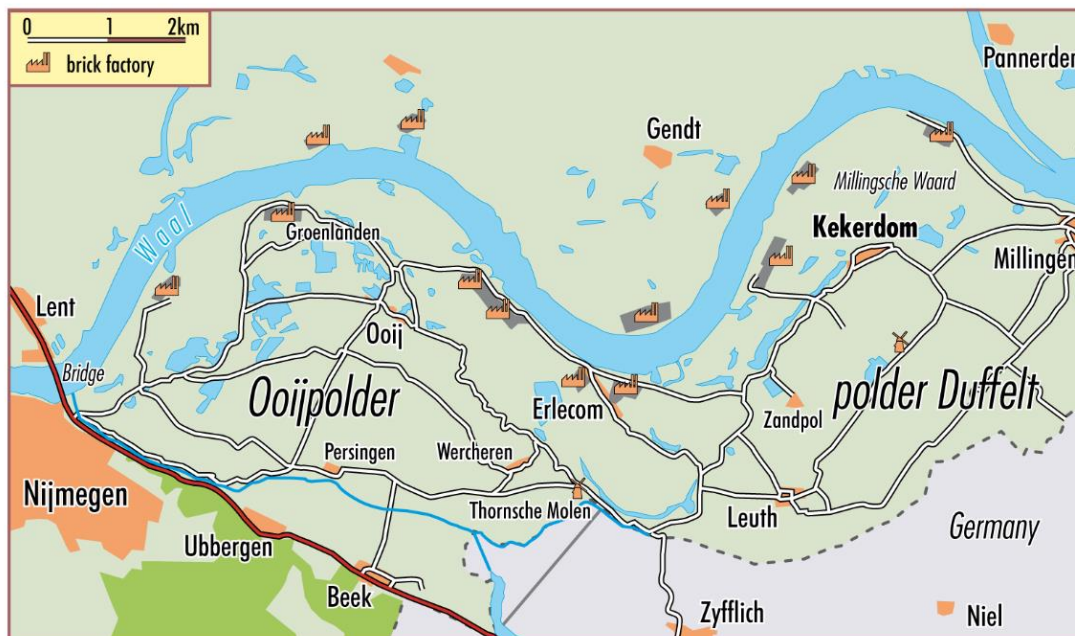


# Military operations in the polder and the liberation of Kekerdom

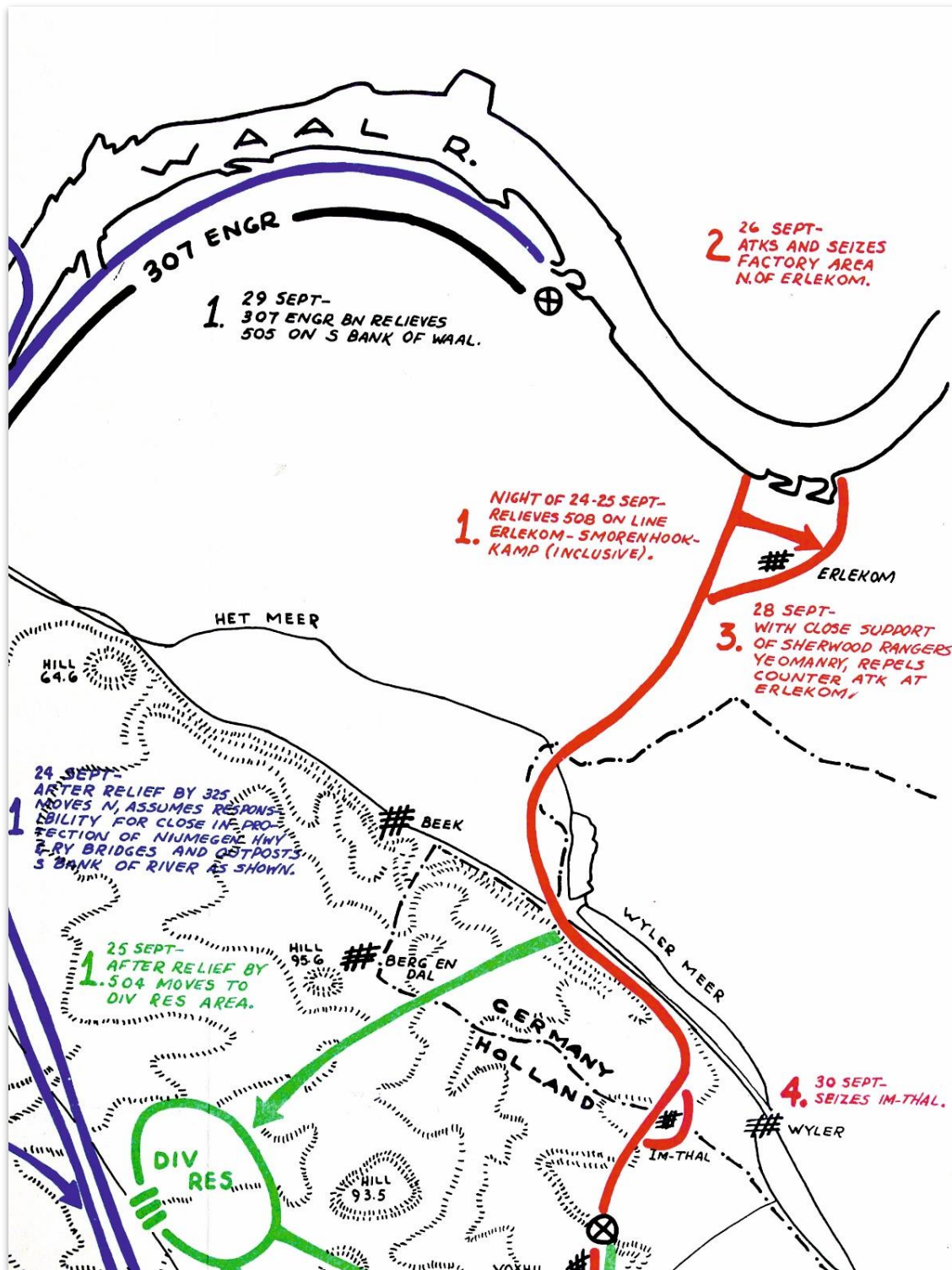
Hans van der Wiel

## The front between Erlecom and Zandpol

The airborne landings of September 17, 1944, near Groesbeek (operation Market Garden) caused the necessary commotion in the polder because of the many flight movements and the distant noises. The Germans were trying to decrease the bridgehead held by the allied forces and keep the route to the bridge over the river Waal open. After the bridge at Nijmegen was secured, the Americans concentrated on pushing back the German troops in the polder. Between September 22 and 24, the Americans tried to gain a foothold around the Thornsche Molen (Thorn windmill). Divisions of the 508 PIR (Parachute Infantry Regiment) attacked here several times but were pushed back by the German artillery. Their commander decided to withdraw his troops behind Wercheren, because the gain in territory did not warrant the many casualties. Apparently, he was unaware that the Germans were building an important defensive line here as an extension of their Meuse line.



The polder area near Nijmegen (map by Luc Oteman)



Situation in the area west of Keekerdam around September 28, 1944. The red line shows the position of the 504th American Parachute Infantry Regiment. That position was also the front line. To the left of that line were the Allies, to the right of it the Germans. The small shift of the front line at Erlekom was the gain of ground that the Allies made on September 28. After this, the front line remained stable until February 8, 1945.

On September 24, the 508 PIR was replaced by the 504 PIR. Shortly thereafter, the Germans attempted to recapture lost territory at Erlecom using a dozen tanks and other armored vehicles. They were driven back with great difficulty by the Americans with the help of British tanks of the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry. The net result was that the Allies captured the T&A brickworks just east of the village of Erlecom. The German tanks withdrew after the fighting via Millingen. After that, the frontline did not move. New attacks by the Allies did not occur because General Eisenhower had decided that the area of the Scheldt estuary and Antwerp had to be conquered first to establish a shorter supply route of materiel, ammunition, etc. The Battle of the Scheldt would last until the beginning of November. After that, Canadian troops were moved from that combat area to Nijmegen and Ooijpolder to rest and recuperate. These Canadians replaced the American troops, who had been stationed here until that time. There were no more major battles in the Ooijpolder until Operation Veritable on February 8, 1945.

