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First Place

*Forgotten Battle: A Command Analysis of Lieutenant-General
Sir John Crocker GoC I British Corps 23 September – 8 November
1944*

Major Nicholas Wheeler, CD, RMC, MA

Many scholars believe that the Battle of the Scheldt or the Battle for Antwerp has been fully dissected and chronicled by Canadian historians. The narrative is of First Canadian Army successfully liberating the Scheldt River Estuary from September to November 1944 in an operation primarily executed by the infantry of II Canadian Corps. The Scheldt, the Breskens Pocket, Woensdrecht, and the Walcheren Causeway now reside within the pantheon of Canadian military battle honours and are stitched on the Regimental Colours of the infantry regiments of 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions. While Major-General Charles Foulkes was the A/GOC of II Canadian Corps, true command of this operation rested with the A/GOC of First Canadian Army – Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds. One of Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's acolytes, Simonds plays the part of the Clausewitzian genius within the narrative. To an extent, the academic community has been happy to accept these narratives as the definitive account of the battle.

Yet the story is incomplete because an examination of Lieutenant-General Sir John Crocker's part in this battle is noticeably absent. From 23 September to 8 November 1944, Crocker's I British Corps anchored the right flank of First Canadian Army with a large portion of its combat power. During this period, I British Corps successfully executed a number of tasks, none more important than engaging and destroying the bulk of Fifteenth Army. Through this, Crocker achieved significant tactical, operational, and strategic victories, which shaped and ultimately led to the successful opening of Antwerp as a major logistical hub. Despite the magnitude of Crocker's accomplishments, his contemporaries made no reference to his performance. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, who held Crocker in high esteem, and Simonds appeared fixated on their own battles respectively and made neither positive nor negative comments on his performance during this period. In addition, a comprehensive scholarly analysis of his command of I British Corps during the Battle of Antwerp has yet to be attempted. Given the absence of both professional and scholarly analysis, an examination of his command performance is merited and sorely overdue.

This essay will demonstrate that Lieutenant-General Sir John Crocker effectively commanded I British Corps during its operations north of Antwerp. The paper will first examine the criteria that will be used to assess Crocker's command performance as GOC I British Corps. By using 21st Army Group's operational art as the foundation of the study, the subsequent analysis will be based on tangible assessment criteria. However, certain intangible aspects of command and leadership, such as mission command and his relationship with his division commanders, will also be used to evaluate Crocker's command performance.

Subsequently, Crocker's command performance during the first phase of I British Corps operations north of Antwerp from 23 September to 15 October 1944 will be examined. In exploring the relationship between 21st Army Group, First Canadian Army, and I British Corps, the orders issued by each organization and the operations Crocker executed will be dissected. Critical to this analysis will be an examination of the limitations imposed by Montgomery on Crocker during this phase of the battle. This examination will demonstrate that, despite being poorly resourced and lacking the necessary combat power to execute his operations, Crocker nonetheless did his best to apply 21st Army Group's operational art in an attempt to achieve his assigned tasks. While there were several instances where he violated the principles of this operational art, it will be shown that this was in large part due to the operational imperatives imposed upon him by Montgomery. It will conclude that Crocker effectively commanded I British Corps despite the overwhelming operational limitations he faced.

Finally, Crocker's command performance during the second phase of the battle from 16 October to 8 November 1944 will be assessed. In the same vein as the first part of this study, the direction issued by 21st Army Group, specifically Montgomery's 16 October 1944 directive will be reviewed and Crocker's translation of this direction into operational action will be examined. Through a comprehensive analysis of Crocker's orders and actions, in conjunction with how he managed, organized, and fought I British Corps, it will be argued that Crocker effectively commanded I British Corps by completing his assigned tasks through the successful application of 21st Army Group's operational art. In conclusion, it will be further argued that by the end of the battle, Crocker had earned the trust and respect of his formation commanders and their staffs through the effective use of mission command and the manner in which he commanded I British Corps.

