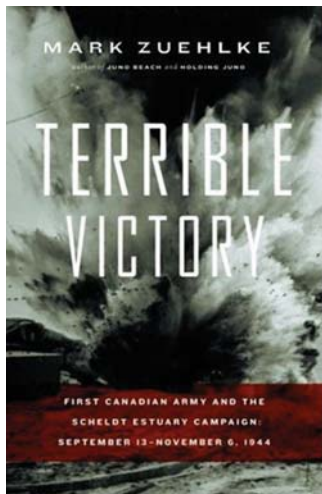

— BOOK REVIEWS —

TERRIBLE VICTORY: FIRST CANADIAN ARMY AND THE SCHELDT ESTUARY: SEPTEMBER 13, NOVEMBER 6, 1944

ZUELHKE, Mark. Douglas & McIntyre, 2007, 545 pages. \$37.95

Reviewed by 2Lt Thomas Fitzgerald, 2 Irish R of C



By September 1944, the war in Europe appeared won. The Allies, having stormed ashore at Normandy, had succeeded in encircling, destroying and routing the German army. In the pursuit that followed, the Allies had bounced the Seine River and were moving rapidly towards Germany. In the North, Brussels had fallen to the British Second Army on September 2, Antwerp, two days later. But in this success lay the seeds for, arguably, an unnecessary and bloody campaign—the Battle of the Scheldt Estuary, brilliantly and meticulously analyzed in Mark Zuehlke’s “Terrible Victory: First Canadian Army and the Scheldt Estuary Campaign.”

By the fall of 1944, the Allies were in grave trouble. “The Pursuit” of the previous summer had stalled due to logistical problems—the Allies were still trucking supplies in from the Normandy beaches, hundreds of miles from the front lines. There was dissension in the top command regarding how to conclude the war. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery favoured a narrow thrust across the northern German plain, while the Americans, under the command of General Omar Bradley favoured a broad front approach to Germany. Montgomery won the argument leading to the disastrous Operation MARKET GARDEN, vividly portrayed in the movie, “A Bridge Too Far”, from the book of the same name. Finally, relations between Montgomery and General H.D.G. Crerar, Commander of the First Canadian Army, while never warm, had particularly soured due in part, to Montgomery’s inability to recognize Crerar as a thoroughly Canadian general and not simply a dominion general.

By October 1944, with the failure of MARKET GARDEN and the Supreme Command’s insistence that the port of Antwerp be opened, Montgomery switched priorities and directed the Scheldt Estuary be cleared. The plan for opening the estuary was devised by Lieutenant General Guy Simmonds (General Crerar had left for England on medical leave) and consisted of four phases:

- ◆ clearing the area north of Antwerp and securing access to South Beveland;
- ◆ reduction of the Breskens Pocket, north of Antwerp (Operation SWITCHBACK);
- ◆ capture of South Beveland (Operation VITALITY); and
- ◆ the capture of Walcheren Island (Operation INFATUATE).

Relying on primary and secondary sources and interviews with the survivors, Zuehlke paints a vivid picture of the plight and the bravery of the Canadian soldiers in the battle that should not have been fought. From the insane (the near destruction of the Canadian Highland Regiment (the Black Watch) at Woensdrecht on “Black Friday”)

to the incredible (the South Beveland race between the 4th and 5th Infantry Brigade) to the heroic (the assault by the Calgary Highlanders, the Highland Regiment of Canada and the Regiment de Maisonneuve across the Walcheren causeway) to the humorous (the meeting between the Royal Regiment of Canada and the British 157th Infantry Brigade), Zuehlke writes compellingly and passionately about those autumn months when the Allied victory hung in the balance.

The campaign started off innocently enough. An infantry battalion (it was always the “poor bloody infantry” in the Scheldt campaign), the Algonquin Regiment from North Bay, Ontario tried to establish a beach head across the Leopold Canal, which if successful, would have permitted the 4th Canadian Armoured Division to move northward and reduce the Breskens Pocket, clearing the southern bank of the West Scheldt. But like similar battles, faulty intelligence, poor weather and terrible ground (it was always the ground) forced the withdrawal of the Algonquin Regiment leading to a series of slow, costly set piece battles. By November 8, and 6367 dead later, the Scheldt Estuary was cleared and Antwerp was open to great celebration (though no Canadian was invited to the festivities).

The Scheldt campaign was the story of the Canadian soldier. In “Terrible Victory”, as he has done in the past¹, Zuehlke recounts it through the eyes of the infanteer, the tanker or the gunner. The narration is fast paced and vivid. Unlike some military historians, the author has a knack for clear, concise writing even when describing the movement of various units. The reviewer has two small observations. First, the book is largely written from the perspective of the battalion commander and below. Perhaps to provide greater context to the campaign, some expanded discussion about the interaction between division and corps, corps and army, army and army group commander might have occurred. Second, notwithstanding the clarity of the narrator, greater use of maps particularly at the battalion or brigade level and their proper placement would have been of assistance.

This is a well written and extremely well researched book. Reading it would give anyone a great sense of pride in the Canadian soldier who fought well against a veteran, well supplied foe. It rightfully joins its place with others on the same subject². The Scheldt campaign was for Canada, a terrible victory.

Endnotes

1. Ortona: *Canada's Epic World War II Battle*, Toronto, Douglas & McIntyre, 1999; *The Liri Valley: Canada's World War II Breakthrough to Rome*, Toronto, Stoddard, 2001, *The Gothic Line: Canada's Month of Hell in World War II Italy*, Toronto, Douglas & McIntyre, 2003, *Juno Beach: Canada's D-Day Victory*, Toronto, Douglas & McIntyre, 2004.
2. Copp, Terry *Cinderella Army: The Canadians in North West Europe, 1944-1945*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2006, Whitaker, W. Denis and Whitaker, Sheilagh., *Tug of War: The Canadian Victory that Opened Antwerp*, Toronto, Stoddard, 1984.