### Evacuation from Ooij

Because of the continuous shelling, the inhabitants of the Ooijpolder (Ooij, Erlecom, Wercheren, Persingen and Groenlanden) had to leave on October 3, by way of the town of Wijchen to liberated territory in the Province of North Brabant. This was still done on the authority of the Americans because the Canadians had not yet arrived in the polder.

Many residents did not get further than the area between the rivers Meuse and Waal. However, not everyone appeared to have left. There is mention in the Intelligence Log (diary of the Security Service) of the Regina Rifles on December 6, of citizens who had permission to stay in the area, because they were lockkeepers or had to take care of livestock. According to a list drawn up by Captain R.L. Bickford, liaison officer of the 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade, it involved twenty-seven persons. At this time, the Regina Rifles had just arrived in the Ooijpolder.

### Evacuation from the German occupied Duffelt

The front line ran right through the polder and the inhabitants west of this line were fortunate in that they could evacuate to liberated territory. East of the front, the residents were still under the yoke of the occupier. They were forced to evacuate to occupied territory in the east and north of the country. By order of Hauptmann Levin, many people from Leuth were ordered to leave on September 26. Further away from the front, one person per house was allowed to stay behind and the rest had to leave. Many of these people ended up in Millingen, which became overcrowded with refugees and German soldiers. On October 13 there was already a partial evacuation of the inhabitants of Zeeland (hamlet near Millingen). This was done on a voluntary basis. Those who stayed behind to take care of livestock were at risk of a direct hit at any moment from the nearby German artillery.

On October 17 an officer of the German police appeared at the Millingen town hall and ordered that the villages of Millingen, Leuth, and Kekerdom had to be evacuated. The inhabitants of these polder villages, together with the many refugees, would be moved across the river to Tolkamer on October 19. Some of them, including those from Kekerdom, were only moved across on October 20. Yet most of the population would have preferred to stay in the line of fire, rather than leave home and hearth. Via line crossers (people who risked their lives to cross the front line, usually people from

the underground) information about the evacuation also reached the Dutch intelligence service in Nijmegen and therefore also with the Allies.

Through these sources of information it also became clear that the only body of authority along the evacuation route was the Dutch Red Cross, albeit under direction of the NSB (Dutch collaboration party). Carts and bicycles were allowed to be taken, but most of the people evacuated on foot. The procession moved from one village to another, rested for a few days and then moved on. Sometimes families stayed behind or went into hiding along the way. The official destination was mostly in the occupied northern Netherlands. Villagers from Leuth were to go to Emmer-Compascuum in the Province of Drenthe, those from Kekerdom had to go to Marum in Groningen, and Millingen had Workum in Friesland as its destination.

One of the line-crossers was a nineteen-year-old from a transport company in Silvolde. He was able to report that about thirteen hundred evacuees from Millingen, Kekerdom and other towns had been housed in the school in Silvolde. Initially, these evacuees suffered greatly from the poor hygienic conditions, but they were treated well and had their own soup kitchen. Evacuees were also housed with farmers. It was the intention that they moved on to Groningen, but some tried to buy their way in to stay with these farmers. However, this was strictly forbidden. Many evacuees helped the farmers in their daily work, because the regular farm workers had been forced to dig trenches for the German defensive positions.

### The liberation of Zandpol

By January of 1945, in preparation for their attack on the Rhineland, the Allies had assembled hundreds of thousands of troops and an abundance of equipment in Nijmegen. The Germans wanted to make it as difficult as possible for their opponents and had already blown a hole in the river dyke near the Driedijk on December 21, 1944. In the first week of February, the high tide came in, so that the German strategy of 'water as a weapon' did not miss its effect. The Ooijpolder and a little later the polder Duffelt came under water, and the evacuated villages in the low-lying areas flooded. In Kekerdom, the water eventually rose to almost two meters. But the water would not stop the Allies.

On February 8, 1945, at 6:00 p.m., the ground attack of Operation Veritable started, after aircraft bombardments had already been carried out the day before on the nearest targets to weaken the enemy. First, the Regina Rifles of Canada attacked Zyfflich from the south locks in the Querdam. A short time later the 1st Canadian Scottish attacked the area around Thornse Molen. At the same time, the Canadian North Shore Regiment launched the attack from the Erlecom Polder in the direction of Zandpol.





