



## **BCMh Battlefield Tour 2006 Northern Belgium and South Holland A Tour in the Study of Time**

### **Presenters**

Zeebrugge 1918	Robin Brodhurst
Walcheren 1809 – The Landing	Andy Grainger
Walcheren 1944 – Westkapelle	Michael Orr
Walcheren 1944 – Flushing	Michael Orr
Walcheren 1809 – Fort Rammekens	Andy Grainger
French Army in Holland 1940	Tony Cowan
Moerdijk Bridges 1940	Tony Cowan
Best 1944	Dianne Smith
Liège 1914, Fort Lonçin	Michael Orr
Eben Emael 1940	Michael Orr & local guide
Aart Bridgehead 1944	Michael Orr
Antwerp 1914, Fort No.5	Michael Orr
RNAS 1914, Wilrijk airfield	Bridget Pollard

Perhaps it is a truism that battlefield touring is as much about tourism as battlefields. Keen military historians though BCMh members are, it is noticeable that visits to scenic areas like Normandy and even the drabber bits of Northern France are better attended than the chilly coastlines of the North Sea or the suburban sprawl of the Netherlands. No matter how varied the action or spellbinding the speaker, our interest in military history tends to take a sharp step to the rear when presented against a flat, characterless landscape or a grey sea – even if the sun is shining.

And the sun did shine frequently upon the twenty of us who made the trip to the Low Countries. At one point our man in The Hague, Tony Cowan, felt that he had to apologise for the absence of character-forming downpours or blizzards.

And the variety of military sights – and sites – almost made up for the scenery. All of us were stimulated by visiting places of which we had read but not actually seen – the River Scheldt at Flushing, the mighty wreckage of the Liège forts destroyed in 1914, the sheer scale of the bridge over the Maas at Moerdijk. I am sure others will have their own favourites.

We all know, of course, that this region is known as the Cockpit of Europe, that Antwerp has long been described “*as the pistol pointed at the heart of England*”<sup>1</sup> and that there has been extensive British military activity in the region for centuries. But the advantage of being on the ground – even ground that has altered so extensively in recent years – is that one forms a greater appreciation of the very many geographic factors affecting the campaigns.

---

<sup>1</sup> If anyone can find the source of this quotation I would very much like to hear from them.



Michael Orr had subtitled the tour “Landings and Forts (mostly)”. And this was very accurate. There are water obstacles everywhere and of every conceivable variety. At one remove there are the great waters of the North Sea and big rivers like the Rhine, Scheldt and Maas – but their passage tends to be immensely complicated by sandbanks, currents and tides. Then there are canals which vary in size from the picturesque waterways that are familiar to us in the UK to enormous riverine thoroughfares as wide as the Thames at Tower Bridge. And wherever the flow of water is not regulated there are swamps, marshes and land reclaimed from the sea – which is merely damp.

These waterways are crossed by bridges and causeways of all sorts and both obstacles and crossings have been fortified throughout history. Fort Rammekens, captured by the British in 1809 had been garrisoned by their forbears two hundred years previously during unknown campaigns that are nevertheless to all of us from Shakespeare. A recurring feature of the stands was the contest for crossing points – between the ingenuity of attackers to seize bridgeheads before defenders could deploy behind their water obstacles.

We heard of many and various technologies and *ruses de guerre* employed by attackers – flat-bottomed boats, superheavy siege guns, amphibious tractors, swimming tanks, airborne troops, gliders, armoured trains as well as, doubtless, nuns and burly men in trenchcoats and trilbies. And all for the purchase of time, the commodity that fortifications and obstacles are designed to provide.

The aim of the British expedition to Walcheren in 1809 was the destruction of the docks and French shipping in Flushing and Antwerp. The planners knew that they had a window of only 18 to 20 days to accomplish their task before the land-based French could march overwhelming numbers of defenders up to block them. But adverse winds and heavy seas contrived to place the invasion fleet in the right place offshore whilst preventing their small boats from landing. Consequently surprise – and four days - were lost. Both Walcheren and South Beveland were occupied within five days by a series of bold advances and many examples of inter-arm and inter-service co-operation. At the remarkably preserved Fort Rammekens I was able to explain how General Picton (of later Peninsular and Waterloo fame) used his 95<sup>th</sup> Riflemen to snipe the enemy gunners and suppress their fire whilst his Commander Royal Engineers directed the emplacement of guns landed from a port captured only the day before. The garrison surrendered. But then the defenders of Flushing cashed in their inundations card to buy a further fortnight of resistance. Marshal Bernadotte arrived on schedule on Day 20 and organised the crowds of now unemployed French sailors and National Guards behind forts that, although crumbling, were also protected by inundations. Antwerp was thus placed beyond the power of the relatively small invasion army of 40,000 men – even if it was the biggest amphibious landing in the entire French Wars from 1793 to 1815.