An analysis of command can be approached in a multitude of ways. This poses certain problems in the case of Crocker's command of I British Corps from 23 September 1944 to 8 November 1944. By 16 October 1944, I British Corps was composed of Divisions from four nationalities, only one, 49th (WR) Division, of which had served any period of time under Crocker's command. Given the short period of time in which the three other Divisions were under Crocker's command, an analysis of the long-term impact of Crocker on these formations is problematic. The same can be said for an analysis of the intangible quality of leadership. In this sense, only a limited analysis of Crocker's leadership qualities, that is his ability to influence his subordinate Division commanders through gaining their respect, can be accomplished. Instead, this analysis will focus on a more structured and tangible set of criteria. By using the framework of 21st Army Group's operational art as the basis for this analysis, we can assess how Crocker managed, organized, and fought I British Corps, in relation to these operational principles, and in turn develop a picture of his performance as a corps commander. Additionally, elements of this analysis will focus on how Crocker implemented the lessons learned from Normandy in the form of combined arms doctrine in order to maximize the combat power of I British Corps. Throughout this analysis external influences will be factored into the assessment of Crocker's performance. As it will be seen, Montgomery had a pervasive influence on I British Corps' operations during this time period, which influenced Crocker's adherence to 21st Army Group's "way of war."

Stephen A. Hart describes Montgomery's operation technique as "Colossal Cracks." This is important as Monty's operational technique would influence and drive all aspects of 21st Army Group operations, including those of Crocker's I British Corps. Hart identifies that the focus of 21st Army Group's operational art was "set-piece battles based on copious *materiel*,

during which is would sustain both troop morale by avoiding defeats and prevent excessive casualties. Through this operational approach Montgomery's forces would grind the enemy down by attrition based on massive firepower..."¹ The primary purpose behind this operational art was to minimize casualties and maintain the morale of 21st Army Group and Montgomery felt that the set piece battle was the best way to accomplish this objective. The set-piece battle itself had several constituent parts, which were manifestly interconnected. Chief among them was the master plan. It entailed the development and maintenance of a clear plan for how an operation or campaign would develop, and then the utilization of forces to enact this plan.² Canadian Army doctrine today would term this as a concept of operations, composed of the commander's intent, scheme of manoeuvre, main effort, and end state within the standard five-paragraph order format. Linked to this was the idea of a cautious and methodical approach based on methodical planning, administrative planning, and the concentration of force to maximize the prospects of success.³ Increasing the prospects of success not only meant achieving tactical and operational objectives, but achieving them with as few casualties as possible.

How 21st Army Group's combat power was used and employed also factored into its operational art. Concentration, the classic military principle of focusing the weight of your forces available on the decisive point of the enemy was naturally part of this way of war. In Montgomery's mind, this meant attacks on narrow frontages in order to overwhelm the enemy and to focus maximum offensive power to achieve a decisive break in and subsequent exploitation by follow on forces.⁴ Firepower based attrition was connected with this principle. This involved the massing of artillery to provide overwhelming firepower to advancing troops with the intent to kill, suppress, or stun the enemy, facilitating the breakthrough of the defensive crust. At the same time, direct fire assets, such as tanks and Self Propelled Anti-Tank (SP AT) guns, played an important role after the completion of indirect fires. Inevitably, this softening up of the enemy defensive positions would reduce casualties on the Anglo-Canadian forces. Finally, Hart argues that alternative thrusts were a complimentary and integral part of the set piece attack. He describes them as smaller-scale set piece battles designed to support the main efforts. By executing attacks on various points in the enemy defensive network, it would force the enemy to commit forces at multiple points along their

¹ Stephen Hart, *Montgomery and "Colossal Cracks": The 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe, 1944-45* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2000), p. 7.