Aerial view of the 'Driedijk' where the Erlecomsedam runs into the Duffeltdijk. A strategic point for the Germans to create an inundation area just in front of their own front line. The aerial photograph is from December 24, 1944. At that time, the Germans had already made a hole in the dyke with many bombs (note the bomb craters). This did not have an effect at the time because the water level in the river was too low. Furthermore, it is striking how the Germans had built foxholes everywhere in the Duffeltdijk high in the inner dyke embankment. At the bottom right of the image the hamlet Zandpol with its twelve two-family homes.

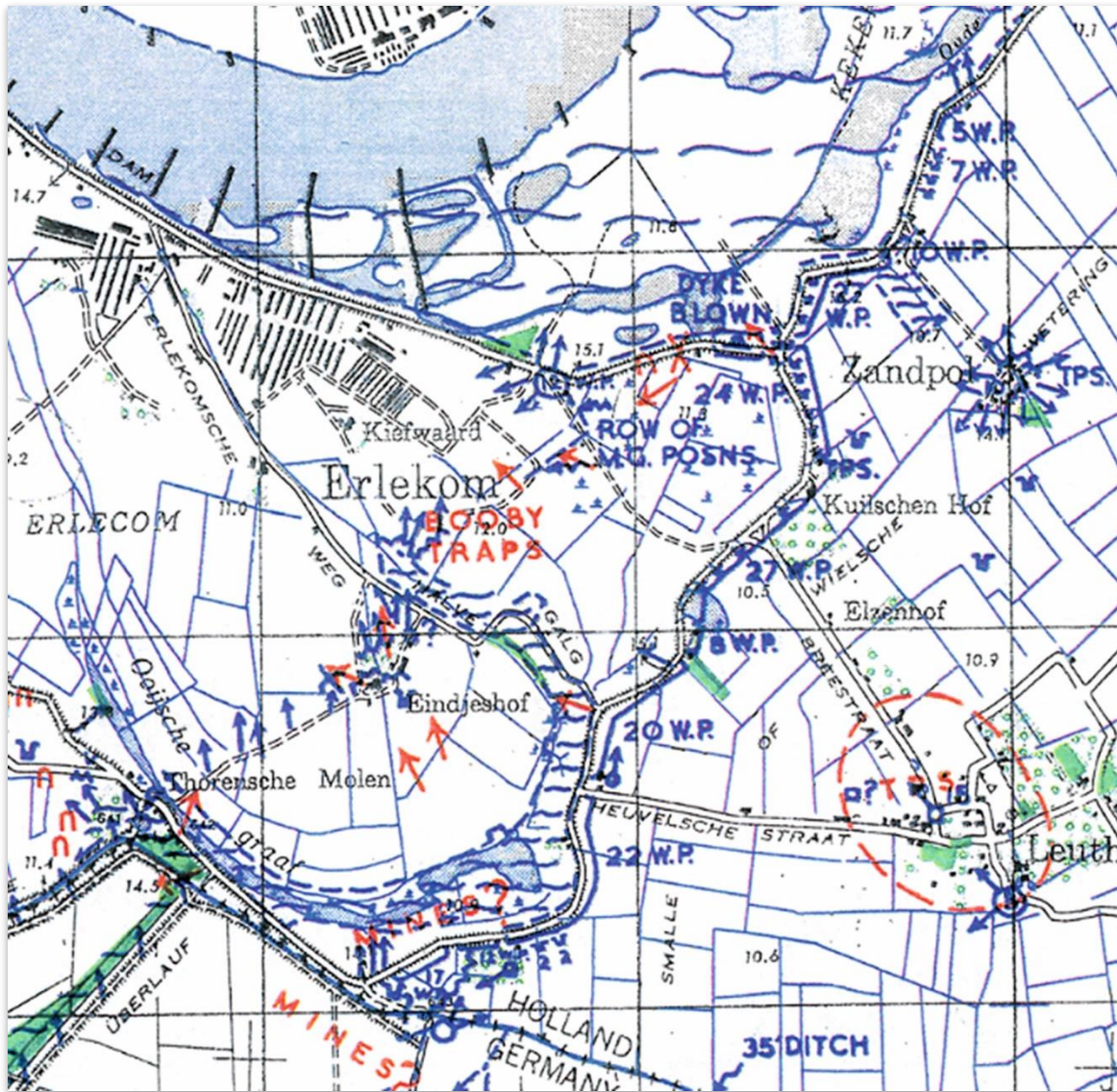


Allied aerial photograph of the 'Driedijk' on February 6, 1945.