In 1944, by contrast, Antwerp was taken speedily but the Scheldt estuary was not. The result was that three months elapsed between the capture of the docks on 4<sup>th</sup> September and the unloading of the first merchant ship on 26<sup>th</sup> November. Without Antwerp (and Marseilles) Germany could not be invaded. Eisenhower was always fully aware that these ports were critical to allied operations and so the failure to make the capture of the Scheldt Estuary an absolutely top priority would seem to represent an enormous strategic blunder. But, like our preference for scenic battlefields, the military history of the campaign in North-West Europe



has tended to focus on the heroics of Market Garden rather than the activities of SHAEF planners after the Falaise Pocket and the grinding struggles of 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Army in the polders.

Our visit to the Aart bridgehead on the final day of the tour revealed how tough some of these actions were. Over terrain which has changed less than most of the other sites we visited, Michael Orr described a battle by the 15<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Division to defend its tiny bridgehead across the Junction Canal just south of Turnhout in September 1944. Such was the ferocity of the German attacks that the Division had to abandon it, including its dead, and concentrate its efforts elsewhere. The infantry officers were impressed, as ever, by the accuracy and speed of the Divisional Artillery but, we heard, less appreciative of the achievement of the PMC who contrived to deliver his mess bills to them!

In recent times a number of books have appeared about Operation Infatuate, the landings on Walcheren on 1 November 1944.<sup>2</sup> We visited both landing sites, at Westkapelle and Flushing. The shoals that have bedevilled landing operations throughout history were not visible to our non-nautical eyes but the enormous ships passing close inshore rather than in the centre of the channel must have been doing so for a reason. The docks at Flushing where 52<sup>nd</sup> Lowland Division made its attack are much changed but the site at Westkapelle is not and Michael Orr was able to point out the location of the breach in the dyke where the commandos landed following the self-sacrifice of the supporting gunships. From unarmoured Landing Crafts (Gun) German casemates were engaged with 17pdr anti-tank guns that were later found to have penetrated 6 feet of concrete – only another 4 feet to go... But they drew off the German fire and the craft transporting the commandos were able to land successfully.

On the second day of the tour Michael Orr took us into Belgium where the study of military activity was as stimulating as the scenically dramatic valley of the Meuse between Visé and Liège. We heard that the Germans had also been attracted to the scenery because General Ludendorff had taken his holidays there prior to 1914 and insisted that his staff do the same. One wonders how the wives coped with this busman's holiday.

In both 1914 and 1940 the Belgians and the Dutch relied on a mix of water obstacles and fortifications to hold up a German invasion long enough for their allies (they hoped) to arrive. Despite the expenditure of great amounts of time and money, particularly by the Belgians, however, it seemed that the attacker had the overwhelming advantage by being able to strike at the moment of his choosing.

General Brialmont's<sup>3</sup> forts of the 1880's had been designed with a degree of future-proofing and must have represented a colossal financial investment for a small country. All of us were aware of the reduction of the forts by the German Big Berthas in a few days in August 1914 but I think that all of us were stunned by Fort Lonçin. From the gate the fort seemed undamaged but inside the massive citadel towered above us in a great jumble of concrete

---

<sup>2</sup> [Walcheren \(Battleground Europe S.\)](#) by Andrew Rawson (Pen & Sword Paperback - Aug 2003); [Cinderella Operation: Battle for Walcheren, 1944](#) by Gerald Rawling (Hardcover - 26 Jun 1980); [Battle for Antwerp: The Liberation of the City and the Opening of the Scheldt 1944](#) by Major General J L Moulton, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.geocities.com/~brialmont/index.html> is a detailed site about the forts and the 1914 battle. It is stronger on the battle narrative than analysis, particularly of the strategic planning of each side, but does set out conclusions about the results of the battle from a range of sources.



wreckage mixed with steam boiler sized chunks of iron from the cupolas. A 42cm shell had penetrated the magazine. German planning, technology and all the resources of a great nation had negated the Belgian attempts to buy as much time as they had wished. Even so, the Belgians might have been able to hold up the Germans if they had concentrated all six divisions of their small army at Liège but King Albert very wisely stuck to his strategy of keeping his army in being and withdrew to the Yser. One might say, therefore, that the Germans got their operation right but King Albert maintained his strategic objective successfully. We also heard how the Germans, determined not to get bogged down in semi-guerrilla warfare as had happened after they defeated the French Armies at Metz and Sedan in 1870, commenced a campaign of terror against both individual civilians and entire communities. It was impossible not to feel that whilst individual atrocity stories might have been exaggerated in the contemporary press the true story of German “frightfulness” was largely forgotten – if it was ever told.

