw the Belgians as Skorzeny's men. Obviously, the Americans were suspicious when they met Belgian SAS members who asked them with a foreign English accent about their dispositions or other information about their troops. In the beginning, four of the six sections had to spend more time in arguing with the Americans than they were able to execute their mission. The team of Van der Heyden was stopped by Americans and thoroughly checked. Déom's teams were halted at the Jambes bridge. They were taken to the American command post in Belgrade under strict surveillance, and the section was only released after many hours of questioning. More to the south, Radino observed that the Lustin bridge was totally destroyed and that the Yvoir bridge was unusable. In Dinant, the railway bridge could be crossed on foot and the Americans had built a new bridge in wood. In Namur, Romnée noticed that the bridge over the Sambre had been rebuilt. The bridge over the Meuse was reinforced by engineers to allow the crossing of tanks. The railway bridge over the Meuse was still suitable for convoys. The distance between Liège and Givet turned out to be far too large to be efficiently monitored by twenty-four jeeps. The vehicles were regrouped between Namur and Givet and reconnaissance operations would be conducted further south. Krolkowski was sent with three jeeps from Namur to Marche-en-Famenne, where he contacted the withdrawing American 84th Infantry Division. Romnée drove from Dinant to Rochefort and reported nothing abnormal. Renkin went from Givet to Chanly, where he was notified of the arrival of refugees from Luxembourg. On 21 December, Renkin met Thonard in Givet and later on, he linked up with Van de Heyden and Déom in Wépion, where the squadron had regrouped. Lieutenant Radino and sergeants Déom and Krolkowski then drove with two jeeps over the Meuse in Namur, in the direction of Marche-en-Famenne. In the vicinity of Natoye, an enemy aircraft flew over the jeeps and dropped a series of bombs, which missed their target. The two jeeps reached Marche-en-Famenne around 1.30 a.m. At 7.30 a.m., Radino delivered the following message to the Phantom operators: *"Information from the American 84th Division in Marche-en-Famenne. German movements to the northwest. Four Tiger tanks noticed east of Hotton, as well as an infantry unit, about a company strong. Fighting yesterday around 6 p.m. A few paratroopers were dropped but not taken prisoner. In all likelihood, the Germans want to seize Noiseux. The bridge in Hotton has been blown up. The situation south of Marche is confused. The Marche-Rochefort road is declared unsafe. The 106th Division is cut off south of the Amblève. Another advanced element is in Hamoir. La Roche and Bastogne are*

believed still in the hands of the Americans. The German tactics seem to be to make a circular movement around large agglomerations." In the late afternoon of 22 December, Blondeel, who had returned from England, went to Wépion and took over command of the unit. The patrols continued from Namur to Givet. By 23 December, the unit was back in its barracks at Tervuren. Its new mission was to protect the 21st Army Group communications centre, located in Boitfort (Brussels), from possible German airborne attacks.



Men from 'A' Troop - Albert Ravet, Regner de Wykerslooth, Laurent Boch and Marcel Chavaux (Collection M. Backx)

7.3. Counterattack in the Ardennes: operation 'Regent'

The German advance was finally stopped on 26 December 1944. On 27 December, Blondeel received orders to get ready to get again to the Ardennes to conduct patrols in support of the British 61st Reconnaissance Regiment and 6th Airborne Division. The Belgian SAS also had to establish liaison with the French SAS, which was tasked to protect the left flank of Patton's 3rd American Army. The next morning, the entire squadron left Tervuren and reached the village of Froidfontaine, where it established its headquarters. In the afternoon of 29 December, all Belgians were ready and the squadron sent out patrols to the east, until 6 January. To the north of Libin, a distance of twenty kilometres was defended by one hundred and forty Belgians. About two hundred French SAS troops, also equipped with semi-armoured jeeps, defended positions south of this area. Blondeel put together three teams of three jeeps each: team 'Tiger', under Van der Heyden, left Pondrôme to arrive in Halma. Tellin was reconnoitred and two German artillery positions were located north-west of the church. The jeeps left the main road and went to Belvaux. No traffic was observed on the Tellin-Wavreille road. Team 'Panther', under Thonard, checked the state of the bridge in Han-sur-Lesse. In case it was occupied by the enemy, they had to find a way to cross the River Lesse in order to reach Wavreille. The 'Lion' team, under d'Oultremont, had to check the condition of the bridge over the Lhomme River between Libin and Hatrival. The bridge turned out to be demolished and mines were everywhere. Hatrival was defended by two to three hundred Germans.

7.4. Drama at Bure

The 6th Airborne Division had arrived in Bure-Tellin on 30 and 31 December. In support of the British attack, parts of the Belgian SAS Squadron were deployed on 31 December, to reconnoitre the region east of Bure. An intensive patrol plan was established, coordinated between the Belgian squadron and the British airborne division. This terrain compartment formed a wedge in the Allied disposition and gave the Germans a dominant position with perfect observation and firing positions. The tasks of the Belgian SAS were clearly defined: from reconnoitring infantry and artillery positions, minefields, enemy obstacles and opportunities to cross waterways, to destroying small pockets of resistance, but never to attack strongly defended positions. In the coming days, motorised patrols would continue to be conducted further east, as the British counterattack progressed. Two groups were formed, one under the command of Van der Heyden, the other under the command of Renkin. In the north, Van der Heyden occupied the Bure chapel to attempt to observe the enemy guns from this vantage point, and also observed the Tellin-Wavreille road. The 'Arthur' jeep, with d'Oultremont, Mas and Oosters, was ordered by Van der Heyden to reconnoitre the Our Lady chapel of Bure, where the SAS team captured six Germans. In Tellin, Blondeel assigned the tasks for the afternoon of 31 December. At 12.15 p.m., patrols 'Lion 1' and 'Lion 3', with 'Tiger 3' and 'Tiger 4' as reinforcements, commanded by Renkin, left Tellin and tried to circumvent Bure via a small country track through the south. In the north, Van der Heyden took 'Tiger 1', 'Tiger 2' and 'Lion 2' back to the Our Lady chapel of Bure, while trying to get as close as possible to the village. Renkin moved on the right flank, to discover the location of an anti-tank position and to protect a British assault section that was advancing through the forest to the south-west of Bure. The four jeeps stopped near the tracked vehicles that had transported the British section. Across the fields, the four jeeps drove up a hill, Renkin in the lead ('Lion 1'), followed by the jeep of Barette, Patyn and Regner ('Lion 3'), the jeep of Polain ('Tiger 4') on the right, and that of Mestdagh ('Tiger 3') on the left. Seven hundred meters to the north, Renkin noticed about twenty Germans, who quickly disappeared into a wooded valley. The jeeps followed the British section until they disappeared from sight and then reached the hilltop. After an advance through hardened snow, along country roads and across fields, the leading jeep was faced with fierce enemy opposition. The 'Tiger' patrol changed into an extended line formation; Renkin aimed his machine guns and fired into the undergrowth. Suddenly a new target surfaced, which was immediately fired upon by the Vickers machine guns. The jeeps were suddenly shot at by a German anti-tank gun. One of the following rounds hit the fuel tanks of Renkin's jeep. Renkin, de Villermont and Lorphèvre were killed. On New Year's Eve, the Belgian SAS Squadron mourned the

loss of its three comrades. On 3 January 1945, Blondeel and a team managed to reach the ridge where Renkin and his men were killed. Doctor Sevens noted that they had been killed instantly. The Belgians wanted to bury their fallen comrades with military honour, but increasing mortar and machine gun fire prevented the bodies from being recovered. It was not until 10 January that the three bodies were moved to the village of Bure and were subsequently buried at the Bure military cemetery. The maroon berets continued to pursue their reconnaissance missions in the beginning of January 1945 and reached Libin, Smuid, Daverdisse, Mirwart, Barriere de Champlon, Saint-Hubert, and Bande. On 11 January 1945 a patrol, led by Radino, discovered the bodies of thirty-four Belgian civilians in Bande, every one of them assassinated by German forces. This crime was committed on Christmas Eve and the bodies were abandoned in the cellar of a house destroyed during the battle.



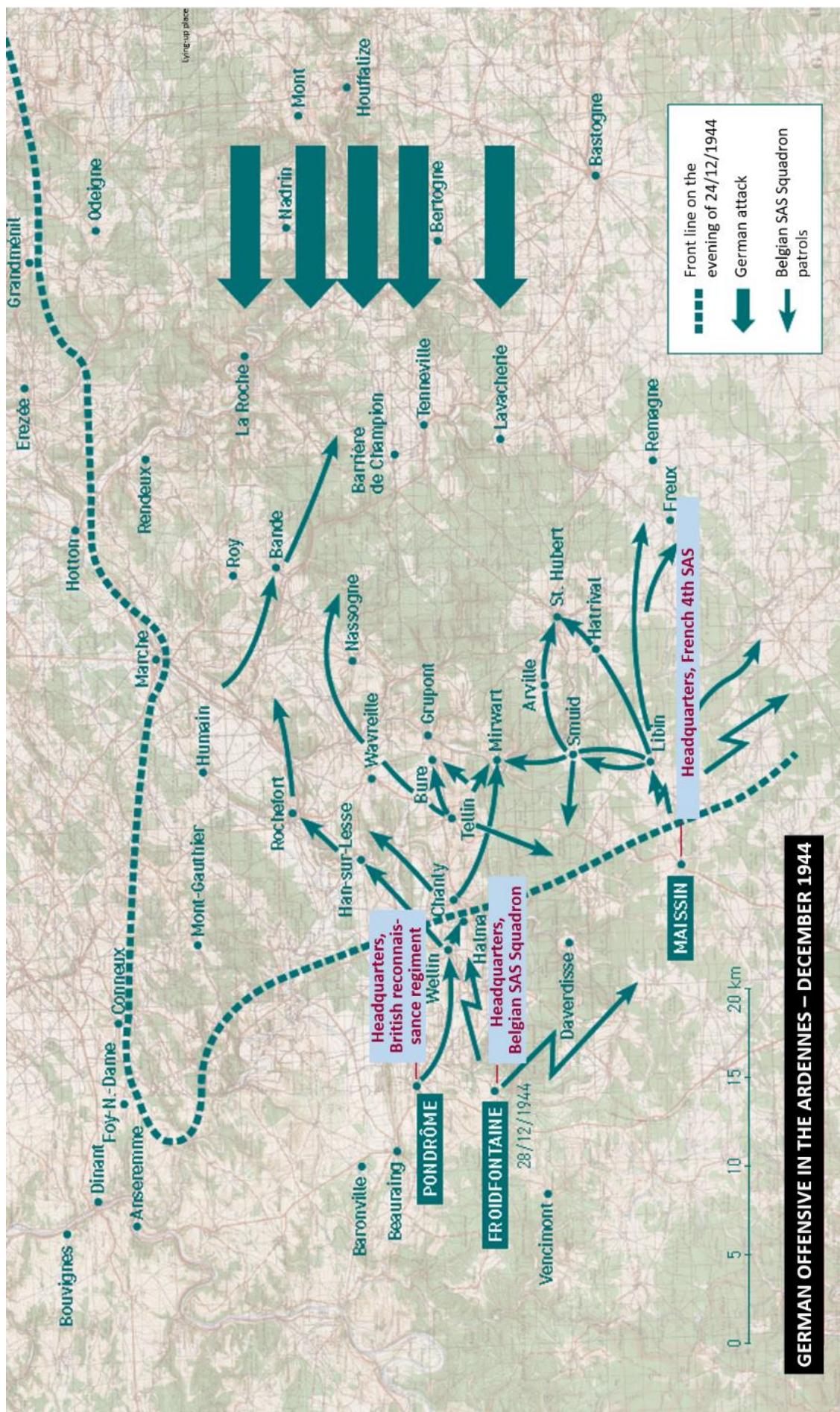
Wreck of Renkin's jeep
(Renkin family archives)

7.5. Rear area operations in Antwerp

On 13 January, after more than three weeks of operations in the Ardennes, the Belgian SAS Squadron returned to the Two Lions Barracks in Tervuren. Already on 14 January, they were ordered to move to Antwerp, as it was feared that, as a result of the failure of the ground offensive, a German airborne operation would take place, with the intention of disabling the port installations. The SAS squadron installed itself in Berchem and patrolled intensively for fifteen days in the north-east of Antwerp up to the Dutch border. On 2 February, when all danger of a possible attack had passed, the mission ended and everyone returned again to Tervuren.

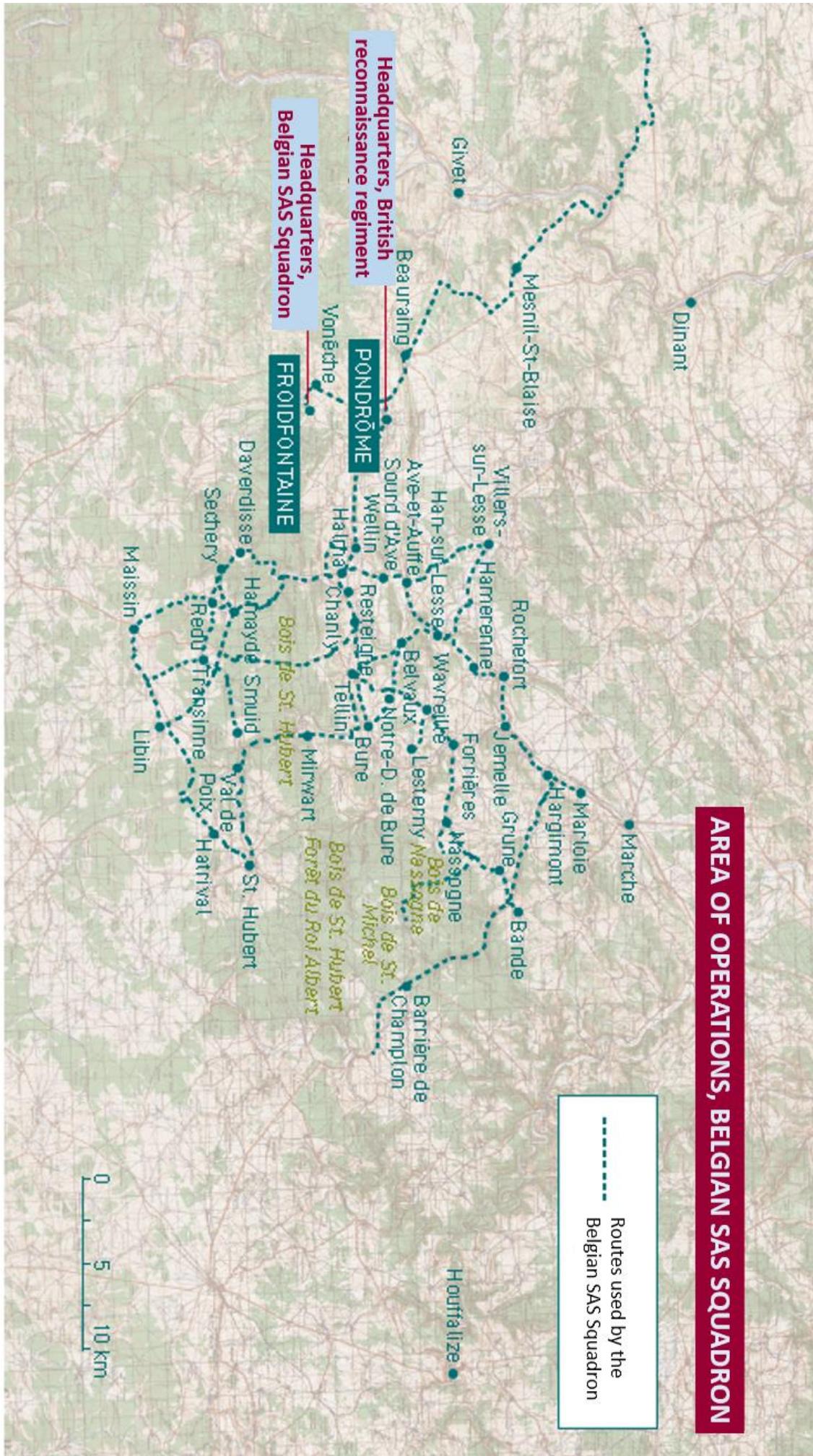
7.6. Expansion to regimental strength

During February and March, the unit was reorganised into a regiment, and saw its strength doubled. The regiment consisted of a staff, a staff squadron, 'A' Squadron and 'B' Squadron. Both 'A' and 'B' squadrons had a staff, a jeep troop and an assault troop. The staff squadron was composed of a staff, a signal troop, a transportation section, an administrative troop, an intelligence section, a defence troop, a mortar troop and an assault engineer troop.