Through the breach in the dyke, the river water flows into the Erlecom Polder. In the first week of February the river rose, so that the Ooijpolder and later the Duffelt were flooded. The designation 'Strong Pt.' indicates where the German machine gun nests were located. At the arrow above the farm 'Keulse Hof' is written 'Ramp for Buffaloes'. Here is the dyke ramp along which the Buffalo amphibious vehicles would drive up the dyke two days later.

These regiments were supported by various other units, such as a platoon of heavy machine guns from 'D' company of the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa, two platoons from the 16th Canadian Field Company of the Royal Canadian Engineers, a section of the 4th Canadian Provost Company (military police) and a group of Crab or flail tanks (mine clearing vehicles) from the 1st Lothian and Border Horse, as well as 25 Buffaloes (tracked amphibious vehicles) of the 5th Assault Regiment of the British Royal Engineers.





Defence Overprint with the positions of the German army drawn in. The situation depicted is probably from January 20, 1945. Arrows are gun emplacements. TPS are 'troops' (army units), W.P.'s are 'weaponpits' (foxholes). The floodplain was flooded as evidenced by the wave lines. The Thorn mill ('Thorensche Molen') is located at the bottom left and the hamlet of Zandpol is at the top right. On the west side there was a kind of no man's land, where many victims from both sides fell during reconnaissance patrols.

The North Shore Regiment kicked things off in Buffaloes that they had climbed in early in the morning, probably near the Kleverberg brickworks near Erlecom. In any case, it must have been an elevated area, because the rest of the Erlecom Polder was already well under water. All day long, rolling stock had to be brought to safety in a hurry as the water level rose rapidly. At 6:00 p.m., Spitfires and Typhoons bombarded the German positions at Zandpol and Leuth with rockets and machine guns to crush the enemy. At 6:45 p.m., 'A' Company led by Major F.F. Moar started the ground attack and five minutes later they had already reached the road on the dyke near the farm 'Keulse Hof' with their Buffaloes. Their assignment was to clear the dyke

to the left and right, from the farm of Jurrius, at the entrance of the road to Zandpol, to where Breestraat (now Bredestraat) ends at the Duffeltdijk. Ten minutes later, 'B' Company led by captain C.F. Richardson was already able to pass over the captured dyke in the direction of the hamlet of Zandpol, which they had to conquer.



The attack route of February 8, 1945, of the Canadian Armed Forces from Erlecom below the dyke towards Driedijk. At the bottom of the image, you can see the buildings of the brick factory Erlecom. The location of the breach in the dyke is indicated with the notation 'Dyke blown'. Near the farm 'Keulse Hof' is the ramp where the attackers were to go up the dyke. The photo with the attack instructions is from February 2, when the high tide did not yet flow in through the hole in the dyke.

The advance to Zandpol was not without danger, because here the Germans had set up machine gun nests under the shelter of the twelve houses of the hamlet, while the entrance was protected with minefields. Because the flail tanks could not be used due to the rising water, mines and booby traps created a great danger, resulting in the first casualties. Lieutenant L. Walsh and four men of 'B' Company were killed at 7:05 p.m., when they walked into a hidden minefield. Nevertheless, 'B' Company pressed on and took more and more prisoners of war. Interrogation provided them with valuable information about the enemy positions. After 'A' Company had the dyke under control at 8:15 p.m., 'B' Company asked for artillery support to silence the persistent resistance at Zandpol.



That broke the German opposition and at 8:55 p.m., Zandpol was in Canadian hands. At 11:00 p.m. another German counterattack was made by a platoon of twenty men on the positions of the North Shore Regiment, but this did not produce any results.