One effect of the fall of the Liège forts was that permanent fortifications became discredited and the French, in particular, removed most of the guns for use in the field. But concrete came back into fashion after 1918 and the Belgians again looked to it during the inter-war years. Michael Orr had arranged a tour of Fort Eben-Emael<sup>4</sup>, completed in 1935 and now run by a group of enthusiasts. I think that most of us had the view that Eben-Emael was the lynch-pin of the Belgian defence on the Albert Canal and that its spectacular capture by a handful of German glider troops so demoralised the Belgian Army that it collapsed almost at once. In fact, although the fall of Eben-Emael was immensely demoralising it was only part of the story.

My impression was that Eben-Emael formed a part of defence system covering the German border. There were a number of forts mounting a considerable number of guns, the OPs for which were largely found by the field army deployed in the intervals. The system therefore was intended to provide protected positions for a substantial covering force with the aim of delaying the Germans for up to five days on the line of the Albert Canal. Unfortunately for the Belgians, the speed and surprise of the German attack caught them before they were fully deployed. Eben-Emael was only a Category 3 fort because of its distance from the border – about ten miles. The revolutionary and secret hollow-charge explosives delivered by glider “outgunned” the Belgian concrete and steel like the Big Berthas of 1914. I must say, however, that I had not appreciated that the glider solution was adopted because the siege gun being designed to take on Eben-Emael – the 80cm Dora – was not yet ready. Again, we saw the advantages accruing to the attacker when technology changes quickly. Had Eben-Emael been attacked in 1941 the Germans would simply have shelled it.

But in 1940 the German attack wrong-footed the Belgian command structure because the fortress commander did not dispose of any combat troops. His counterattacks failed because the men he scraped up had no knowledge of the fort, were untrained and did not even have proper weapons. Once again German tactical ingenuity, speed and surprise overwhelmed a Belgian defence that was hamstrung from the top by an inappropriate strategic doctrine of neutrality. The precedent of 1914 notwithstanding, a policy of wishful thinking about both

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.fort-eben-emael.be/> is the official website. At the time of writing, however, it does not contain a great deal of information.



the threat and the support that might be provided – at zero notice – by the allies produced catastrophic results.

I think that for most of us the military history of Holland is a closed book. Before the Tour I had drawn up a chronology of Anglo-Dutch military and maritime activities and I was surprised at its extent and closeness. I have already alluded to the English involvement in the Dutch Rebellion against Spain. My own county Regiment, the Royal Warwickshires, was once known as the Dutch Guards because of the proportion of Dutch speakers in its ranks following the wars against Louis XIV. So all of us very much appreciated Tony Cowan's help not only with the recce for the Tour but also his presentations about the Dutch involvement before and during the 1940 campaign.<sup>5</sup>

Like Belgium, Holland adopted a policy of strict neutrality between the wars. Unlike Belgium it had largely lost its military tradition during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its army was small, badly led and poorly trained and equipped. We also heard that there was considerable sympathy and even support for Fascist policies within Holland. Thus, when the time came, both government and army had suspicions about the allegiance of some of their officers.

But Dutch affinity with the Germans also helped to place them well in terms of intelligence. The Dutch had links with Admiral Canaris in the *Abwehr* and so received frequent warnings of a German invasion. But because Hitler kept changing the date the reports began to lose credibility. The impact of this percolated all the way down to states of readiness at unit level.

Tony explained the impossible dilemma of the Dutch defence planners. The army was too small to do more than garrison a National Redoubt around The Hague and Amsterdam but limiting the defence to such a restricted area would allow the Germans to cut them off from the allies to the south. Inevitably, a compromise was reached in that some forces were deployed in the south to maintain a link. But they were very weak and lacked a clear understanding of their role. They were overwhelmed by German Special Forces on the frontier and by airborne forces landing near the key bridges. Yet again, tactical ingenuity, technological innovation and sound planning negated the effects of some really gigantic water obstacles. The BCMH unwittingly recreated the surprise of the German paratroops at the Moerdijk bridge, the victims on this occasion being a couple seeking privacy in their car parked under the colossal structure.