GERMAN OFFENSIVE IN THE ARDENNES – DECEMBER 1944

AREA OF OPERATIONS, BELGIAN SAS SQUADRON



Routes used by the
Belgian SAS Squadron

8. The liberation of the north-east Netherlands: operation 'Larkswood'

8.1. The military situation at the end of March 1945

In the spring of 1945, after the counter-attack that followed the Ardennes offensive, the Western Allies found themselves just beyond the Franco-German and Belgian-German borders and south of the Rhine in the Netherlands. In the northern part of the front line, the 21st Army Group, under the command of Montgomery, carried out a series of operations to defeat the German troops on the left bank of the Rhine. In the north, the Canadian 1st Army started operation 'Veritable' on 8 February 1945, breaking the *Westwall* and conquering the area between the Meuse and the Rhine. To the south, the American 9th Army crossed the Ruhr at the start of operation 'Grenade', on 23 February, and occupied the area between the Ruhr and the Rhine. On 23 March, the British 2nd Army and the American 9th Army succeeded in establishing a strong bridgehead on the eastern side of the Rhine, during operation 'Plunder'. After crossing the last major natural obstacle in western Germany, the Allies continued their advance unabated. The Canadian 1st Army advanced to the north, where the Belgian SAS Regiment would participate in the liberation of the still occupied part of the Netherlands.

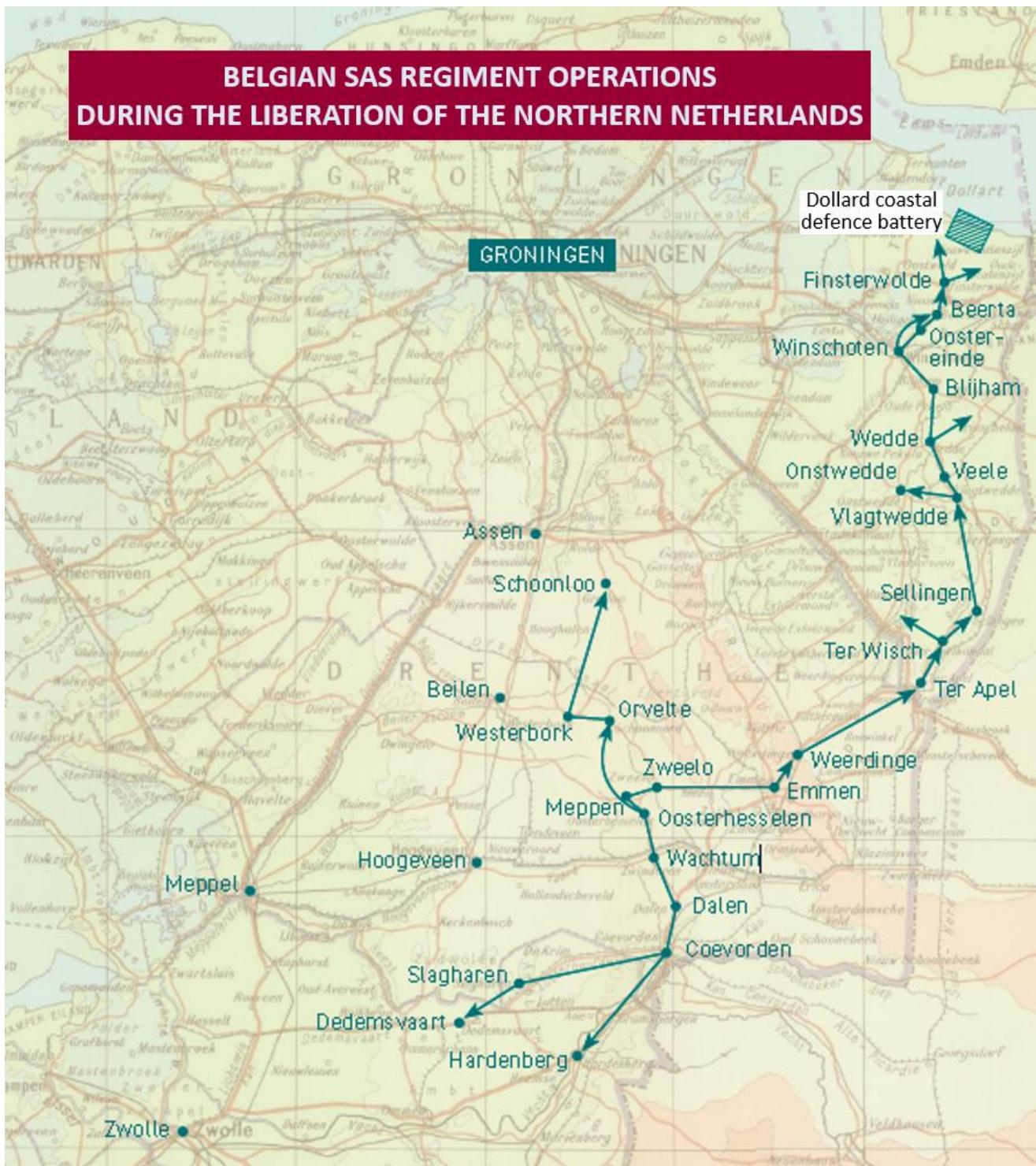
8.2. Preparation until the last minute

While awaiting a new major offensive in the Netherlands and Germany, the Belgian SAS Regiment was anticipating new operations. The volunteers recruited after the liberation continued to train tirelessly. Blondeel wanted to optimally prepare his men, especially the new recruits, for the potential missions involving reconnaissance and flank guard operations in support of a larger formation. On 3 April 1945, the new recruits, led by lieutenant Van Cauwelaert held exercises in Leopoldsburg. After five days of hard training, the assault troop of 'B' squadron was ordered to move to the base of Tervuren. The tough and demanding training would ultimately pay off during the campaigns in the Netherlands and in Germany.

8.3. The campaign from day to day

On 3 April 1945, the Belgian SAS Regiment was ordered by the 21st Army Group to move to Huise-Zelle near Hengelo and make itself available to the Canadian 2nd Army Corps. On 4 April, an advance party consisting of major Blondeel, the intelligence section, the regimental sergeant major and a representative of each group to be moved, left via Antwerp and Breda. The rest of the regiment arrived in Huise-Zelle on 5 April. Operation 'Larkswood' was part of a large Allied operation, with the aim of dividing the Netherlands in two parts, from the south to the north, to encircle the Germans who were in the west and to prevent the

Germans from withdrawing to the east. In March 1945, the Canadian 2nd Army Corps, commanded by lieutenant general Guy Simonds, had launched the attack and immediately encountered fierce German resistance. The mission of the Belgian SAS Regiment was to operate in a reconnaissance and attack role in support of the Canadian 4th Armoured Division. The Germans heavily defended the most important bridges over the numerous canals, but the Allied operations went according to plan. Colonel Rothschild, operations officer of the Canadian 2nd Army Corps, received Blondest on 4 April and explained the Allied advance in detail. From the moment a breach was made, the Belgian regiment would be



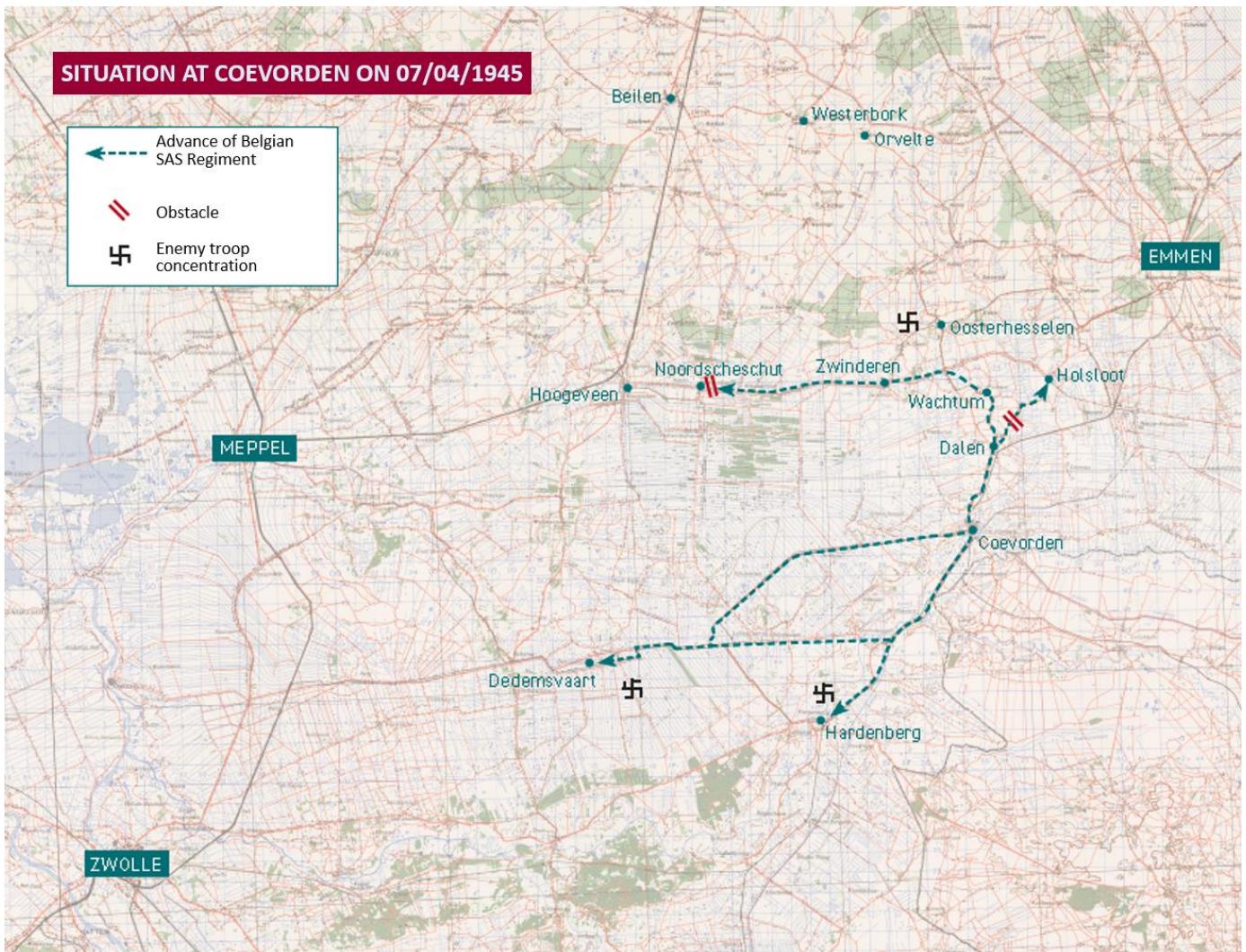
deployed. The rest of the regiment arrived on 5 April. On 6 April, the Belgians in Huise-Zelle were busy with the maintenance of their weapons and vehicles. Their vehicle park received a three-ton truck and two armoured light trucks with a load carrying capacity of 750 kg. The Canadian 2nd Army Corps ordered the Belgian regiment to start operations on 7 April at 9 a.m. The regiment had to hold Coevorden, to protect the left flank of the 4th Armoured Division and the right flank of the 2nd Infantry Division.