A total of nine Canadians, an officer and eight soldiers, were killed in the attack of February 8. In addition, another officer and twelve soldiers were wounded. These numbers indicate that the attack went less smoothly than an official post-war report would have us believe. It is striking that the Canadian reports make no mention of the number of casualties and wounded on the German side. However, it was mentioned that 78 German prisoners of war were taken that day.



Buffaloes approaching the dyke





Details of the defence overprint of February 2, 1945, map reference Millingen 4102, with locations of farms with billeted Germans (TPS) and the command post (HQ) in farm Schouwenburg. Roadblocks (symbol K) were installed in the Weverstraat in Kekerdom and on the west side of Millingen. The data in blue comes from aerial observations, and the data in red from observations from the field, partly provided by line crossers and partly obtained through espionage. The bunkers at Vullingskempke indicate anti-aircraft guns with searchlights. The wave lines in the Millingsche Waard indicate high water. The green dotted plots are orchards.

## The liberation of Kekerdom

After the North Shore Regiment had received word on the morning of February 9, that the Régiment de la Chaudière had taken Leuth, they sent 'C' and 'D' companies in the direction of Kekerdom. Lieutenant M.D. Morton and his pioneers led the way to clear the Duffeltdijk and Botsestraat of mines. The resistance along the way was minimal: only eleven Germans were encountered. 'C' company reached Kekerdom at 8:45 a.m. Hardly any fighting took place here, because most Germans had already quietly fled when Zandpol and Leuth were taken. After careful reconnaissance, because the danger of snipers and booby traps threatened everywhere, the Canadians of 'C' company declared the village of Kekerdom free of Germans. After that 'D' company also came into the village, later followed by 'B' company. This company had absorbed the heaviest blows at Zandpol and had been replaced by 'A' company, which stayed there and expanded its positions a bit more. Due to high water, it was not considered necessary to occupy the three brick factories in the Millingsche Waard and the Kekerdomse Waard. The Germans had already left these high lying areas of their own accord.

The Canadian ground forces determined that the information from the intelligence service and from the defence overprint (the map with German positions, gun emplacements, trenches) was correct. It turned out that the German commander indeed had his headquarters in the Schouwenburg farm at the beginning of the Weverstraat in Kekerdom. Earlier in the war, the Kapittelshof had been headquarters, but that farm had caught fire during the fighting at the end of September 1944. The Canadians brought a few Germans whom they had captured in headquarters Schouwenburg to their commander, Major Corbett. He asked the Germans where their commander was. One of the Germans replied that he had left just twenty minutes earlier.

During the fighting at Zandpol, the Canadians plodded through knee-deep water. When they took Kekerdom the next day, the water was already rising considerably. Due to inattention, they lost some army vehicles that were swallowed up by the water. On February 9 and 10, they could only work with boats in the polder. On February 9, Major Corbett got drenched in Kekerdom when he wanted to visit a group of officers. His subordinates found him scantily dressed in front of a stove with the steaming clothes around him. This resulted in great hilarity. A couple of others went out in a boat the next morning when they hit an obstacle and overturned. They too got wet from head to toe and lived up to their reputation as water rats.

On this 9th day of February, only Lieutenant F. Fewer was wounded on the Canadian side and fortunately there were no fatalities this day at Kekerdom. After they had searched the whole village and picked up the last German stragglers, the Canadians were able to catch their breath again. Yet unexpectedly, a white flag was suddenly waived from a cellar in Kekerdom. It turned out that three Germans had been overlooked. This incident and the risk of booby traps and mines made everyone aware of the fact that they had to always remain vigilant.



It is worth mentioning that the Canadians found some musical instruments and uniforms of the local marching band in one of the Kekerdom houses. Apparently, not the entire copper assortment of the band had been melted down into German war munitions. It was now February 10, and the men of the North Shore Regiment were surrounded by the rising water, but their part in the advance of the Third Canadian Infantry Division in the polder was completed.



In this aerial photograph of March 15, 1945, the Botsestraat winds through the image from bottom to top, with the T-junction at the Weverstraat in Kekerdom and the river dyke at the top left. The farm Kapittelshof near the Eversberg exit has burned down. On February 9, 1945, the Canadians travelled with their equipment through the farmland, to avoid mines and tank barriers along the road (see vehicle tracks at the bottom right of the photo). The vehicle tracks continue to the Zeelandsestraat and bend there in the direction of Millingen. The presence of tracks indicates that there was not much water during the attack on February 9. Only in the early morning of February 10 did the water reach the village center of Kekerdom.