² Hart, "Colossal Cracks," p. 84.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

front, preventing them from reacting quickly or effectively to the main effort.⁵

I British Corps found itself on the right flank of First Canadian Army, having been ordered there by Montgomery on 13 September after capturing the port of Le Havre. The intent was for Crocker's forces to fill the even widening gap between First Canadian Army and Second British Army, while the latter executed Operation Market-Garden.⁶ Having completed its move 23 September 1944, I British Corps began clearing between the Albert and Antwerp-Turnhout canals in preparation for its advance north. In a letter to Crocker on 26 September, Lieutenant-General Harry Crerar indicated that there was "an increased need for 1 British Corps to strike North, quickly," yet provided little with regards to a specific task linked to a purpose.⁷ While specific instructions were lacking, informal discussions on I British Corps' tasks had likely occurred between Crerar, Simonds, and Crocker prior to the battle.

However, the directive issued by Montgomery the following day clarified 21st Army Group's plan, which in turn shaped I British Corps' operations until 7 October. In cooperation with First United States Army, 21st Army Group tasked Second British Army to focus its efforts on crossing the Rhine in order to threaten the Ruhr, while First Canadian Army was to continue opening the Channel Ports, develop operations aimed at opening Antwerp, and protecting the left flank of Second British Army.⁸ While Montgomery had stated that his intentions were to open Antwerp and destroy all forces preventing 21st Army Group from capturing the Ruhr, his true priority was with the latter. In First Canadian Army's subsequent directive on 2 October, Simonds clarified I British Corps responsibilities. Crocker was tasked to thrust NE towards Tilburg-Hertogenbosch, direct 2nd Canadian Division to secure the South Beveland isthmus, and finally develop operations towards Breda and Roosendaal to secure 2nd Canadian Division's right flank.⁹

For the Germans' part, General Jodl directed Field Marshal Von Rundstedt to defend the Antwerp-Tilburg-Hertogenbosch line to the last as it was key to denying the Scheldt, and by

⁵ Ibid., p. 103.

⁶ Charles Perry Stacey, *The Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, Vol. III: The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe 1944-1945* (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer and Controller of Stationary, 1960), p. 359.

⁷ Crocker personal papers - Letter from Lieutenant-General Crerar to Lieutenant General Crocker, dated 26 September 1944.

⁸ W.E.C. Harrison, CMHQ Report #188: Canadian Participation in the Operations in North-West Europe, 1944. Part VI: Canadian Operation, 1 Oct - 8 Nov. The Clearing of the Scheldt Estuary, April 7, 1948, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), pp. 44-46.

⁹ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, p. 380.

consequence Antwerp, to the Allies.¹⁰ The actual defence of this line fell to Fifteenth German Army command by General Gustav-Adolf von Zangen. While Fifteenth Army was still in the process of reconstituting and reorganizing its forces after escaping across the West Scheldt, a defensive line began to emerge out of the chaos of its retreat through the Scheldt into Belgium and the Netherlands.

North of Antwerp, and within I British Corps' area of operations, LXVII Corps under General Otto Sponheimer defended from Antwerp to Turnhout.¹¹ Consisting of the 346th Division, 711th Division, and 719th Division, it would be I British Corps principle adversary during its operation north of Antwerp. LXVII Corps' operations were von Zangen's main effort during Fifteenth Army's time in the Scheldt and Sponheimer's corps was consistently reinforced at the expense of LXXXVIII Corps to the east and 70th Division in the Scheldt Estuary. Their primary task, until almost the end of October, was to prevent the isolation of the South Beveland isthmus, thus denying the use of Antwerp to the Allies.

As Fifteenth Army established its defensive line, it was far from being at one hundred percent fighting strength and was clearly not a first class fighting formation. Operations in France and its withdrawal east through Belgium had been costly, leaving Divisions seriously undermanned. Terry Copp puts the average effective strength of the Divisions between six to eight thousand men but those numbers and the quality of the soldiers varied greatly.¹² 346th Division consisted of four regiments of infantry instead of the standard two as it had absorbed regiments from 70th and 711th Divisions.¹³ The 711th Division had been badly mauled in the west and only consisted of three battalions of infantry with an additional battalion of Armenians and Ost troops. 719th Division was no better off and was described as a "patched up junk heap of odds and sods," composed of a *mélange* of infantry, railroad guards, untrained flying personnel, local defence organizations, Dutch SS, and "stomach" soldiers.¹⁴ According to Stacey,

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 381.