8.3.1. The operations in Coevorden

Saturday 7 April 1945

The unit moved north to Coevorden and relieved a Canadian battalion. The front line lay along the Hardenberg-Coevorden canal, in an arc around the village, five hundred meters from the last houses, before turning to the east. The enemy was therefore in front, to the left, right, and perhaps even behind the unit, if he seized the lock at Hardenberg. Vague indications were obtained that a German attack might be possible. Aware of the fact that a three hundred and thirty-man force had to defend a broad front, the Canadians left an anti-tank battery and a tank squadron in Hardenberg in support of the Belgians. The SAS Regiment took up defensive positions in the north, west and southwest of the city, and began carrying out the first patrols to Hardenberg and Zwolle, where retreating Germans were already being intercepted. After taking part as a crew member of Romnée's jeep in the Ardennes Offensive, where he had regained his sergeant's chevrons because of his courage and his competence, staff sergeant Charles Vlijt, became commander of the 'B' Squadron jeep troop. He was ordered to patrol north of Coevorden. Early in the morning, three Germans manning a machine gun between Dalen and Holsloot were surprised by the arrival of the Belgian patrol. Carefully, a white flag was displayed above their foxhole, from where they finally emerged with arms raised. They immediately answered all questions and one of them pointed towards the farm where their section commander was staying. Vlijt went to the farm and found a German who was warming himself next to a stove. Seeing a maroon beret, he widely opened his eyes, slapped his heels together, and froze. The SAS non-commissioned officer went into the kitchen and offered a cigarette to the German, who showed him the shed where his men slept. The SAS team then entered the barn and Vlijt went up the ladder to the hayloft, his gun in his hand, and found six Germans sleeping. "*Get up! Hands up!*" An indescribable, non-violent reaction followed and the prisoners descended the ladder one by one, and were put in the jeeps to return to the staff, where the prisoners were handed over to the intelligence section. Afterwards, the 'Lucky' section conducted the reconnaissance to Noordscheschut, following the north side of the canal from Holsloot to Hoogeveen. They found no trace of the Germans, but observed that the bridge had

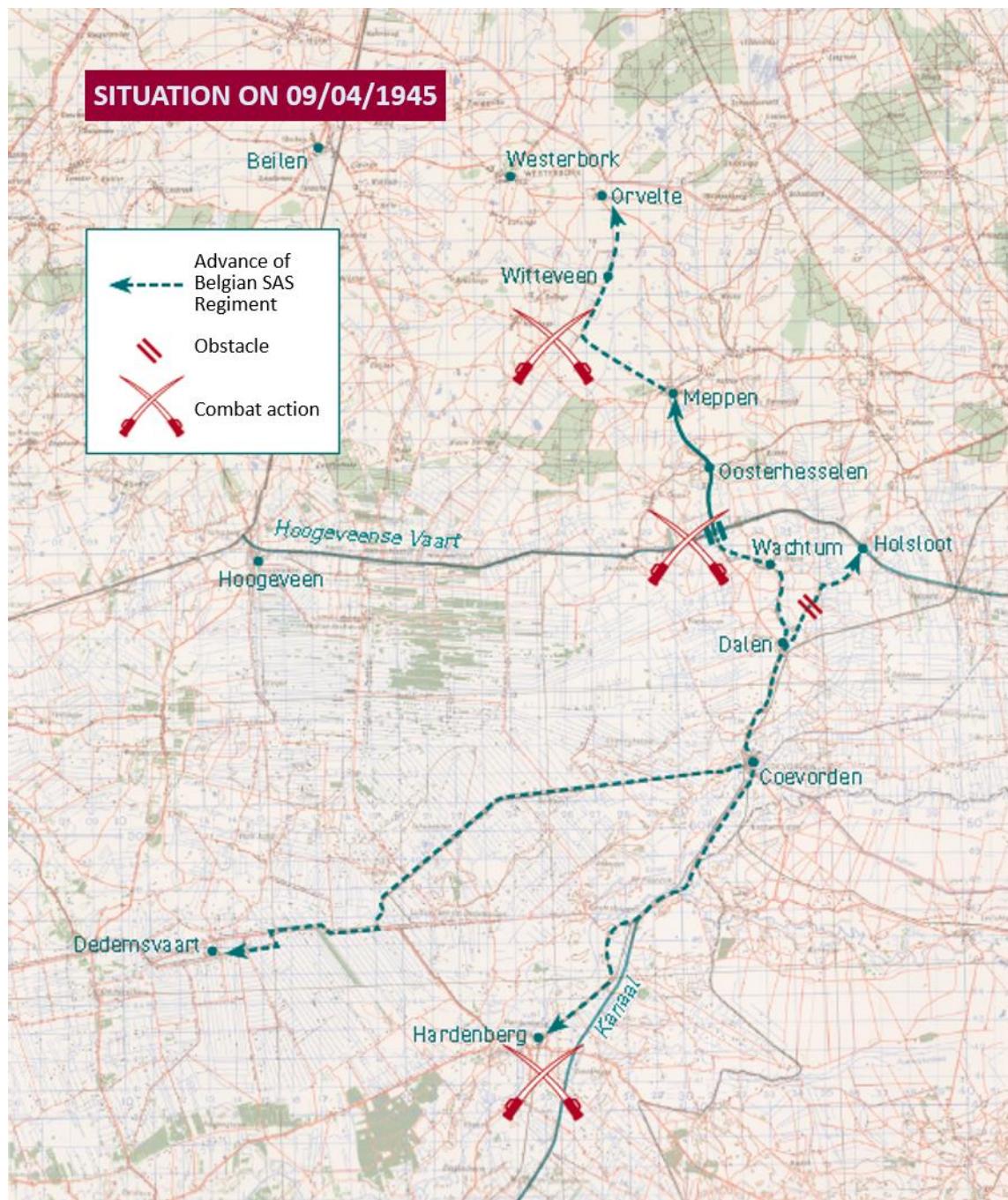
been destroyed just before Noordscheseschut. Upon their return, they noticed a water tower that could be a good lookout position. However, the patrol was stopped by a cart loaded with branches that blocked the road. Vlijt carefully removed the branches one by one and under the last branch he discovered German hand grenades, which he carefully rendered harmless, under the watchful eye of Ghys. After reporting around 12 a.m., the non-commissioned officer immediately left for Holsloot. The Germans blocked the road with abatis, a bus and a heavy truck, which they had booby-trapped. The SAS men made a detour through the fields and discovered that the Holsloot bridge had been destroyed. With a burst from their Vickers machine guns, they pushed the Germans back so that they could continue their progress towards Zwinderen. On the way back, they were again forced to disperse retreating Germans. After transferring his information and giving the men time to eat, Vlijt again went on patrol. He signalled the regrouping of SS troops and soldiers from another unit in a forest about 5 kilometres west of Wachtum. He received orders to disperse the enemy with the support of a 3 inch mortar section. A representative of the resistance informed the intelligence section that German stragglers were retreating to Zwolle, to strengthen the defences of the city. At 8 p.m., the Dutch resistance fighters from Hardenberg asked for help. The Germans tried to cross the Vecht River. Lieutenant d'Oultremont and his section were sent as reinforcements. On the night from 7 to 8 April, various airborne insertions were carried out by the SAS brigade. Six hundred and ninety-six French SAS troops were parachuted in nineteen different areas in the province of Drenthe, with the aim of preventing important bridges from being destroyed, as well as harassing the enemy rear area. The operation carried the name 'Amherst'. Four British SAS sections were also dropped in north-eastern Holland; their operation was called 'Keystone'. Operations 'Larkswood', 'Amherst' and 'Keystone' provided the contribution of the SAS Brigade to the operations of the 2nd Army Corps.



Sunday 8 April 1945

After a relatively calm night, new patrols were task organised and six jeeps left for Hardenberg. On the same day, the Belgians were instructed to provide assistance to eleven French SAS operators who had accidentally been dropped in the Dedemsvaart, some ten kilometres west of Hardenberg. Four jeeps and a light truck left immediately. When the Belgians arrived at the scene, they found that the French no longer needed help, except to move an injured person. The doctor and the stretcher-bearers who accompanied the patrol took care of the wounded sergeant, who was taken to Coevorden. Another patrol, commanded by Krolkowski, proceeded cautiously towards the Oosterhesselen bridge. Along the way, they searched a number of houses at the crossroads in the village of Wachtkum, where the Belgians discovered abandoned German equipment. Just when the Belgians observed the objective, they were suddenly shot at from the bridge and returned the enemy fire. Since they had no radio communications, one of the four jeeps was sent back to report, obtain further instructions and bring reinforcements. Twenty minutes later, sergeant M. Devulder returned with orders to fall back to Dalen. Krolkowski's jeep, was fired upon by an enemy machine gun, as well as by a 20 mm cannon. He tried to locate the enemy, but heavy smoke

obscured his view. After a firefight of more than two hours, Krolikowski gave the order to withdraw, jeep by jeep, under mutual support. Around 2.30 p.m., the jeeps had broken contact with the Germans. Based on Krolikowski's report, a mortar section was sent out to harass the enemy position between the bridge and the village of Oosterhesselen. Blondeel also received orders that his unit was being attached to the Polish 1st Armoured Division, and around 4 p.m., a colonel from one of the Polish tank regiments contacted him. He was very interested in the bridge of Oosterhesselen, which should enable him to cross the canal with his tanks. He asked the Belgians to carry out a reconnaissance of the bridge and, if possible, to seize it.



8.3.2. The seizure of the Oosterhesselen bridge

Monday 9 April 1945

The seizure of the bridge implied that the assaulting units, if they wanted to avoid any surprise on their left flank, had to send out a patrol to Dedemsvaart, which was done on 8 April at 8 a.m. Around 10 a.m., Krolikowski, who knew the area well, went to the bridge of Oosterhesselen. He travelled through the woods on the left and right of the road and noticed it was no longer occupied by the Germans. They drove to the farm again, where they had been the day before. Krolikowski then continued on foot with Engelen. Approximately hundred meters from the bridge, Engelen placed the base plate of its 2-inch mortar on the ground. One by one, smoke bombs fell between the bridge and the farm, developing a white smokescreen. Covered by the smokescreen, the jeeps drove to the farm, where the two men joined the jeeps. Only a few isolated gunshots from enemy snipers followed, but they were hindered by the smokescreen. The section received orders to stay in position and to wait for reinforcements. Krolikowski located three enemy positions, which he engaged with mortar fire. At 6 p.m., six Polish tracked vehicles arrived as reinforcements, and attacked the enemy with flanking manoeuvres for two hours. At 6.15 p.m., the dismounted section of Krolikowski attacked the bridge, supported by machine gun fire, and seized it intact. He then established a defensive perimeter around the bridge. Radino obtained information from the local resistance about the poor condition of the bridge. To prevent a possible collapse under the weight of the 30-tonne Sherman tanks, it was decided to use tram rails from a nearby depot as extra reinforcement. The men of the assault engineer troop retrieved the rails and brought them to the bridge. At 9.30 p.m., the first Polish Sherman tank drove over the reinforced bridge. The first wartime task of the assault engineer troop was carried out in record time. In the meantime, a French SAS detachment got into trouble after having been spotted in a forest near Witteveen. Three jeeps and a motorcyclist under the command of Thonard managed to reach them. The French did not need help, although they had three dead and one missing. On the way back, just before Meppen, the patrol collided with Germans, who opened fire. Becquet was hit, and a jeep and the motorcycle were destroyed. At 10 p.m., the patrol reached Oosterhesselen, where it was received by the Krolikowski section. Upon arrival in Coevorden, the doctor noted that Becquet's hand was pierced by a machine gun bullet. The injury ended the career of the pianist, first prize laureate at the conservatory. That night, the farms, located in front of the bridgehead of Oosterhesselen were on fire. During darkness, a group of soldiers suddenly emerged from the rear. After a number of warnings, the Belgians found out that it were Polish troops. The same day, sergeant H. de Müelenaere drove a truck to Hardenberg, along with his second-in-command,

Michel van Strydonck, machine gunners Jacques De Cooman, Hubert de Bergeyck, Stan Cock and Etienne Polain and riflemen Georges Buysse, Jacques Denys, Lambert Salaets and Alfons Meerpoel. Although the Germans had a wide field of fire along the canal, the movement went without any incidents, after which the section took a position at the extreme point of the friendly troops, around the lock-keeper's house. The weapons came into action shortly after, when they fired at the retreating Germans on the other side of the canal. The next day at dawn, in a thick fog, the section carried out a patrol on the opposite bank, to clear the way between the lock and Hardenberg. During the afternoon, it was still engaging retreating Germans, after which it was relieved by Poles and moved back to Coevorden.

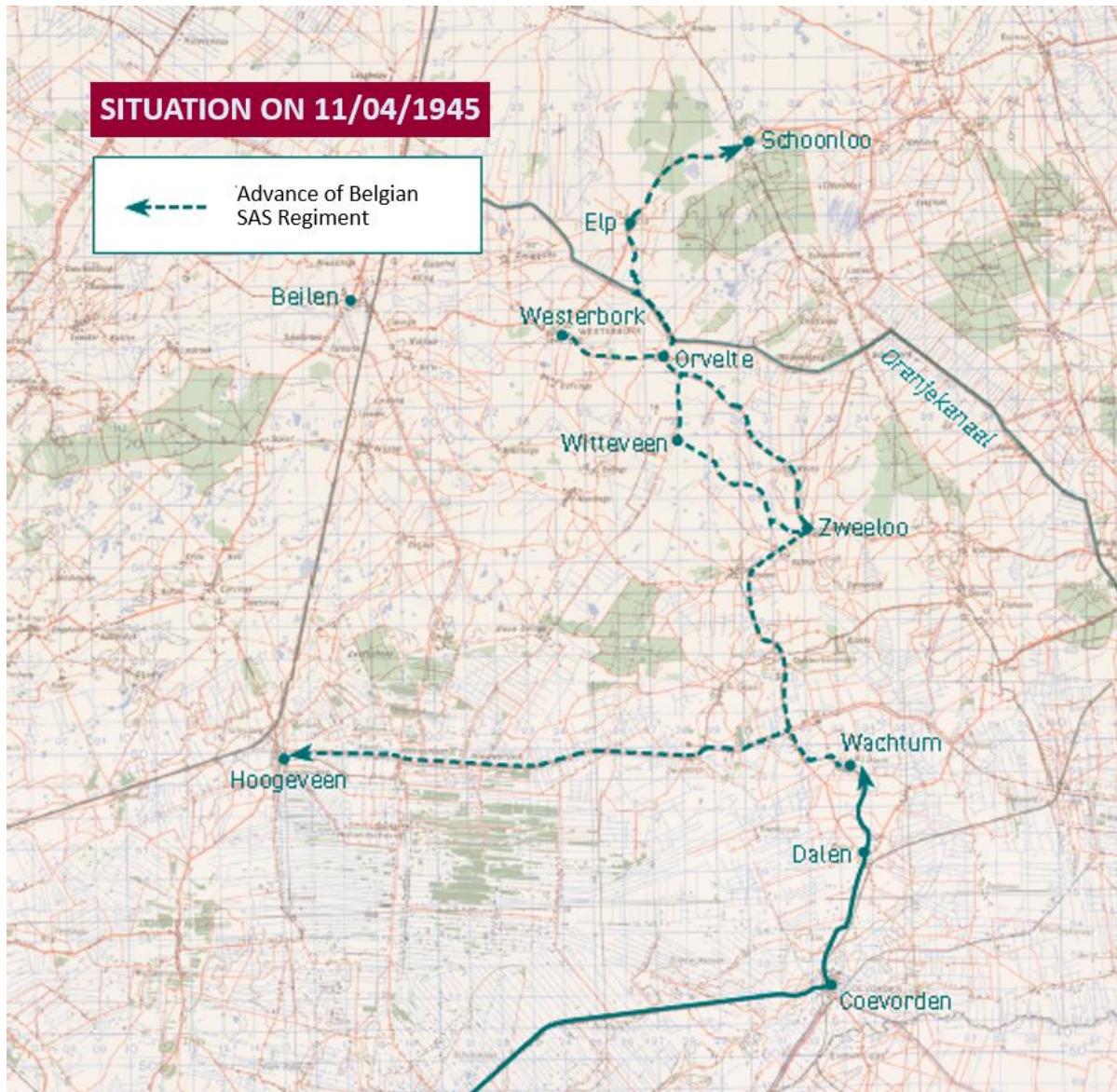
Tuesday 10 April 1945

'A' Squadron, which still operated from Coevorden, sent patrols in a westerly direction to Steenwijksmoer. Despite the operations of the past days, German prisoners of war were still being made. 'B' Squadron rested and kept an eye on the Polish division that was crossing the Oosterhesselen bridge. The tank regiment had to stop just before Emmen due to a destroyed bridge. Dramatic events took place elsewhere. In the prison of Zwolle, 50 kilometres west of Coevorden, SS men deliberated the fate of their prisoners. After some discussion and after excessive alcohol abuse, a 'consensus' was reached to release some prisoners, for others to remain in prison, and for a third group to be shot. Telephone calls were made to the detachment charged with counter-espionage and then asked for permission to carry out the planned executions. After a courier provided written authorisation, ten prisoners were lined up with their backs to the IJssel River; an execution platoon of twenty men was waiting in front of them. The moment the execution order sounded, one of the prisoners, the Belgian Lamarche, dropped into the water and managed to escape. The lifeless bodies of the nine others fell into the water. Among the victims was the 'Brit' Henderson, also known as Raymond Holvoet of the Belgian SAS. Holvoet's body remained stuck on the banks of the IJssel and was caught on 25 April 1945 in Wilsum and temporarily buried. On 18 October 1947, his remains would be buried again in his hometown of Kortrijk. Blondeel received the news of Holvoet's death from a Dutch resistance fighter, in the morning of 11 April. On 15 June 1945, Holvoet was mentioned in dispatches.

