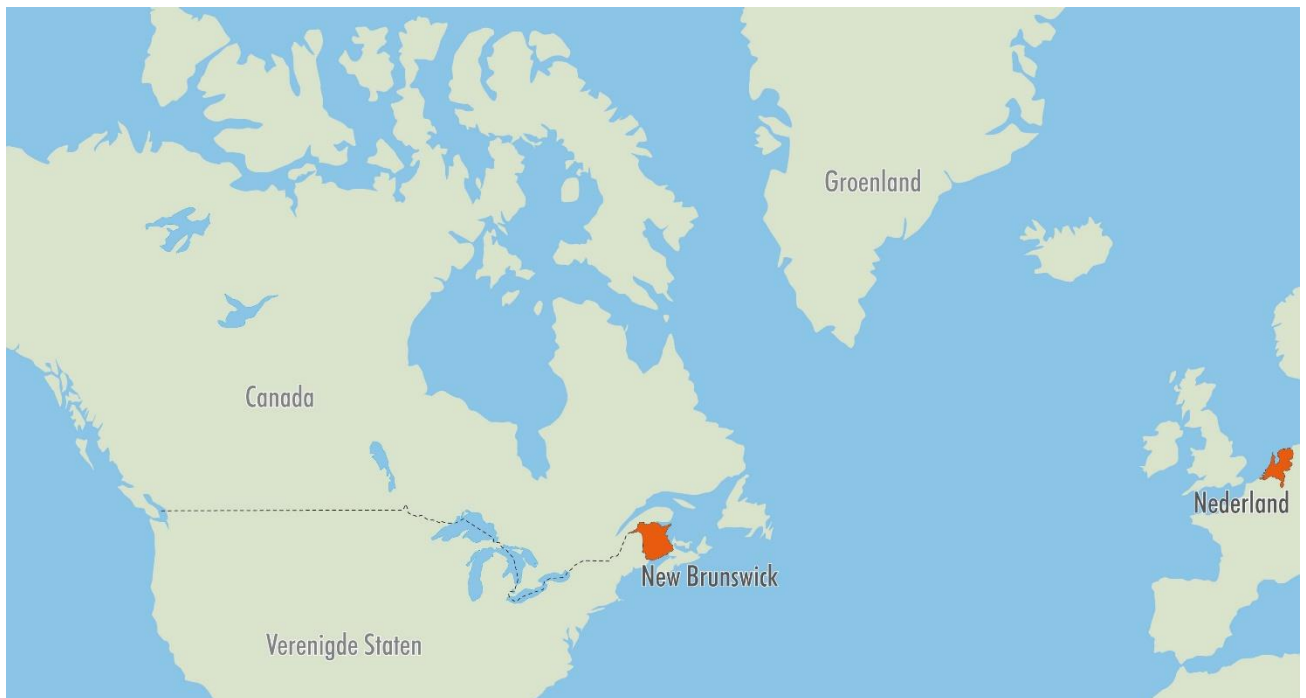


# Ode to the Liberators

Johan Bekhuis & Marco Cillessen

## Boys from Canada's East Coast

In the book 'Kekerdomse Oorlogsbelevissen' we read how the Kekerdom brothers Lambert and Gert Janssen were busy in the first week of February 1945 replenishing the stock of firewood at their Noordwijk host families in distant Groningen. Like their exiled fellow villagers, they had no idea of the rising tension and threat in their own region. At that time, a large Allied force had assembled in Nijmegen to prepare for Operation Veritable, the Rhineland Offensive. Some Canadian units were preparing the attack on the Duffelt polder. The North Shore Regiment from the Canadian province of New Brunswick was tasked with liberating Zandpol and Kekerdom. At the same time, the Régiment de la Chaudière from the province of Quebec had to take Leuth and the Queen's Own Rifles from the province of Ontario would then advance to Millingen. These men from eastern Canada had probably never heard of those small Duffelt villages before. Nevertheless, they would put their lives on the line to drive the dogged Germans out of their positions. The last night before the attack, those overseas boys undoubtedly fell into a restless sleep, with fear in their bodies and thinking of their families in distant Canada, if they were able to sleep at all from the apprehension.



The liberators of Kekerdom were soldiers from the Canadian province of New Brunswick.