¹¹ CMHQ, Special Interrogation Report – General Otto Sponheimer, Kardex, 981.065, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), p. 9. Sponheimer commanded LXVII Corps until 25 October at which point he returned to Germany due to health concerns.

¹² Terry Copp, *Cinderella Army: The Canadians in Northwest Europe 1944-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), p. 125.

¹³ CMHQ, Special Interrogation Report –Lieutenant General Erich Diestel, Kardex, 981.065, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), p. 9.

¹⁴ CMHQ, Special Interrogation Report – General Eugen-Felix Schwalbe, Kardex, 981.065, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), p. 9. Stomach soldiers were individuals who were previously exempt from military service due to stomach disorders or injuries. They required a specialized diet in order to

the 245th Division, at the time under the command of LXXXVIII Corps and straddling the boundary between I and XII British Corps, had been reduced to five thousand men and had lost most of their equipment.¹⁵ Tanks, self-propelled guns, and heavy weapons were in short supply, forcing von Zangen to consolidate most of these assets at army level in order to maintain some form of tactical reserve. This “fire brigade” concept was used extensively throughout operations in the Scheldt in order to reinforce areas of Fifteenth Army’s defensive line threatened by Allied penetrations. However, weakened though they were, von Zangen’s forces were still capable of denying the Allies the use of Antwerp.

Having received his orders, Crocker now had to find a way to achieve his assigned tasks in accordance with Montgomery’s intent. First and foremost, Crocker must have realized that he had insufficient forces to accomplish his assigned tasks and was restricted in the manner in which he could employ his available combat power. Given the boundaries outlined in the orders issued by I British Corps, Crocker had to maintain a front of almost forty kilometers with only three divisions – 2nd Canadian Division, 49th (WR) Division (The Polar Bears), and the 1st Polish Armoured Division.¹⁶ From a scheme of manoeuvre perspective, two large pieces of it were dictated to Crocker. 2nd Canadian Division was attached more for geographic and administrative purposes than an attempt to increase the combat power of I British Corps. While I British Corps’ main effort was towards Tilburg-Hertogenbosch, 2nd Canadian Division was tasked by Simonds to attack towards the South Beveland isthmus in preparation for the clearance of the Scheldt Estuary under the command of II Canadian Corps.¹⁷ In this sense, Crocker was restricted in his ability to incorporate all of his combat power into a well-developed and coordinated plan.

1st Polish Armoured Division presented Crocker with a similar problem. Simonds had originally envisioned 1st Polish Armoured Division supporting 2nd Canadian Division to the South Beveland isthmus; however, direction from Montgomery on 27 September overrode this priority.¹⁸ Instead, they were transferred to I British Corps on the same day for operations only. From a command perspective, this meant that Crocker was required to support 1st Polish Armoured Division administratively but lacked the authority to assign them tasks. This

maintain their combat efficacy. 70th Division, occupying Walcheren Island and South Beveland, was an example of a Stomach Division.

¹⁵ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, p. 362.

¹⁶ I British Corps Operation Instruction No. 15, dated 22 September 1944. Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 10 790, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

¹⁷ Simonds direction to First Canadian Army in Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, p. 380.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 380.

suggests that they arrived at I British Corps with a predetermined mission; that is, attacking along the Tilburg-Hertogenbosch line.¹⁹ While 1st Polish Armoured Division did come under I British Corps for all purposes three days later, it still highlights the operational limitations imposed on Crocker.