Wednesday 11 April 1945

The 'A' Squadron of captain Van der Heyden was charged with the task of checking whether or not Hoogeveen was occupied by the enemy. Several patrols confirmed that the enemy had left the village, but there were still Germans in the vicinity. A patrol was waiting on the market square of Coevorden to evacuate wounded from the French SAS. Commanded by Thonard, the patrol consisted of his own section,

the jeep section of second lieutenant d'Oultremont, two sections of the assault troop, a detachment from the assault engineer troop, medical officer lieutenant Dr. Sevens, and the regimental chaplain. Via Zweeloo and Witteveen, the patrol reached the Orvelte factory where French SAS troops were located. Other Frenchmen were in Elp. To reach Elp, however, the Orange Canal had to be crossed, but the bridge over the canal was destroyed. The director of the factory suggested to use the abandoned barges along the canal. The pioneers set to work and soon the jeeps arrived in Elp, where two French non-commissioned officers informed them that their officer was engaged in fierce fighting farther down the Schoonloo forest. Half a jeep section went their help. After assisting the French to push back the enemy, the Belgians returned with two prisoners. The patrol finally returned to Coevorden at 8.15 p.m. with the wounded French and ten prisoners of war. Westerbork, Orvelte and Elp were liberated and the nearest enemy defence positions were now in Beilen.



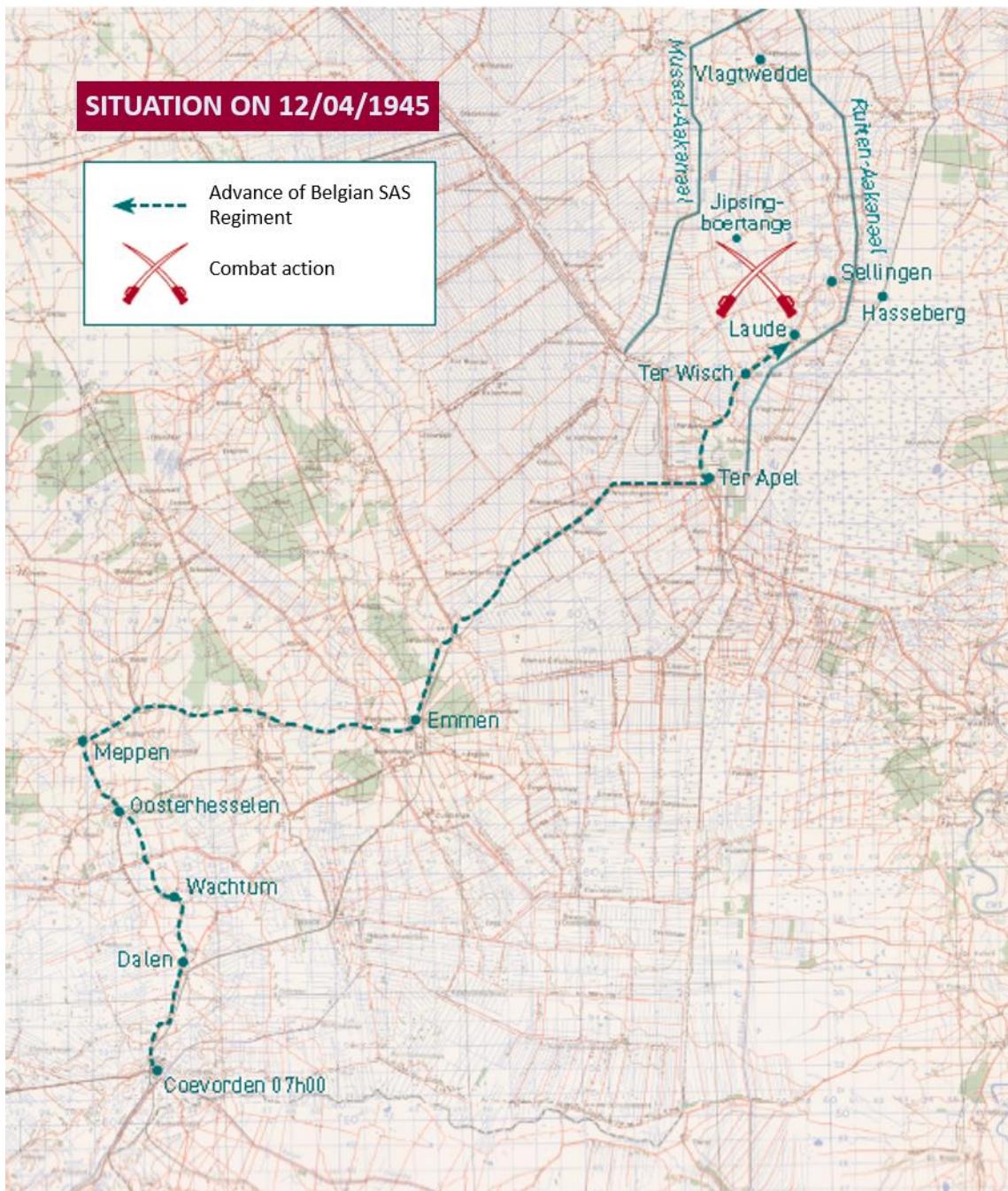
8.3.3. The liberation of Hoogeveen

In their fast jeeps, the Belgians penetrated far behind the German lines, where they evacuated wounded from the French SAS, among others. In the vicinity of Coevorden they seized a bridge over the Hoogeveense Vaart and liberated a number of villages. Yet in Hoogeveen there was also the belief that the Canadians liberated the village, which is mainly due to the Hoogeveensche Courant, a local newspaper. The misunderstanding first appeared on 16 April. The editors described everything as if they had experienced it from the office on Hoofdstraat in Hoogeveen and could not rely on other sources. Rectifying proved to be a difficult matter at a time that facts were not always easy to be distinguished from rumours. The liberation was believed to be on 11 April and the Canadians were honoured, although the Belgians had been there a day earlier. The information from this first newspaper report was reprinted several times in the following years. Many kept these 'valuable' articles which explains the misgivings about the liberation. When the first Hoogeveensche Courant appeared, the Belgians had already left. The Belgian liberators of Hoogeveen had also difficulty getting any recognition after the war. On 10 May 1945, the municipal administration was no longer aware of the liberation activities of the Belgian SAS. Blondeel's report on 11 April was clear: "*A. Squadron: Patrols towards Hoogeveen, which is reported clear of enemy.*" If jeeps from 'A' Squadron went to Hoogeveen on the morning of 11 April, it were certainly those of Romnée who freed Hoogeveen. From 11 April, numerous units of the Canadian 1st Army entered Hoogeveen. The Canadian presence seemed so overwhelming that no one thought about the Belgians. During the unveiling of the memorial in Hollandscheveld in 1995, some Belgian veterans were addressed by a Hoogeveen official, but they were not welcome during the official commemorations of the municipality of Hoogeveen. To their astonishment, they did not fit into the program. The municipality of Hoogeveen honoured the Canadians with a Canadian choir. Real recognition failed to materialize until 2013, when mayor Karel Loohuis and former Belgian SAS operator Jaak Daemen unveiled a plaque on the Raadhuisplein in Hoogeveen, to commemorate the liberation of the municipality on 10 and 11 April 1945. The event was recorded on film by local artist-historian Albert Metselaar.

8.3.4. Objective north, towards the sea

Thursday 12 April 1945

In order to cut off the retreat of the encircled German troops in the west of the Netherlands, the Canadian 2nd Army Corps continued its advance farther north. The Belgian SAS Regiment moved towards Emmen, then to Ter Apel and along the German border to Winschoten, to the Dollard estuary, on the border between the Netherlands and Germany. If the Allies succeeded in reaching Dollard, they could completely seal off the western part of the Netherlands. The unit left Coevorden at 7 a.m. and arrived in Ter Wisch at 10.30 a.m., then proceeded further north to the sea. The Polish division also moved further north on its left flank, via the road from Zandberg to Onstwedde. The staff moved to Laude, a small village between Ter Apel and Sellingen. From this location, the section of d'Oultremont progressed to



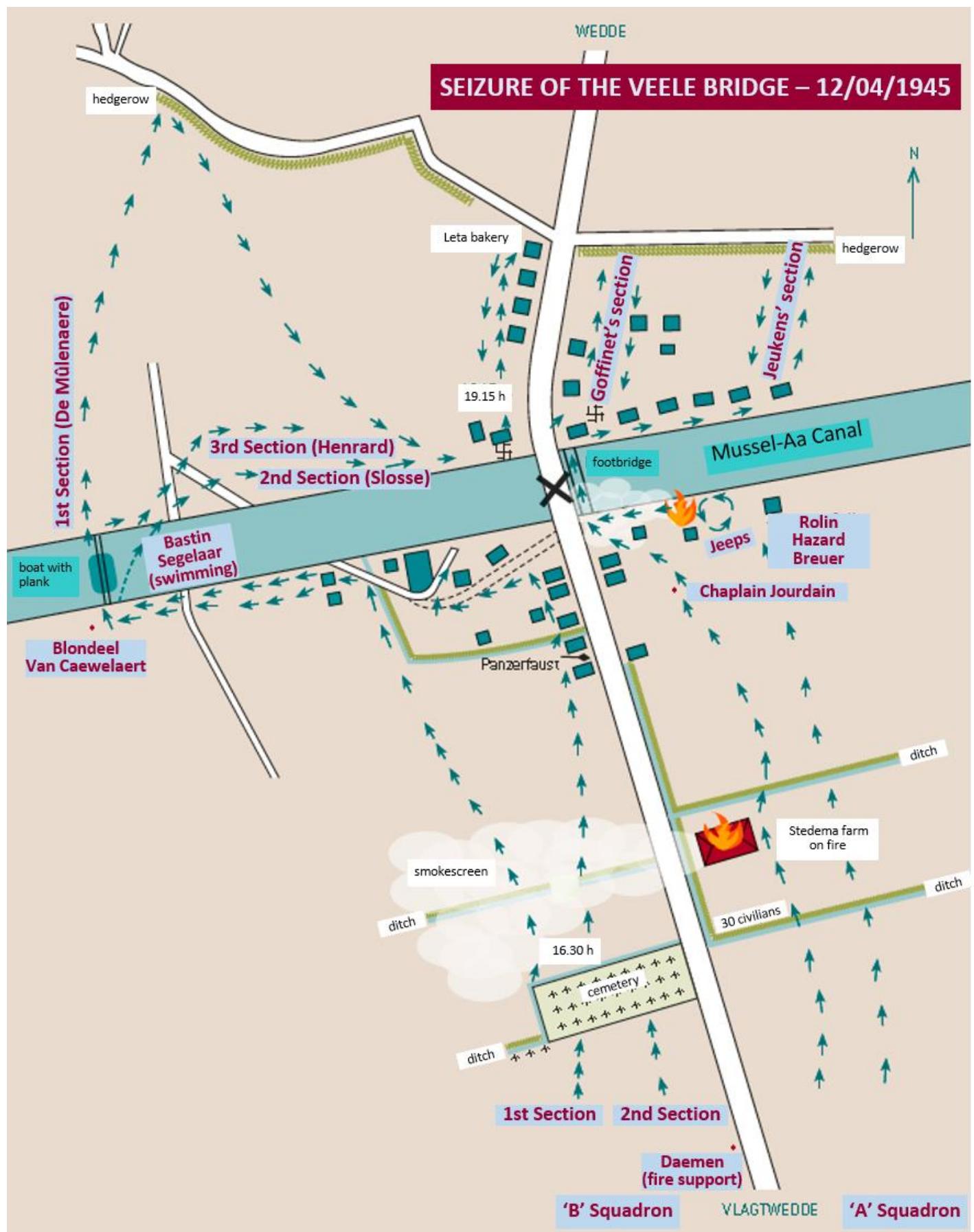
Sellingen, in the direction of Vlagtwedde. A kilometre to the west, Romnée advanced along a parallel road. Schils and the mortars were ready to support them. The section of Dom was kept in reserve. Further west, on the left flank, Lieutenant Van Cauwelaert's squadron patrolled the east bank of the Mussel Canal. Radino and Levaux, sent out to conduct a reconnaissance, entered Sellingen and captured seventeen Germans. Around 2 p.m., citizens informed them that the Germans were approaching from Hasseberg. In Jipsingboertange, a Dutch SS camp was encountered and subdued without too much trouble; one SS soldier was killed and eleven men were captured. The mortars of Déom detected an enemy observation post for anti-tank guns and destroyed it, after which the anti-tank guns withdrew. Sellingen, however, remained threatened. The assault sections of Tinchant and Goffinet were sent as reinforcements and took positions along the Ruitenkanaal. Because of the decisiveness of the Belgians, the Germans would ultimately not attack Sellingen, but withdraw. The SAS assault sections continued their advance north; their new objective was Vlagtwedde. The Déom section attacked the enemy at a crossroad near Vlagtwedde, after which it took the village, together with the assault troop of 'A' Squadron. The Goffinet section missed the road they had to take to get into Vlagtwedde, stumbled upon a column of retreating Germans near the Bridge of Veele and took three prisoners. Goffinet was ordered to withdraw to Vlagtwedde. The liberation of Vlagtwedde by the jeep section of Déom and the assault troop of 'A' Squadron allowed the regiment to come to a halt for a few moments. Blondeel conducted a reconnaissance from Vlagtwedde. Up to the lock at Veele, no serious obstacles were found. The Vijf patrols found out that the destroyed bridge of Veele was defended by a few snipers and at least one machine gun. They also found that Smeerling's bridge was apparently not defended in the west, but that behind the raised bridge deck, the bridge seemed to be virtually destroyed.