A few kilometres to the south of these bridges Tony related the unfortunate experiences of General Giraud's 7<sup>th</sup> Army whose task was to race through Belgium and reinforce the Dutch – the so-called Breda variant. Contrary to my belief this formation was by no means wholly mechanised but was a mix of armour, motorised infantry and footsloggers. Some of its units even managed to cover a distance of well over 200 kilometers through Belgium in a few hours and make contact with the Dutch. But in the absence of effective liaison arrangements, supplies and the disorganisation of their rapid advance their impact on the battle was limited.

---

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.waroverholland.nl/> offers a well-organised site and comprehensive coverage of the 5 day campaign in Holland (the Germans thought it would take two days) although its judgements are not always of the most considered or scholarly nature – particularly concerning the French!



We began and ended the tour with examples from the First World War. At our first stand at Zeebrugge Robin Brodhurst apologised for the fact that the Belgians had placed the entire 1918 harbour under concrete a few years ago. In fact, however, he was able to use the model on the memorial to point out that the famous mole still defined the edge of the harbour. We were able to get a good idea of the size and shape of the battlefield and see the lock gates which were the object of the raid.<sup>6</sup> Like many commando type raids the execution was gallant in the extreme (8 VCs were awarded) and the outcome a matter for controversy even now. Ironically one of the initial plans had considered a naval bombardment of the lock gates, an idea that was rejected on the grounds that they were too difficult to hit. Ironically they were later knocked out in this way by a lucky hit.

The factors of timing and tides governed the Zeebrugge operation as they do in so many others of this type but chance, as ever, seems to play the greatest role in amphibious raids as it did when the wind unexpectedly dispersed the smokescreen.

On our final day we visited Antwerp where Michael Orr and Bridget Pollard covered different aspects of the 1914 campaign. Because Holland controlled the Scheldt Estuary and was neutral, the port of Antwerp became something of a backwater (militarily speaking) in September 1914. But eventually Winston Churchill (First Lord of the Admiralty) decided that it offered an opportunity to attack the German flank with forces landed by sea whilst simultaneously the Germans decided that they had enough forces available to take it. Their siege artillery once again pounded the Belgian forts to rubble but our stands concerned a) the remarkably disorganised efforts to land – and almost immediately evacuate – a naval force from Antwerp and b) the Boy's Own Paper story of the Royal Naval Air Service's (RNAS) attempts to bomb Zeppelin sheds near Düsseldorf from what is now a suburban park in the south of the city. Bridget Pollard told a story of a task which revealed the Service's profound understanding of the potential of airpower, audacious yet thorough planning and a total confidence in the cutting edge technology demonstrated in the film "Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines." One can only say that the Director of a film about the raids would need to combine the stiff upper lip heroism of "The Dambusters", the atmosphere of "Magnificent Men" the crazy optimism of "Forrest Gump" on the Brighton Pavilion set from "Oh What a Lovely War". Further words about this incredible – and successful – mission are beyond me but fortunately Bridget has provided an account of the raid elsewhere in this issue.

I hope that readers will have gleaned from this admittedly overlong account just what a fascinating trip this was. I have tried to convey something of what became a theme of the tour – the attempt by small countries to buy time with the purchase of fortifications and the efforts by attackers to overcome them. But military factors, whilst important, were probably outweighed by the political ones in preparing for and then trying to manage the hours and even minutes between peace and war.

The amphibious operations in 1809, 1918 and 1944 revealed the vital importance of meticulous planning and the crucial impact that chance and weather can play. I was surprised at the energy and effectiveness displayed both by the Royal Navy and the Army during the

---

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.mckenzie.uk.com/zeebrugge/index.htm> is nominally about Able Seaman Albert McKenzie who was awarded the VC by ballot but it contains a reasonable account of the raid supported by contemporary illustrations and some photographs of the mole before its demolition in 1998.



*The author of this article retains the copyright of the material. No part of this article may be reproduced or distributed in any form other than for private use without the express permission of the author. Permission may be sought via the [BCMh Newsletter Editor](#)*

Page 7 / 7

1809 operation on Walcheren – the tragedy lay in the squandering of the troops in needless garrisons long after the operation should have been wound up.

There is a great deal more to see in Holland. We had planned to visit the site of the Battle of Turnhout 1597 where a largely English force ambushed a Spanish *tercio* but did not have time. We discussed many others. Certainly I look forward to further visits.