If there was any confusion on Crocker's part it was clarified in a letter from Montgomery followed by an in-person meeting. In the former, Field Marshal emphasized that the "right wing of the (First Canadian) Army must 'drive' hard northwards on the axis Tilburg-Hertogenbosch."²⁰ Given 2nd Canadian Division's predetermined task, this reinforced the obligation to send 1st Polish Armoured Division northwest. He further indicated, "Breda, and places that way (presumably Roosendaal), do not matter."²¹ Developing operations northwards towards the Maas, excluding the advance on Tilburg-Hertogenbosch were obviously inconsequential to Montgomery, including any kind of flank support to 2nd Canadian Division. Crocker later recounted to his brother that after receiving the letter, "...I was sent for by Montgomery, who told me what he wanted."²² Given the direction outlined in the letter and the meeting with Montgomery, it is evident that Crocker had very little flexibility in how he could develop operations associated with his assigned tasks.

The forces available to I British Corps and their relative strength also played a large role in Crocker's development of his plan. With 2nd Canadian Division and 1st Polish Armoured Division having predetermined tasks, this left him 49th (WR) Division to essentially round out his scheme of manoeuvre. This was far from sufficient to accomplish the tasks assigned to I British Corps and Crocker recognized his limited capabilities. One example of this is a message from I British Corps to First Canadian Army on 28 September 1944, which identifies the requirement for a composite bridging organization (likely composite battalion strength) no later than 30 September 1944 to support I British Corps' advance to the line Bergen Op Zoom-Roosendaal—Breda-Tilburg-Hertogenbosch.²³ It is unknown if these assets were delivered but it

¹⁹ I British Corps War Diary, entry for 27 September 1944. 1 British Corps, War Diary and Message Logs, August - September 1944, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), Kardex, 79.681, Reel 3.

²⁰ Crocker personal papers. Letter from Field Marshal Montgomery to Lieutenant-General Crocker, dated 28 September 1944.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Crocker personal papers. Letter from Lieutenant-General Crocker to George Crocker, dated 9 December 1944.

²³ GS Log and Summary of Events, entry 981, dated 28 September 1944. 1 British Corps, War Diary and Message Logs, August - September 1944, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), Kardex, 79.681, Reel 3.

is unlikely given I British Corps' main effort and the administrative/transport situation. Similarly, on the same day Crocker was offered 33rd Tank Brigade but requested that it not be transferred to I British Corps as they had insufficient administrative resources to support it.²⁴ In Crocker's assessment of the situation, as 49th (WR) Division established bridgeheads over the Antwerp-Turnhout canal the remainder of I British Corps "... followed up at once, ridiculously thin on the ground and still without most of my artillery, tanks, etc..."²⁵

Compounding the issue of a lack of forces available was the apparent manpower shortage within I British Corps formations. While this manpower shortage was not felt acutely by First Canadian Army until mid-October 1944, it was already an issue within 1st Polish Armoured Division. The Poles were suffering from considerable manpower shortages, in particular within its armoured regiments. Replacements were limited, had insufficient training, and conscripts who had defected from the German Army had no armour training whatsoever. In order to maintain the strength of his armoured brigade, Major-General Stanislaw Maczek GOC 1st Polish Armoured Division, disbanded his anti-aircraft platoon and distributed the personnel throughout the armoured regiments. While this solved the problem of bodies, the division's fighting value would have been negatively impacted prior to its incorporation into I British Corps.²⁶ Though 49th (WR) Division had replacements more readily accessible, by the beginning of October 1944 it began to fold companies due to a lack of leadership and personnel.²⁷ Clearly, Crocker was very limited in what he could achieve given the forces available and his assigned tasks.

In developing his plan, Crocker recounted that it was "Not easy, as it meant trying to do two things at once, each pulling in exactly opposite directions."²⁸ The essence of Crocker's complaint to his brother was that he was attack on two non-mutually supporting divergent axis. Between 26 and 29 September, 49th (WR) Division fought to establish and expand a bridgehead over the Antwerp-Turhout canal. A very logical first step for I British Corps current and future operations as the establishment of the bridgehead meant that 2nd Canadian Division and 1st

²⁴ GS Log and Summary of Events, entry 982, dated 28 September 1944. I British Corps, War Diary and Message Logs, August - September 1944, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), Kardex, 79.681, Reel 3.

²⁵ Crocker Personal Papers. Letter to George Crocker.