8.3.5. The seizure of the bridge over the Mussel canal at Veele

After receiving orders from the Polish brigade commander, which stated that the Belgian SAS would force a passage over the canal immediately, Blondeel briefed his attack plan to his squadron commanders: "...to push the enemy back to the canal; using heavy fire from the jeeps to force the enemy to remain in place; cross the canal by swimming and immediately clear a passage for the troops; along the avenue of approach Vlagtwedde-Veele, clear the left-hand side with 'B' Squadron and clear the right-hand side with 'A' Squadron, in order to take positions on the southern side of the canal...". Blondeel hoped that his men would find one or two barges, that they could crush the enemy and set up a defensive position north of the bridge before midnight, so that the assault engineer troop could build a bridge under their

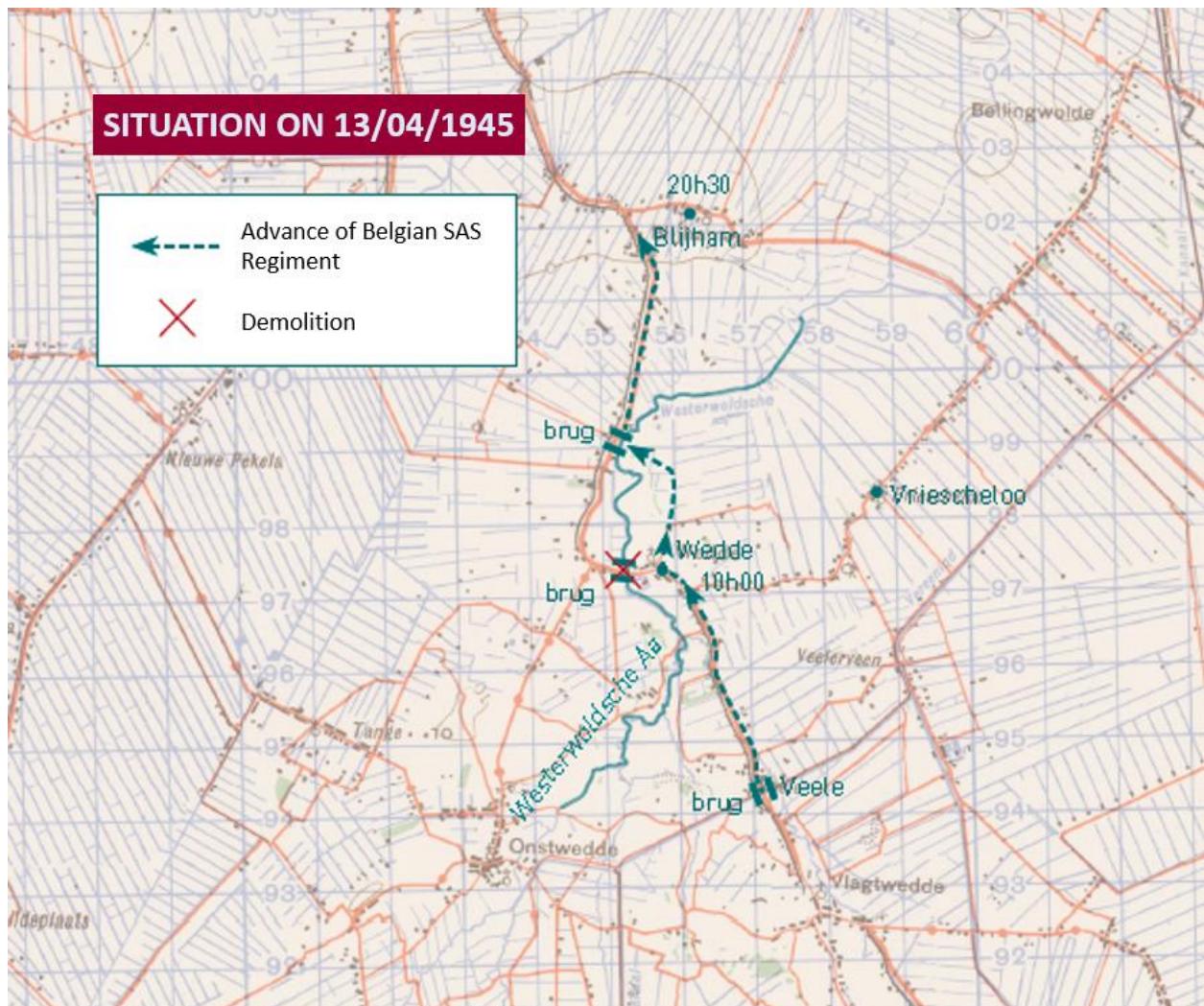
protection, allowing the jeeps to cross the canal before dawn. The assault sections consisted of numerous young volunteers. For most of them, it would be their baptism of fire. In the meantime, it had also become clear that elements of the German Navy were defending the bridge in Veele. The 1st section (under sergeant de Müelenaere), and the 2nd section (under sergeant Adelin Slosse) of 'B' Squadron's assault troop advanced on the left flank and first had to clear the cemetery. The position from which 'A' Squadron was to launch the attack did not provide any protection against enemy fire from the canal, and contained broad, water-filled canals. In addition, some thirty civilians were hiding in this area. The cemetery was cleared by 'B' Squadron, killing four Germans, after which the rest fled. The two sections regrouped to the north of the cemetery and prepared to move quickly to the canal. Trooper J. De Cooman was wounded on the upper lip by a deflected bullet, but would join his section again on the next day. The Germans fired without stopping, but the mortars and machine guns that were set up in firebases returned heavy fire against the enemy positions on the canal. The two sections still had to cross 700 m, eventually reached the south bank and then started a heavy volume of fire towards the other side of the canal. They then followed the bank in a westerly direction, where they met Blondeel, Van Cauwelaert and a section of 'B' Squadron. Two volunteers were asked to pick up a small boat on the other bank. Jean Bastin and Andy Segelaer doffed their equipment and jumped into the water. Shortly afterwards, a barge was pulled across the canal. The 2nd section was ordered to attack the Germans in the vicinity of the bridge. The 1st and 3rd sections crossed with the small boat and continued their advance. The men of the Müelenaere section moved in the direction of a secondary road in the north, until they reached a hedge. German prisoners and wounded were brought back by the small boat. Goffinet and some men from 'A' Squadron noticed a few men who moved through the ruins of the bridge and entered a nearby house. Daemen, Hendrikx and Broothaerts reached the last house, a bakery. The area between the canal and the secondary road was cleared and the enemy withdrew. Barette came to warn the men that they had to withdraw, to allow a defensive position to be set up for the night. To the right of the Vlagtwedde-Veele road, 'A' Squadron's assault troop also reached the bank of the canal and occupied the houses whose occupants had fled into the cellars. To the side of the destroyed bridge, Goffinet had established a foothold at the footbridge of the lock, which he used to cross the canal. However, a smokescreen was laid down by the Germans, who tried to maintain a firm grip on this narrow passage, so that Goffinet's attack was stopped. The sections of sergeant Philippe Rolin and of Tinchant answered the enemy fire. Rolin was hit in the head and stomach. Etienne Hazard, who came to help him, was wounded in the chest. Adrien Philippe fired without stopping until the barrel of his Bren turned glowing red. Jean Breuer,

who was lying by his side, to refill the machine gun magazines, was badly injured in the chest, abdomen and arm. In the meantime, Marco Guelton took care of the seriously wounded Rolin. Levaux returned to fetch stretchers to evacuate the wounded under cover of a smokescreen. The jeeps came to provide fire support, to compensate for the reduced volume of fire due to the losses. They took positions at the burning farmhouse where Rolin was wounded and their crews worked in turn: while a number of jeeps provided fire support, the crews of the other jeeps behind cover refilled the magazines with ammunition and then replaced the first jeeps with their vehicles, who in turn got resupplied. Guided by Romnée, Hambursin located the enemy who had fatally wounded Rolin. With a few bursts, the Germans were shot out of the poplars in which they had been hiding. Goffinet asked and was again allowed to re-launch the attack on the bridge. In the meantime, he was protected by a section of 'B' Squadron that was on the other side of the canal. This time he crossed the canal, entered the house at the corner and made eleven prisoners. The section of sergeant A. Jeukens followed, crossed the canal, followed the bank to the east and, once past the last house, continued north, parallel to the Veele-Wedde road. Two Bren gunners were wounded during this attack. The helmet of Rene Ligot was hit by a bullet, which caused an ugly wound to his scalp. Shrapnel caused an open arm fracture to Odilon Fagnard. The assault troop of 'A' Squadron continued its advance towards Wedde. The troop searched every house and made twenty-five prisoners, until stopped at an intersection by enemy machine-gun fire. Goffinet responded to the enemy fire and requested mortar support. At nightfall, Blondeel ordered the bridge's perimeter to be reduced in order to build a better defence. At night, the pioneers started the construction of a bridge. Together with all the men from 'A' Squadron who were not on guard duty and with the help of the local population they worked all night long. At 6 a.m., the bridge was ready; a small sign presented its name: 'Rolin Bridge'. The operation had taken a heavy toll: Rolin, Hazard and Breuer were to die shortly afterwards and several others were injured.



Friday 13 April 1945

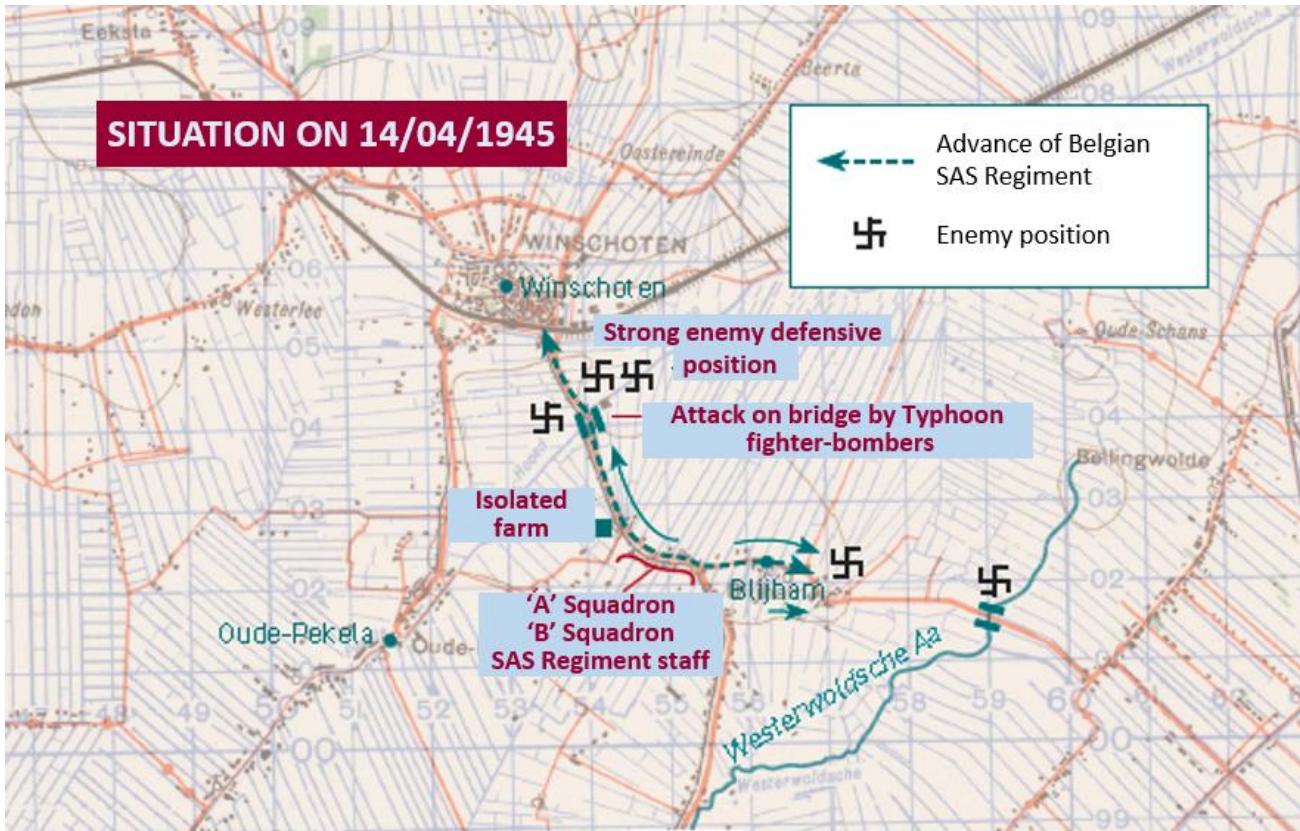
At dawn, the traces of the fighting over the Veele bridge were clearly visible: blackened ruins, rising smoke from the houses and the corpses of German soldiers along the canal bank. Blondeel ordered Padre Jourdain to go to the trenches and the destroyed houses to bury any remaining corpses. At a certain moment, the chaplain stood face to face with a German who started to pull his gun, but changed his mind and surrendered. The first and last time that the chaplain would bring back a prisoner to the staff. The unit had to leave Veele, to urgently advance to the bridge of Wedde. The 1st and 2nd sections of 'A' Squadron, reinforced with Déom's jeeps, drove along the Veele-Wedde road and cleared the houses on their way. At the entrance to Wedde, a part of the unit lined up in a circular defensive position, while the first elements entered the village without encountering any enemy resistance. The assault troop of 'A' Squadron occupied the location. Then the armoured jeeps advanced. The section of Vijt, followed by that of Déom, had to reconnoitre the road to Blijham, especially the two bridges that spanned the Westerwoldse Aa at the exit of the village. It turned out that the westernmost bridge was demolished. The second, along the main road, was only partially destroyed. Jeeps and trucks could effortlessly cross the small watercourse. The



bridge of Wedde came into view, where a German non-commissioned officer surrendered, not with his arms raised, but full of bottles to distribute to the Belgians. A little further, two German soldiers rode to their guard post by bike, straight into the position of the Belgians. Vlijt then drove on to the bridge, crossed it, but immediately fell under heavy machine gun and cannon fire, and drove backwards. Déom's jeep came to the scene, but Vlijt signalled him to stop. However, he drove on until his vehicle was hit by two grenades. One pierced the windshield, the other damaged the mount of the Vickers machine guns. The driver, Thévissen, was hit in the right eye by a splinter; the back gunner, Boch, was badly wounded. Déom got out of the jeep to raise his weapon, but was hit in the knee by shrapnel. Vlijt – now dismounted – crossed the bridge again and brought Déom to a safe location. d'Oultremont took the place of Déom, while Vlijt attacked the enemy, supported by mortars, who bombarded the artillery positions along the Wedde-Blijham road. Around 10 o'clock, a dull hum could be heard in the west; Polish tanks that had advanced to the left of the SAS, arrived just at the right time. The Germans withdrew. The Belgians were able to continue their advance, and were responsible for securing the right flank of the Poles, until they reached Blijham. At 8 p.m., Krolkowski's section and two sections of the 'B' Squadron assault troop relieved the Polish battalion at the intersection between Blijham and the Winschoten bridge. When night fell, the rest of the regiment took a defensive position in Blijham.