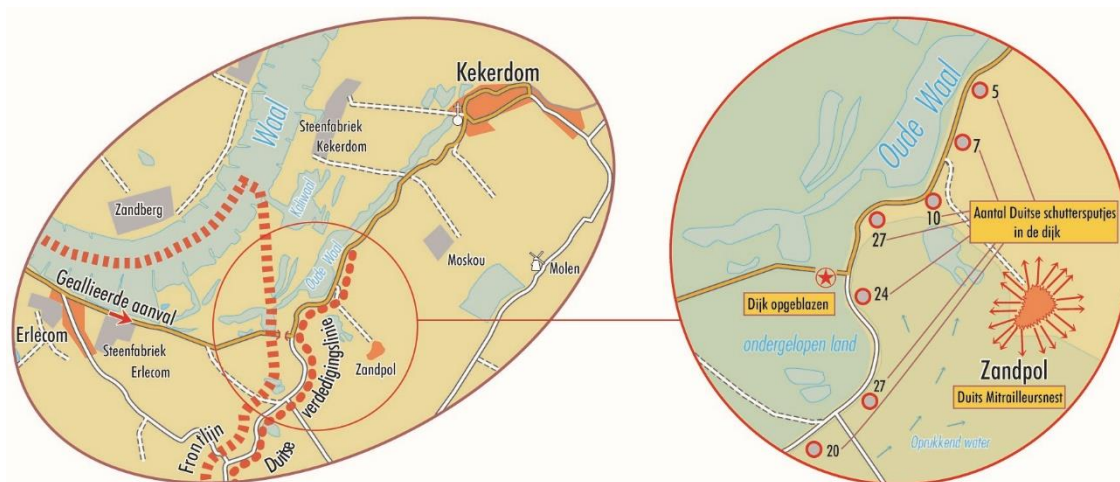
*'Infantry near Nijmegen, Holland'* by Canadian war artist Alex Colville, who accompanied the North Shore Regiment in the Ooijpolder and Duffelt  
(© Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum CWM 19710261-2079)



Badge of the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment

## Hampered by the flood

On February 8, 1945, the time had finally come. Unfortunately, the water level in the river rose sharply that week and the polder and villages flooded. The Germans had taken advantage of the high tide and had already made a large breach in the Erlecomsedam with explosives at the end of December, allowing the river water to flow unhindered into the polder. But the North Shore Regiment held their ground. These boys had already gained the necessary experience fighting on water during the capture of the Scheldt estuary and had amphibious vehicles at their disposal. It is not for nothing that they were called the Water Rats. The swelling river had already turned the Ooijpolder and the Erlecom Polder into an endless sea of water and the Duffelt polder was about to fill up. Behind the Duffeltdijk, the Canadians had to struggle knee-deep through the water when they started the battle for the Duffelt villages, while the level rose rapidly by the hour. To mask their attack from the German units along the North bank of the river Waal, they laid a smokescreen over the river. Nevertheless, the confrontation with the Germans near the Driedijk and Zandpol was extremely intense.



The front line near the Driedijk on February 8, 1945.

Driedijk area shown in map on the right (dijk opgeblazen = dyke blown, schuttersputjes = foxholes) (Map by Luc Oteman)

## Heavy fighting on February 8

Hans van der Wiel has described this attack in detail. The combination of flooding, lack of cover, treacherous minefields, snipers, and relentless machine gun fire was deadly. The Germans had dug a series of foxholes in the dyke and entrenched themselves with a large force in the hamlet of Zandpol, where fanatical machine gun units were concentrated. After preliminary bombing and fierce fighting, this German outpost was finally captured that evening. The next morning, February 9, 1945, the men of the North Shore Regiment were able to take the village of Kekerdom without further significant German resistance. The losses on the Canadian side during the two-day advance to Kekerdom amounted to nine casualties and fourteen wounded. The fallen were buried shortly afterwards at the Jonkerbos military cemetery in Nijmegen. In 1946 they were reburied at the Canadian war cemetery near Groesbeek, where they are now resting among more than two and a half thousand compatriots. All nine of those killed on February 8, had voluntarily enlisted in the Canadian army in the years before. The attractive salary of 1.50 to

1.70 Canadian dollars per day had been an important consideration: because of an economic crisis in Canada, they could not earn that much anywhere in their home country.