Starting February 12, the positions of the Canadian army units were rearranged. The Royal Winnipeg Rifles, in Keeken, had already withdrawn. The units of the North Shore Regiment in Kekerdom were also almost gone and had to be replaced by units of the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada, who were ordered to guard an elongated area along the southern banks of the Rhine and the Waal. On February 14, 'D' company of the Queen's Own Rifles moved to Kekerdom, where they replaced the last elements of the North Shore Regiment. They were withdrawn to Nijmegen in anticipation of new orders.

After the reveille of February 20, the Queen's Own Rifles were ordered to return to Beek with the help of Buffaloes. 'D' company, commanded by Major B. Dunkelman, left shortly afterwards via Beek to Ubbergen. In Kekerdom the 7th Hampshire Regiment, part of the 130th Brigade of the 43rd British (W) Division, finally came to guard the long stretch along the river. For the Canadians, Operation Veritable was over.

Title pages will be prepared.			<del>INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY</del>	forwarded to O. i/c 2nd Echelon for disposal.
NORTH SHORE (NEW BRUNSWICK) REGIMENT C.A. (C/S)			(Erase heading not required)	FOR MONTH OF FEBRUARY 1945
Place	Date	Hour	Summary of Events and Information	Remarks, references to Appendices and initials
HOLLAND MR 776627 NIJMEGEN SHEET 1/25000	8 Feb 45	(Cont'd)	<p>The usual wireless trouble was encountered and relay stations were set up. "A" Coy reported they had taken their objective at 1850 hrs and "B" Coy under Capt. C.F. Richardson who were following closely behind reported they were on "A" Coy's objective at 1900 hrs and making for Zandpol. At 1905 hrs "B" Coy reported having run into some booby traps and four men and 1 officer Lieut L. Walsh were killed.</p> <p>At 1930 hrs "B" Coy reported making good progress and taking prisoners inside the dyke and were still moving toward Zandpol. There was very little water on the enemy side of the dyke. "A" Coy reported they were sending back 60 P.W. and "B" Coy 9. five of these PW were questioned and gave valuable information regarding the positions of enemy companies. At 2015 hrs "A" Coy reported they were consolidating on the dyke and "B" Coy asked for a five minute fire plan on Zandpol to quiet it down before moving in. This was laid on by Major T O'Shea 13 Fd. Regt. RCA, our Arty rep. At 2055 hrs "B" Coy reported they were in Zandpol and there was no enemy activity there at all.</p> <p>Bde Hq. were arranging for transportation of casualties and PW. The Regt. de la Chaudières reported good progress being made towards LEUTH and "C" and "D" Coys were ordered to get ready to move. However the R de Chaud were held up for a time and our Coys did not move. At 2305 hrs "B" Coy reported a counter-attack on "Chess" (Zandpol) approximately strength of about 20, repulsed and 1 PW taken. Total PW for the day was 78.</p>	E.S.W.
		9 Feb 45		<p>WEATHER: Cloudy and raining.</p> <p>At 0500 hrs R de Chaud reported LEUTH to be in their hands and at 0530 hrs the C.O. attended an HQ Gp. at Bde Tac Hq. At 0600 hrs the C.O. held a short conference with "C" and "D" Coy Comds and at 0620 hrs these companies moved off in Buffaloes for their objectives. Tac Hq. moved behind these companies and the plan was to establish the Hq. at Zandpol. However due to the circumstances this Hq. was not established but stopped for a short time on the dyke at MR. 797630.</p> <p>"C" Coy were moving up on area CHECKERS (See Appx 9) MR610632 and encountered very light opposition, capturing 4 P.W.</p>

Description of the battles of February 8, from the war diary of the North Shore Regiment.

For the text and images in this chapter, many sources from Dutch and Canadian archives have been used. A further elaboration of these sources can be found in the book *Water als Wapen in Ooijpolder en Duffelt* by Hans van der Wiel.

(Translation by Gerard Janssen)