Saturday 14 April 1945

The night went uneasily due to the firing of tracers; in the morning, the men from the 'B' Squadron assault troop were relieved. From 7.30 a.m., patrols were conducted in the Blijham area. Tinchant's section took a defensive position at the crossroads east of Blijham, to cover Romnée's jeep section, who carried out patrols within a two-kilometre radius. Contact was made with forty Germans trying to reach the main body of their troops in Winschoten. A fight started. Due to the intensity of the SAS fire, the enemy stopped shooting after fifteen minutes and withdrew in the direction of Vriescheloo at 11.30 a.m.; the Germans left five dead, five wounded and two prisoners. The Vlijt section attacked six Germans who moved by bicycle. Two of them were taken prisoner. During the search, one of them tried to draw his handgun, but was shot immediately. For an hour and a half, the 'B' Squadron assault troop was exposed to heavy fire from mortars and artillery. Fortunately, several mortar bombs did not explode, but Vlijt, Kamiel Coetsier and Georges Cruyt were injured and showed signs of post-traumatic stress. Meanwhile, Blondeel prepared for further actions. With his staff, he studied aerial photographs, which revealed enemy defensive positions in front of Winschoten. This was confirmed by the grenades and shells that landed on the Belgian



positions. Brigadier J.M. Calvert, commander of the SAS brigade, joined Blondeel to conduct a reconnaissance. This revealed that the only avenue of approach to Winschoten was a straight road, which was under constant enemy fire and did not provide any cover. The brigadier suggested requesting air support. Blondeel decided to make optimal use of its psychological effect. Sergeant Vijt volunteered

to conduct a patrol. The air support, as well as the patrol, were scheduled at 4 p.m., but the Typhoons would strike the enemy positions with rockets only around 6 p.m. The men of the assault sections, who until recently were still under enemy shelling, enthusiastically witnessed the actions of the pilots. The four jeeps of the Vijt section were ready to leave, their engines running. The Belgian mortars came into action and laid down a smokescreen. The jeeps started to move, left for the bridge and fell under heavy enemy fire, which was answered with all their machine guns. They advanced further and pushed the enemy back over the bridge. Two jeeps were put out of order and eventually the section had to stop



Typhoons provide fire support – sketch by M. Guelton (Collection M. Guelton)

and withdraw due to the heavy enemy opposition. The squadrons then positioned themselves in defensive positions around Blijham, where they spent the night.

Not only enemy shelling slowed the advance. The section of d'Oultremont came under Allied fire. As Winschoten was being approached, the section advanced further on, but went a little too fast and passed the Poles they were supposed to support. When the Poles saw the section appear ahead of them, they mistakenly concluded that they were dealing with the enemy and fired with their flamethrower tanks. The SAS men were about to be burned when warrant officer Vlijt displayed large marker panels to identify themselves, upon which the Poles recognized their mistake and immediately ceased fire. Through the interrogation of prisoners of war, the enemy was identified: they were part of the newly arrived 351nd and 359th naval fortress battalions. Throughout the day, three of the regiment's personnel had been wounded: trooper Vlijt was wounded on the left foot, Coetsier was wounded after an impact that penetrated his helmet and Cruyt was injured on the knee by falling bricks.



The liberation of Winschoten; to the left (with glasses) Henk Hoogerduijn Strating (Collection F. Van Haezendonck)



Winschoten, April 2019: Fred Van Haezendonck, Raymond Holvoet, Henk Hoogerduijn Strating and Marc Vindevogel (Collection Geert G.)

Sunday 15 April 1945

Around 10 a.m., after a night of guard duty in the western sector of Blijham, the men of the 1st section of the 'B' Squadron assault troop realise that the enemy had discreetly left its positions ahead of Winschoten. Ghys drove his jeep through the fields and arrived at the position of the 1st section. They noticed that the bridge

that provided access to the city was slightly damaged. On the bridge, Ghys removed three mines and ordered posting sentries on the bridge. The southern part of the city was an open space where several streets joined. Vlijt ordered the men to move to a house, in order to avoid the danger of indirect fire. The 1st section had to guard a narrow street on the right-hand side. The 2nd section took position in a street in the middle, with a protrusion on the left that provided a perfect position for a Bren. While moving into the narrow street, the men of the 1st section suddenly noticed an SS officer who was observing the area with binoculars. When fire was opened on the German, it was immediately answered by machine gun fire, forcing the Belgians to withdraw. A Bren gun was positioned to cover a wide avenue with flanking fire. The retreating Germans had to cross that avenue as they retreated to the east. Moments later, they rapidly crossed the avenue, but the Bren gun had a malfunction, so the enemy could escape over the bridge with a motorcycle with sidecar, moments before the bridge collapsed. A possible pursuit had to be stopped as a result. Upon examination, it turned out that the collapse was due to loosened support beams. However, the bridge proved easy to repair by the assault engineers, who also searched for mines in the area. Shortly afterwards, an incident due to the incorrect manipulation of a weapon happened. Christian Gouzée, an inexperienced young recruit, was responsible for the security of his colleagues and had to deny any access to the bridge until it was completely cleared from mines. He showed his pistol to a few civilians, when suddenly a shot was fired. A bullet entered his wrist and exited just above the elbow, shattering his upper arm. After reading the report on the injury, prepared by Dr. Sevens, Blondeel almost came to the conclusion that the safety catch of the weapons should always be turned on until they were to be used, but he finally changed his mind. According to him, such a measure could lead to an unacceptable delay in case of surprise, with deadly consequences. However, he insisted on the importance of mastering the safety measures whenever weapons were handled. Another incident happened at the bridge. The pioneers were unexpectedly shot at by Polish tanks. Captain Donnelly, the Canadian officer who was assigned to the Belgian regiment to coordinate radio communications with the British, immediately sent them a message warning them that there were indeed Allied troops on the bridge. While the bridge was being repaired, the patrolling activities continued. A patrol managed to get up to three kilometres north-west of Finsterwolde and two kilometres from the sea.

8.3.6. Blondeel's refusal to attack the Dollard coastal battery

With the help of a map, Klein provided Blondeel with more detailed information about the coastal battery installed in a concrete position that was known as 'Dollard-Süd'. The Dutch plumber from whom he had obtained this information



The Dollard coastal battery
(Collection Beeldbank.nl)

knew the battery very well, because he was part of the team that had carried out the construction works. He explained that the battery was protected by various minefields and machine guns and was regularly supplied by ships coming from Emden. 'A' Squadron was entrusted with the task to move towards the sea, via the Beerta-Finsterwolde road. Three groups were task organised under the command of Van der Heyden: jeeps under the command of Romnée, with an assault element

under the command of Tinchant; jeeps under the command of d'Oultremont, with an assault element commanded by Jeukens; finally jeeps under the command of Crèvecœur, with an assault element under the command of Goffinet. At Beerta, at the border, an enemy rearguard was overtaken. The Germans then took positions at an isolated farm. Supported by the Vickers machine guns on the jeeps of Romnée and Van Broekhuyzen, the assault sections of Tinchant and Jeukens attacked the farm. The enemy fled in disorder, after which the village was quickly cleared by the SAS. Eight Germans were killed, two were wounded and twenty-three were taken prisoner. An ammunition depot was set on fire by the retreating Germans. At 4 p.m., Van der Heyden moved to the intersection to indicate a new axis of advance, when suddenly shells and mortar bombs impacted at the intersection. The captain was hit by shrapnel and an open fracture was sustained on his left arm, but he refused to be evacuated. The Polish liaison officer went to Winschoten to request counter-battery fire. Fearing that the shelling was only a prelude to a German counter-attack from Nieuweschans (on the German side of the border), Romnée ordered the vehicles to spread out and to further organise the defence of the two intersections of the village. The advice he got was to remain in position and only to continue the move towards the sea upon arrival of the tanks. In the absence of reliable information about the strength of the 'Dollard-Süd' coastal battery, a Polish brigadier considered to have it reconnoitred and seized by the Belgian SAS. A Polish lieutenant colonel was sent to Blondeel to explain him the Polish plan. At that time, Blondeel was in the front line with fifteen men, behind a raised bank running parallel to the coast. After hearing the Polish brigadier's plan, Blondeel brought the Polish lieutenant colonel to the exit of a small tunnel under a railway, with a view of the enemy position, and made it clear that an attack proved

impossible and was pure madness. The objective was surrounded by dune pans and there was only one single road, which was covered by heavy artillery and machine gun fire, offering no cover or concealment whatsoever, while the Germans could also receive reinforcements from Emden.

The Pole disagreed with Blondeel's view and tried to minimise the threat. In the discussion that followed, Blondeel turned to Vlijt, one of his most experienced section commanders, and asked him his modest opinion about a possible attack on the coastal battery. Vlijt replied that if the order were given, he would carry it out, but added that he did not see how he could manoeuvre his jeeps through the minefields. It was clear to Blondeel that the 'suicide plan' simply had to be cancelled. But the Pole insisted and even tried to bribe Blondeel, by offering him a basket of champagne bottles if he agreed. Blondeel replied that he did not refuse to execute orders, but opposed every stupid order. He also stated that it was not the task of his reconnaissance unit to assault such a well-defended position and, moreover, that the life of his men was worth more than dozens of baskets of champagne bottles. Blondeel then asked the Pole if, in the end, his aim was in fact to have a headquarters communiqué in the evening or the next morning, announcing that the Poles had reached the sea. The Polish lieutenant colonel confirmed. The issue would ultimately be solved by d'Oultremont. After the liberation of Winschoten, d'Oultremont went to Finsterwolde, where he was ordered to go to the sea in the Bay of the Dollard with a group of Poles. When he arrived at a dyke, the Polish tanks and jeeps had to stop. But according to the orders of the Polish general, the sea had to be reached at all costs. Together with Deprez, d'Oultremont moved towards the beach. After crossing the first dyke, both saw a second dike appear 300 meters further on, and then a third dyke. Under cover of the Deprez's machine gun, d'Oultremont crossed the third dike and quickly covered the last 500 meters to the sea, where he filled his water bottle with salt water, as proof that he had successfully completed his mission. In the evening, d'Oultremont was congratulated by both the Polish general and by Blondeel. According to d'Oultremont, that same evening the Polish general again urged Blondeel to attack the German fortification the next morning. Blondeel, however, continued to refuse to comply with this pointless order. Two days later, two infantry battalions and twenty-four tanks, with support from the air force and the artillery, attacked the battery, but their attack was pushed back...



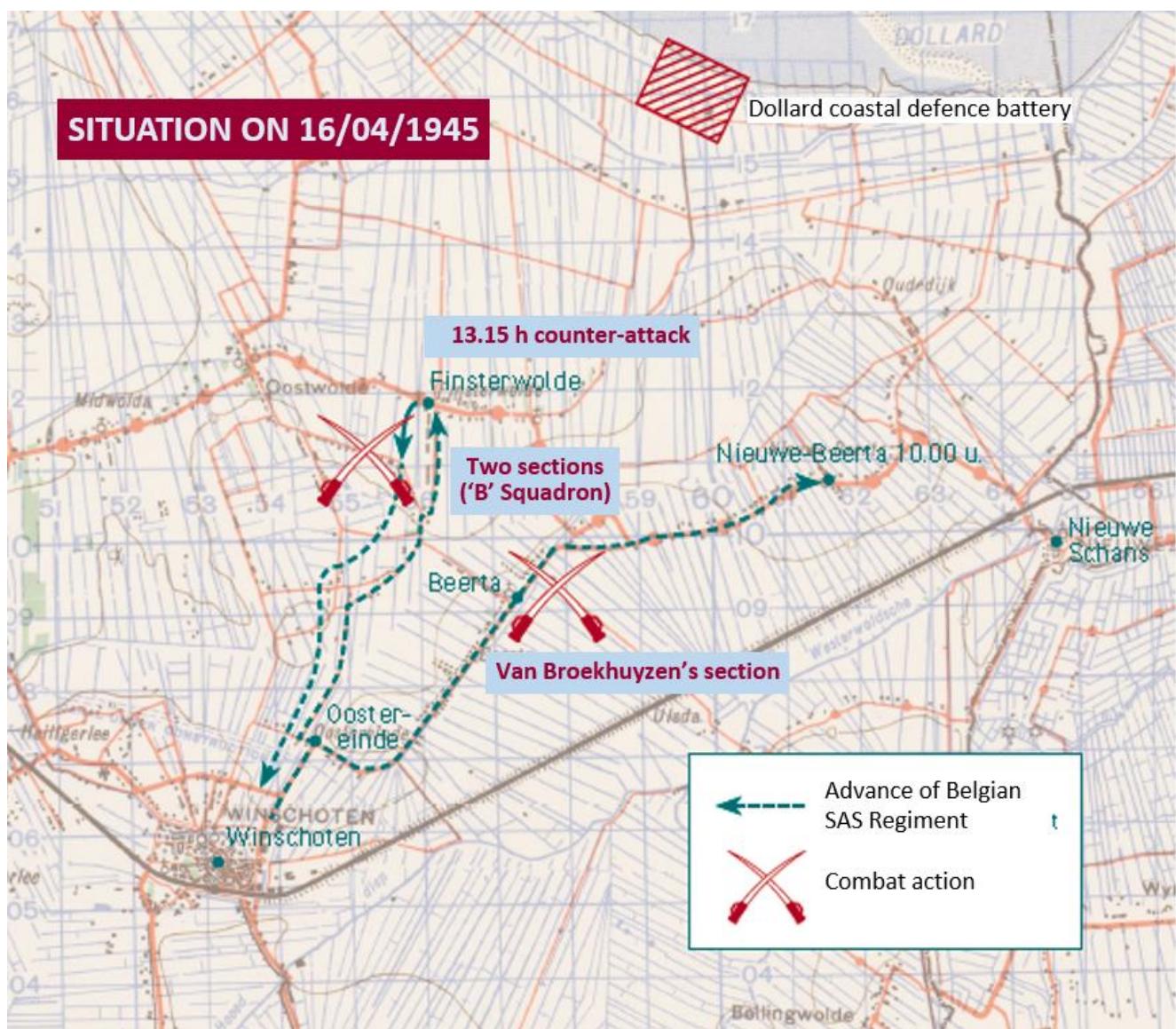
A running d'Oultremont tries to avoid the fire of the 'Dollard' artillery battery - sketch by M. Guelton (Collection J. Daemen)