Men of the North Shore Regiment prepare for the attack with their Buffalo amphibious vehicles on February 8, 1945

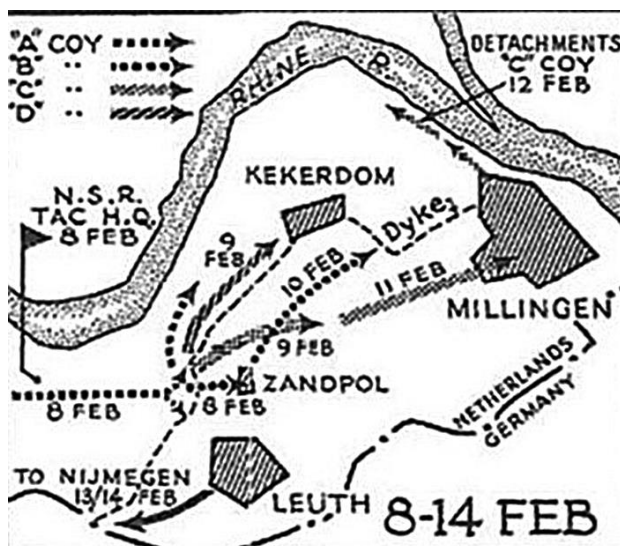


A smoke generator at Erlecom puts a smokescreen over the river Waal

## Kekerdom was unaware for a long time

As mentioned before, the Kekerdom exiles had no idea what was happening in their village during those days in February. News about the fighting in the Duffelt did not reach them. It would take most of them well into May or even June 1945 before they could return to their destroyed village and hear the stories about those February battles. By then, however, the capture of Kekerdom had already been over for months and everyone had long since turned their heads to other issues and had their hands full with new challenges. The need was high, and the poverty was great. In the summer of 1945, the villagers were busy making their damaged houses habitable again, preparing the vegetable garden and the land, looking for paid work and breathing life back into the village community. Everyone wanted to forget the misery of war as soon as possible and resume normal life. As a result, their Canadian benefactors were forgotten.

In the chaos of the post-war period, there was hardly any good information available about these military operations. The exact course of the liberation actions was archived much later. Only in 1963 published Canadian Will Bird his book *North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment: A Complete History 1794-1958*, in which the course of the fighting on February 8, 1945, at Zandpol and Kekerdom was also recorded.



Detailed map from Will Bird's book describing the attack on the Duffelt

## Ode to the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment

Which heroic soldiers were responsible for the liberation of the small spot on the map called Kekerdom? Who were they, where did they come from and what was their background? During the research of the war history of Kekerdom, this question became increasingly prominent as this information was not readily available. For this we had to search in Dutch and overseas war archives, and we sometimes got in touch with family of the fallen soldiers. We also received expert help from people and organizations with the necessary knowledge at home and abroad. Partly thanks to their efforts, we were given access to the War Diaries of the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment, in which their combat actions and advances were recorded from day to day. Through our Canadian contacts we obtained access to the so-called World War II Service Files of the fallen soldiers, with information about their military careers. Often there were leads in

these files that in several cases even led us to descendants so that we were able to obtain a photo of all the fallen soldiers. In this way it was possible to rescue the liberators of Keukerdom from oblivion, and above all to reflect on the great sacrifices they made.



Buffaloes at the dyke ramp near farm Keulsche Hof



DUKW amphibious vehicles in the water and on the Duffeltdijk. On the right the ruins of farm De Dijkhoeve.

## Heroism

From the description of the first contact with the enemy it is evident how intense it was in those crucial hours to breach the German defenses at the Driedijk, in which the Canadian soldier Russell Munroe played such a heroic role. Captain Richardson of 'B' Company mentions him specifically in his notes because of his heroism. Richardson writes how his unit of Buffalo amphibious vehicles became adrift behind the hole in the dyke when they approached the Driedijk. It was difficult to maneuver the last stretch to the dyke and contrary to plan his command vehicle reached the dyke ramp earlier than his attack troops. Private Russell Munroe, on board with him, did not think twice, jumped out of the Buffalo, and crawled up the dyke, from where he kept the enemy at bay. This enabled Commander Richardson to concentrate on his command tasks. Munroe, bombarded by German machine guns, then contacted 'A' Company and, together with his companions from 'A' and 'B' Companies, drove a first wedge in the German defenses. 'B' Company then continued the advance along the dyke when suddenly the forward platoon hit a minefield and came under heavy enemy fire.

Mine blasts caused the first five fatalities and numerous injuries, and the unfortunate platoon was pinned in place by the rattling machine guns. Under those miserable conditions, it was again Russell Munroe who risked his own life to venture into the minefield a few times to bring wounded comrades to safety. He then picked up an anti-tank weapon, crawled to a position higher up the dyke for a better view and under heavy enemy fire managed to eliminate the crucial German machine gun. After that, the company was able to continue the advance.



This aerial photograph of February 6, 1945 clearly shows how the river water flows with great force into the polder through the hole in the dyke at the Driedijk. On February 8, during the attack, the water was still gushing in. At that point, the water was 2 meters high to the left of the Duffeldijk, and knee-deep in the polder surrounding Zandpol.

(Translation by Gerard Janssen)