²⁶ Evan McGillivray, *The Black Devils' March – A Doomed Odyssey: The 1st Polish Armoured Division 1939-1945* (West Midlands, EN: Helion & Company Ltd, 2005), Kindle edition, p. 2212.

²⁷ Patrick Delaforce, *The Polar Bears: Monty's Left Flank from Normandy to the Relief of Holland with the 49th Division*. (Gloucestershire, UK: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1995), p. 161.

²⁸ Crocker Personal Papers. Letter to George Crocker.

Polish Armoured Division would not waste effort on trying to cross the canal and could instead transition directly into the attack. Crocker easily could have waited until he had all of his manoeuvre units available but he took a calculated risk, which paid off, by launching a pre-emptive strike against a weakened German defensive line.²⁹

Having established the bridgehead, Crocker issued verbal orders to his Divisions on 30 September.³⁰ Written orders were not produced nor could a transcript of the verbal orders be located. However, 49th (WR) Division's orders in conjunction with the actions of 1st Polish Armoured Division and 2nd Canadian Division provide a detailed account of what Crocker must have provided as direction. Upon reorganization, 2nd Canadian Division would pass the 5th and 6th Canadian Infantry Brigades through the Polar Bears bridgehead at Ryckevorsel and attack along the Antwerp-Turnhout canal before attacking north to the South Beveland isthmus. Concurrently, 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade would continue to clear the northern suburbs of Antwerp. 1st Polish Armoured Division, reorganized into 3rd Polish Infantry and 10th Polish Armoured Brigade Groups would be the main effort advancing on the Tilburg-Hertogenbosch line. Finally, 49th (WR) Division provided right and left flank protection to 1st Polish Armoured Division with the 146th Brigade and 147th Brigade, both reinforced with a squadron of tanks from the 49th (WR) Reconnaissance Regiment (49th Recce Regt) and 27th Canadian Armoured Regiment respectively. Meanwhile, 56th Brigade continued to expand the bridgehead at Ryckevorsel and Luce Force, a composite force composed of 49th Recce Regt (less two squadrons) with an anti-tank battery and company of infantry, advanced between 56th and 147th Brigade.³¹

On 1 October, with their regrouping complete, Crocker launched his forces against LXVII Corps' defensive front. Between 1 and 5 October, initial operations were successful, with the combined forces of 1st Polish Armoured Division and 49th (WR) Division advancing as far north as Alphen and 2nd Canadian Division clearing the northern suburbs of Antwerp, pushing the Germans as far north as Merxem. Though I British Corps achieved some success during this period, resistance intensified around 5 October. Previously disorganized German Forces had

²⁹ GS Log and Summary of Events, 27-29 September 1944. I British Corps, War Diary and Message Logs, August - September 1944, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), Kardex, 79.681, Reel 3. Delaforce, *The Polar Bears*, pp. 161-163.

³⁰ I British Corps War Diary entry, dated 30 September 1944. I British Corps, War Diary and Message Logs, August - September 1944, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), Kardex, 79.681, Reel 3.

³¹ 49th (WR) Division Operation Instructions 47-49. First Canadian Army, General Staff, October 1944, October 1944, Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 13628, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

been reconstituted and reinforced to resist I British Corps' push north.³² Nowhere was this more evident than 2nd Canadian Division's area of operations and 1st Polish Armoured Division's attempts to push to Tilburg. Situation reports and message logs of I British Corps are indicative of this increased level of resistance as the Corps' advance ground to halt after encountering determined German defences and counter attacks all along their front.³³ By the end of 6 October, continued operations towards Tilburg-Hertogenbosch were abandoned and Crocker was forced to adopt a defensive posture from St. Leonard to Alphen.

The plan for I British Corps to secure the right flank of XII British Corps was only a partial success and violated several principles of war or the operational techniques of 21st Army Group. 1st Polish Armoured Division had advanced only half the distance to Hertogenbosch leaving a substantial portion of XII British Corps flank unsecured by Crocker's forces. Further, 2nd Canadian Division's right flank was unprotected in addition to I British Corps being wholly incapable of clearing all German forces south of the Maas. The question now is how and why did the plan fail and was Crocker responsible for I British Corps lack of success?