In the meantime, Beerta was being shelled. While sending a message, radio operator corporal Robert Feremans was hit in the belly by shrapnel. He was evacuated along with Devinez, who was severely hit in the stomach and chest. Devinez would die four days later without knowing that he had been promoted to 2nd lieutenant. Trooper Jules Renkin was also seriously injured, his thigh had been perforated. At 7.30 p.m., Polish tanks arrived, but the Polish commander seemed displeased when he found that the Belgians were still in Beerta. The commander was impatient to reach the coast and demanded that the SAS jeeps took the lead and that the assault troops crawled on the tanks, but Heilporn had orders to stay in position. It was then decided to advance via Finsterwolde via a new route. As second-in-command of Van der Heyden, who had finally been evacuated, Romnée sent Heilporn and his two assault sections, as well as the jeep section of Crèvecœur to the rear. Together with Van Broekhuyzen, he led the tank column to Finsterwolde, where they joined Blondeel. That night, there was great uncertainty among the men of both squadrons who defended the positions at the Finsterwolde intersection. Enemy artillery was still active, and shots were still being fired elsewhere. Sergeant Roger Van De Ginsté went in the direction where the skirmish probably took place. At the outposts, Joseph Wathelet and Bernard were hit by sub-machine gun fire; Wathelet seemed killed, Bernard was still conscious. Van De Ginsté brought the latter to the command post and returned with the doctor and a stretcher-bearer. He suddenly noticed that they were surrounded by the enemy and warned the others to stop. Van De Ginsté moved on alone and crawled to the lifeless body of Wathelet. He tried fruitlessly to drag the corpse behind him. The occupation of Finsterwolde turned out to be precarious as long as the front line was so badly established. The regiment had to remain particularly wary of being shelled by the German artillery battery, which, from dawn, and thanks to its forward observers, could easily engage the regiment. It was decided to withdraw to Oostereinde before dawn. Only a few outposts would remain in a couple of cellars in Finsterwolde.

Monday 16 April 1945

Early in the morning, the houses of Finsterwolde were systematically searched. All the houses turned out to be deserted and no civilians were found. It was assumed that the Germans might have withdrawn from the city at night, so their artillery could fire at will. In order not to be surprised by the enemy, a listening post was installed in the undergrowth between the houses, with a view of the church and a white house. After some time, enemy movement was noticed. The moment the Germans reached the white house, the listening post fired a volley, after which the enemy disappeared. Moments later, Van Cauwelaert came over with a three-ton truck that contained two sections, who attacked the Germans. In the cemetery, the

enemy still tried to fight, but eventually broke contact. The SAS men regrouped at the church when the Lieutenant suddenly ordered them to seek cover in the houses, having recognised the sound of departing artillery shells. However, the enemy artillery fire was short-lived and no one was injured. Later that day, the German artillery still caused casualties among the Belgian SAS. Henri Tondreau was hit in the shoulder by shrapnel and Jeukens was hit at the hip by flying debris. Both received first aid, together with Jos Baert, Christian Van Melle from Dr. Sevens, before being evacuated. The slightest movement carried out by a Belgian section provoked an enemy artillery burst. The Belgians, however, failed to locate a forward observer. After the war, they were told that a Dutch farmer, who was in direct contact with the artillery battery, passed on information about their positions to the Germans. He would eventually be sentenced and put to death by his countrymen. Interestingly, the German coastal battery of the Dollard would never be conquered. Only when the crew learned of the impending fall of the Third Reich, they decided to surrender.



8.4. An assessment

During the campaign in the Netherlands, from 5 to 16 April 1945, a lot of information was collected, enemy positions were identified, bridgeheads were established, bridges were repaired or strengthened, a large number of Germans were captured and eliminated during the fighting, roads were cleared, support was given to the French SAS, and the troops recruited in October 1944 gained important combat experience. But the Belgian SAS Regiment also had to regret the loss of five killed and eleven severely injured.

9. The campaign in Germany

9.1. Westerscheps/Godensholt

On 17 April 1945, the Belgian SAS Regiment left Oostereinde and crossed the German border. Via Rütenbrock and Haren, it moved to Tinnen, where it stayed four days to rest and refit. On 21 April, the Belgian SAS Regiment, along with 'C' Squadron of the British 1st SAS, was attached to the Canadian 2nd Armoured Brigade, and had to move to Lorup, on 23 April, where it was to be attached to a unit of the Canadian 6th Armoured Regiment. Debefve's 'A' Squadron started its advance in the morning of 28 April. Armoured vehicles, followed by a jeep section and tanks, preceded two other jeep sections and the assault troop. Polish refugees gave Debefve information about the defence of Rostrup and reported the presence of enemy troops on the Westerscheps road, about halfway between Rostrup and Godensholt. Shortly afterwards, the Canadian armoured vehicles were stopped by obstacles. The 1st section of the assault troop, commanded by sergeant de Müelenaere, preceded by assault engineers L. Jacobs van Merlen and Albert Béchet, who were in charge of mine clearance, encountered an abandoned enemy defensive position. The section of the Müelenaere continued its advance, under support of the Canadian tanks that followed the section, and had to attack a position that turned out to be well defended. The section rushed forward under constant enemy fire. During the advance, an anti-tank gunner was disarmed and shortly afterwards, the section arrived in the middle of the German defensive position. While trying to find gaps in the German defences, artillery and mortar fire broke out. Trooper Béchet was killed instantly; Jacobs van Merlen and Hendrikx were wounded and could be evacuated. In the morning of 30 April, an order for the attack on Godensholt was issued. The 'A' Squadron assault troop would clear and occupy the southern and western parts of Godensholt, while the 'B' Squadron assault troop would follow and take positions at the eastern part of the village. The jeeps of 'A' Squadron had to occupy the intersections and the western access roads of the village. The attack was postponed to 4 p.m. and started under heavy rain. An hour later, the agglomeration was in Belgian hands. A self-propelled cannon was destroyed, four Germans were killed and fourteen were taken prisoner. In the evening, a defensive position was set up. On 1 May, the village was under heavy fire from German rocket launchers. Heilporn sustained back injuries, but trooper Paul Ruscatt was hit deadly in the chest. During the day, more projectiles fell on the village. Again, the assault pioneers were hit by shrapnel: Eugene Huybrechts on the knee, Prosper Van Den Reym on a buttock, Edwin Valentyn, who had fallen while searching for cover, got away with a sprained wrist. It was decided that the Belgians would be relieved by the Canadians and the SAS Regiment got a new axis

of advance: Rostrup, Westerstede, Hüllstede and Linswege in the direction of Wilhelmshaven.

9.2. Rostrup/Grabstede

In the afternoon of 2 May, the Belgian SAS left for Rostrup, from where patrols left for the north and north-west. The last elements left Godensholt at 3.30 p.m. Upon arrival in Westerscheps, the column encountered the advance party and it was decided to install 'A' Squadron and support elements more to the east of Westerscheps, while 'B' Squadron and the assault engineer troop moved on to Rostrup. On 3 May at dawn, Vlijt choose to attack to surprise the enemy. The moment his jeep section turned around the corner of a forest, a German corporal was captured while laying 'R' mines. Vlijt put the German soldier on the bonnet of the jeep and drove on. Fifty meters out, the German signalled to stop, Vlijt understood the situation and ordered the German to dig up the mine. Later on, Vlijt ran into two hiding Belgian prisoners of war, who provided him with useful

information about the location of various minefields in the region. Thanks to this information, the advance could be continued without further losses. In Rostrup, the men from 'B' Squadron were looking for a place to sleep in the abandoned houses, while artillery impacts that were getting closer. The rest of the regiment arrived in Rostrup at 2.30 p.m. The next day, the regiment advanced to Hüllstede, where 'A' Squadron

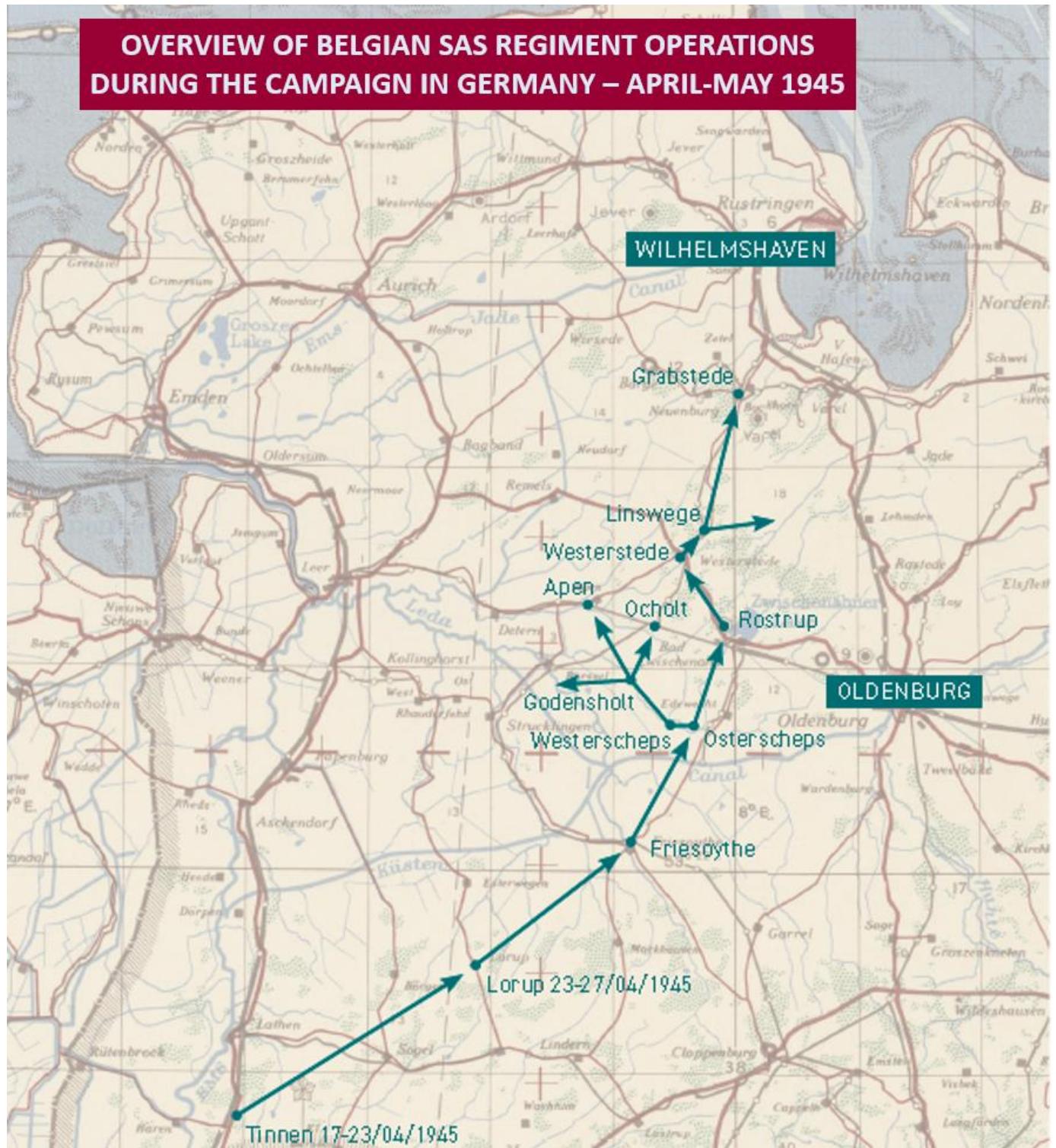


A German prisoner sitting on the bonnet of a Belgian SAS jeep (Archives 40-46)

would continue to the north-east, while 'B' Squadron would enter Grabstede, to the north. The advance was stopped and hampered by an organised line of defence consisting of minefields and other obstacles, supported by mortar fire, 75 mm guns and tanks. All information indicated that the Germans had dug trenches along the Varel-Grabstede-Wilhelmshaven line. Because the Polish artillery wanted to fire on Grabstede, the Belgian SAS was asked to evacuate this village. However, the shooting started before the Belgians were gone, but without serious consequences. The unit installed itself for the night; machine guns and anti-tank weapons were set up to stop any counter-attack. On 5 May, the Belgian SAS Regiment was a few kilometres from Wilhelmshaven. Blondeel described what happened that evening: "... In the evening I moved into a small house where I could spread my maps on a table.

Representatives from each squadron and the Canadian liaison officer were present to determine which patrols we would send out the next day. It was raining and the weather was gloomy. It must have been around 5 p.m. when squadron leader Smith came in and said, "We cease fire tomorrow at 6 p.m." I have never felt a greater sense of uselessness coming up: all those maps, all those representatives, all those tanks we saw outside were suddenly useless. I immediately ordered the unit representatives to proceed with the full maintenance of weapons and equipment, which I was going to inspect the next day, for I feared that the euphoria would start fires in all directions, resulting in accidents. By the way, the Poles were going to spend their artillery ammunition all night long. We stayed on site for another two days, waiting for new orders." On 6 May, Blondeel went to the headquarters of the British 2nd Army in Luneburg. He returned the next evening and informed the regiment of its upcoming mission: after the capitulation of Nazi Germany, the SAS Regiment would conduct counter-intelligence operations.

OVERVIEW OF BELGIAN SAS REGIMENT OPERATIONS DURING THE CAMPAIGN IN GERMANY – APRIL-MAY 1945



10. Counter-intelligence operations in occupied Germany

On 9 May, the Belgian SAS Regiment was reinforced by forty men. Belgian SAS detachments were attached to British forces: three sections (from the assault engineer troop and mortar troop) at the 30th Army Corps in Bremervörde; four sections (from 'A' Squadron) at the 12th Army Corps in Hamburg; and eight sections (from 'B' Squadron, the regimental staff and reserves) at the 8th Army Corps in Lübeck. Fifteen sections were divided between Bremervörde, Hamburg and Kiel; in addition, sections were detached at a dozen other locations to reinforce British field security sections. Each section took care of its own administration and could only count on the staff of the regiment in case of serious administrative issues. The new recruits, who were still in training at the Two Lions Barracks in Tervuren, were assembled in Kiel, where they received an accelerated and specific counter-intelligence training. The staff of the regiment distributed the resources of the unit with the prospect of new tasks. Since these involved quick and lightly armed interventions, the jeeps would be perfect. If supporting sections were to support the jeeps, they were transported by light trucks. The excess heavy equipment was sent back to the Tervuren barracks, where it could be used for the training and equipping of new recruits. The unit was very mobile, and operated from Emden and Wilhelmshaven in the west, up to Tønder (Denmark) and Flensburg (Schleswig) in the north, Wismar and Schwerin (initially occupied by the British, later transferred to the Soviet occupation zone) in the east, to Gottingen, Goslar and Hildesheim in the south. Blondeel's headquarters was located in Rotenhahn, a large village south of Kiel. The main and basically only communications link between the headquarters and the squadrons and between the headquarters and the barracks of Tervuren was ensured by signallers deployed in Rumohr. The new tasks involved ending any resistance and preventing the formation of groups of guerrilla fighters (whose existence was publicly announced by the Nazis), as well as arresting war criminals, in order to put them on trial, thereby preventing them from joining terrorist organisations. These counter-intelligence operations would last two months, a period in which various prominent military and political Nazi leaders were arrested and numerous prisoners questioned. The task was not entirely unexpected. Already in February 1945, Belgian SAS officers had received training from counter-espionage officers to neutralise enemy agents left behind by the retreating units. Especially the knowledge of the German language by thirty members of the Belgian SAS turned out to be very useful.

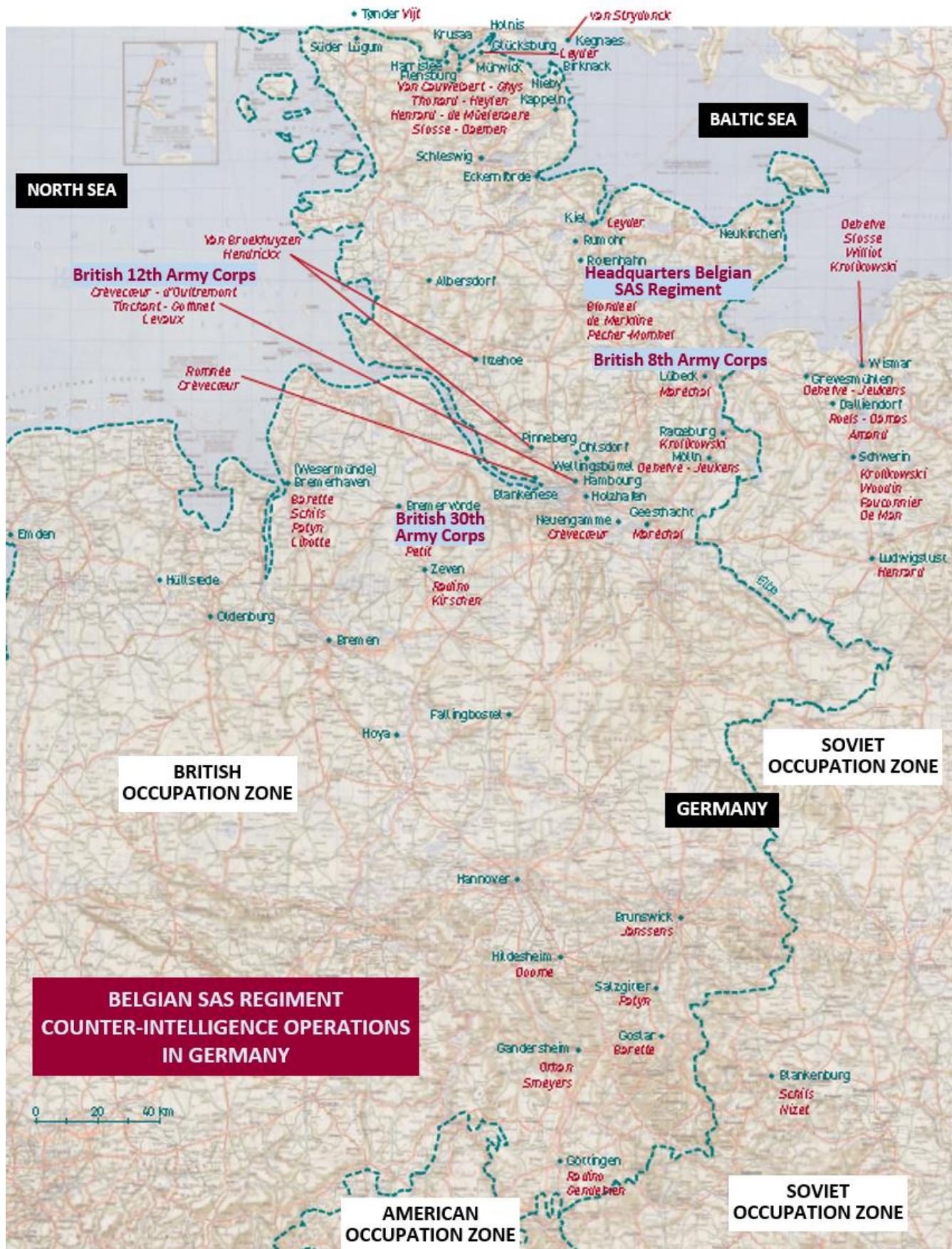
Captain Van Cauwelaert arrived in Flensburg on the morning of 10 May. Later, captain Thonard followed with the rest of 'B' Squadron. They were the first Allies

to enter the city, where thousands of armed German soldiers were still walking around. The Belgians had to carry out patrols to ensure that the 350,000 Germans who were in Denmark returned to their country via the checkpoints. In addition, the Belgians had to provide escorts for the intelligence services tasked with the arrest of active Nazis and other suspects. A jeep section under the command of Vlijt was sent to Tønder, just across the Danish-German border. The other three sections continued to operate in Flensburg. The unit took part in the arrest of several influential members of the Nazi party and various other senior officials. The news of the arrest of Alfred Ernst Rosenberg went around the world. Rosenberg, an intellectual and influential member of the Nazi party and former minister of the occupied Eastern European territories, was arrested by Belgian SAS personnel in a military hospital in Flensburg-Mürwick. Other Belgians contributed to the arrest of members of the government of president admiral Karl Dönitz, who had succeeded Hitler after his suicide. Among the Germans arrested in the region were Dönitz and his government in Flensburg, Dr. Karl Heinz Krämer, liaison officer of the Abwehr in Stockholm, his secretary Orina Siemen, lieutenant commander Peter Silling and lieutenant Walter Sewigh, both naval attaché with the Abwehr, Waffen-SS general Günther Pancke and numerous guards of concentration camps. On 28 May 1945, SAS trooper François Magriet was seriously injured in Flensburg by a tragic accident. During a ride, he was suddenly thrown out of a truck by a brutal shock and sustained a skull fracture. He would succumb to his injuries the next day.

In June, Goffinet received new, apparently very important information. On 15 June at 8 a.m. he went to Military Security Office 26 to receive orders. Two German citizens were waiting at the entrance of the building and said they had important information about the hiding address of von Ribbentrop, who was using the pseudonym 'Von Riese'. The two civilians were placed in custody, a route was planned and soon two jeeps left with two men each. The jeeps were parked out of sight close to the designated building and the team went up the stairs carefully. On the fourth floor, the door was closed and there was no response to the ringing of the bell. Goffinet tried in vain to open the lock with his dagger when the door suddenly opened. In front of him stood a beautiful blonde in dressing gown, rubbing sleep from her eyes. Goffinet quickly entered the room, jumped on the man lying in bed and slapped him on the face to awake him. The man had grown older and now wore sideburns, but Goffinet was sure he recognised von Ribbentrop, based on the photos he had studied. While searching the apartment, 200,000 marks were found in a cloak, as well as two large envelopes, each containing a letter, one addressed to Churchill, the other to Field Marshal Montgomery. The

Nazi chief would later be found guilty of war crimes by the Nuremberg International Tribunal and hanged.

From the beginning of July, the troops returned from Germany, in accordance with a very strict timetable. They drove to the Netherlands in an impressive motorised column, where the last night of the campaign was spent, before returning to the barracks of Tervuren, on 4 July 1945. Only sergeant Doome and his team would remain in Germany until mid-August.



Annex - Belgian Parachute Company and Special Air Service personnel killed in World War II



Pte ETIENNE BATTAILLE,
Belgian Indep Para Coy (*31 Nov 1920)



Killed in Withington, UK,
in an airplane crash during an exercise on 19 April 1943



Pte FLORENT DEPAUW,
Belgian Indep Para Coy (*20 Sep 1914)



Killed in Withington, UK,
in an airplane crash during an exercise on 19 April 1943



Cpl ROGER CARRETTE, SAS (* 29 Jun 1922)



Operation Shakespeare (parachuted in France, 1944)
KIA in La Chartre sur le Loir, France,
on 09 August 1944 (Operation Shakespeare)



Lt FREDDY LIMBOSCH, SAS (*30 Nov 1916)



Operation Shakespeare (parachuted in France, 1944)
Operation Caliban (parachuted in Belgium, 1944)
KIA in Peer, Belgium, on 08 September 1944 (Operation Caliban)



Tpr JEAN LOX, SAS (*01 Mar 1910)

Operation Trueform (parachuted in France, 1944)
Operation Brutus (parachuted in Belgium, 1944)

KIA in Chabrehez, Belgium, on 10 September 1944 (Operation Brutus)



Sgt JEAN MELSENS, SAS (*23 Jan 1922)

Operation Shakespeare (parachuted in France, 1944)
Operation Caliban (parachuted in Belgium, 1944)

KIA in Meeuwen, Belgium, on 10 September 1944 (Operation Caliban)



Tpr CLAUDE de VILLERMONT, SAS (*29 Oct 1923)



Operation Noah (parachuted in France, 1944)

Operation Regent (Belgium, 1944)

KIA in Bure, Belgium, on 31 December 1944 (Operation Regent)



Tpr EMILE LORPHEVRE, SAS (*09 Dec 1922)



Operation Shakespeare (parachuted in France, 1944)

Operation Bergbang (parachuted in Belgium, 1944)

Operation Regent (Belgium, 1944)

KIA in Bure, Belgium, on 31 December 1944 (Operation Regent)



Lt PAUL RENKIN, SAS (*19 Nov 1919)

Operation Noah (parachuted in France, 1944)

Operation Regent (Belgium, 1944)

KIA in Bure, Belgium, on 31 December 1944 (Operation Regent)



Lt CHARLES MATHIJS, SAS (*05 Feb 1921)

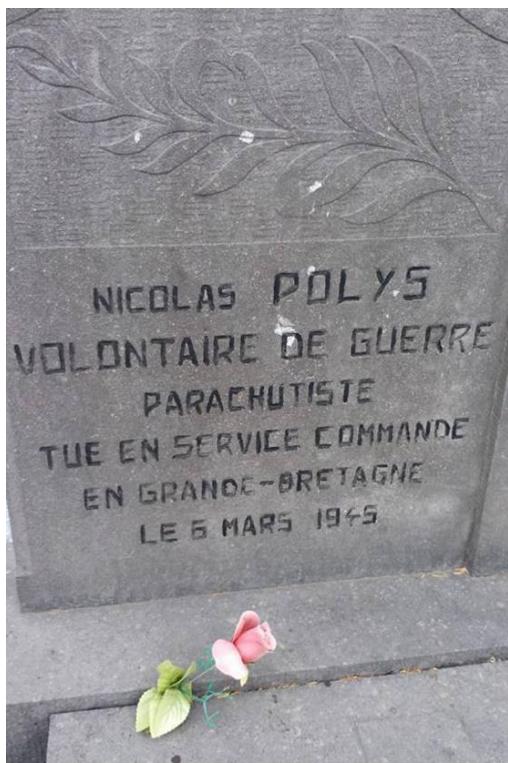


Operation Shakespeare (parachuted in France, 1944)

Operation Brutus (parachuted in Belgium, 1944)

Operation Regent (Belgium, 1944)

Killed in Leopoldsburg, Belgium, during an exercise on 04 March 1945



NICOLAS POLYS
VOLONTAIRE DE GUERRE
PARACHUTISTE
TUE EN SERVICE COMMANDÉ
EN GRANDE-BRETAGNE
LE 6 MARS 1945



Tpr NICOLAS POLYS, SAS (*26 Jul 1923)

Killed in Ringway, UK, on 06 March 1945 in a parachute crash



Sgt RAYMOND HOLVOET, SAS (*20 Jan 1924)



SOE operation Griffon-Badger (parachuted in Belgium, 1943)

SAS operation Haggard (parachuted in France, 1944)

SAS operation Timon (parachuted in the Netherlands, 1944)

Executed in Hattem, the Netherlands, on 10 April 1945 (Operation Timon)



Cpl ETIENNE HAZARD, SAS (*4 Nov 1926)

Operation Larkswood (the Netherlands, 1945)

DOW in England, on 12 April 1945 (Operation Larkswood)



Sgt PHILIPPE ROLIN, SAS (*27 Jun 1923)

Operation Larkswood (the Netherlands, 1945)

KIA in Veele, the Netherlands, on 12 April 1945 (Operation Larkswood)



Tpr JEAN-LOUIS BREUER, SAS (*22 Aug 1923)

Operation Larkswood (the Netherlands, 1945)

KIA in Veele, the Netherlands, on 14 April 1945 (Operation Larkswood)



Tpr JOSEPH WATHELET, SAS (*23 Jul 1925)

Operation Larkswood (the Netherlands, 1945)

KIA in Finsterwolde, the Netherlands,
on 15 April 1945 (Operation Larkswood)





2nd Lt DENIS DEVINEZ, SAS (*28 Feb 1920)

Operation Chaucer (parachuted in France, 1944)

Operation Larkswood (the Netherlands, 1945)

KIA in Beerta, the Netherlands, on 17 April 1945 (Operation Larkswood)



Tpr ALBERT BECHET, SAS (*24 Feb 1926)

Operation Larkswood (the Netherlands, 1945)

KIA in Westerscheps, the Netherlands,

on 28 April 1945 (Operation Larkswood)



Tpr PAUL RUSCART, SAS (*18 Feb 1923)



Operation Larkswood (the Netherlands, Germany, 1945)

KIA in Wilhelmshaven, Germany, on 01 May 1945 (Operation Larkswood)



Tpr FRANS MAGRIET, SAS (*18 Dec 1920)



Operation Larkswood (the Netherlands, Germany, 1945)

KIA in Flensburg, Germany, on 29 May 1945 (Operation Larkswood)