Without a doubt a master plan was lacking. While I British Corps did attack towards Tilburg-Hertogenbosch, there was no clear direction on what the next steps would have been. How Crocker would provide flank security to 2nd Canadian Division or attack towards Roosendaal and Breda was never articulated and, given the tasks and composition of his forces, was impossible. It is important to note that this was not a question of waiting for additional manoeuvre units to reinforce I British Corps as anything that became available was transferred to Montgomery's main effort, the advance to the Ruhr.³⁴ Crocker's account of the situation highlighted that I British Corps

...was very stretched by now on a 45 mile front which we had stirred up to considerable activity. The two divergent operations had the effect of, so to speak,

³² Harrison, CMHQ Report #188, 188. A.G. Steiger, AHQ Report #77: Information from German Sources - Part IV: Higher Direction of Operations from Falaise Debacle to Ardennes Offensive (20 Aug - 16 Dec 44), March 31, 1958, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), p. 39. As early as 28 September 1944, OKW and OB West believed that the advance of Second British Army and I British Corps would cut off Fifteenth Army from the remainder of the Wehrmacht.

³³ GS Log and Summary of Events 1-6 October 1944. I British Corps, War Diary and Message Logs, October-November 1944, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), Kardex, 79.681, Reel 4. I British Corps Situation Reports, dated 1-6 October 1944. Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 10 790, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

³⁴ Crocker Personal Papers. Letter to George Crocker. Specifically, 51st (H) Division, 7th Armoured Division, and 33rd Tank Brigade were transferred to XII British Corps.

pulling us apart and I had no reserve. The rest of my chaps, who had been left 'grounded', had been diverted to other corps and never rejoined me.³⁵

The question of what I British Corps would have done if it had reached Hertogenbosch was also never determined. Realistically, the chance of I British Corps successfully attacking along the Tilburg-Hertogenbosch line was extremely limited due to the combat power available to Crocker. Had they in fact made it to their final objective, Crocker would have been required to maintain control of a front line that stretched fifty-five kilometres from Ryckevorsel to Hertogenbosch with just two reduced Divisions. Included within this monumental task was the requirement to protect the bridgehead at Ryckevorsel and the lines of communications running from it to Hertogenbosch. Follow-on tasks such as these are noticeably absent from 49th (WR) Division's orders, given they would have played a large role in their execution.³⁶ Regardless of the fact that the second phase of operations seemed to be unplanned, these tasks were something Crocker's forces were ill-equipped or prepared to execute.

These limitations tie into the idea of concentration of force. Through an examination of I British Corps' operations from a First Canadian Army or 21st Army Group perspective, it is evident that Montgomery and Simonds hindered Crocker's ability to apply this principle of war. While there were mitigating factors, I British Corps' tasks forced Crocker to attack on a broad front with insufficient forces.³⁷ This prevented him from focusing his combat power on the decisive point of LXVII Corps' defences or to capitalize on any success with follow-on forces. The resulting consequences were that as I British Corps advanced towards Tilburg and South Beveland, it became decisively engaged and overextended, which forced Crocker to revert to the defensive.

How 49th (WR) Division was regrouped and employed provides insight into these issues. To accomplish the division's tasks, Major-General Evelyn Barker, GOC 49th (WR) Division, created a number of composite forces. The creation of composite forces leads to two conclusions. First, the lessons learned in Normandy were being put to good effect in the Scheldt. Pure infantry or armour forces did not perform as well as combined arms teams. Thus,

³⁵ The activity Crocker referred to was the commitment of Battle Group Chill and elements of the 245th Division to stymie the advance of I British Corps towards Tilburg.

³⁶ 49th (WR) Division Operation Instructions 47-50. First Canadian Army, General Staff, October 1944, October 1944, Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 13628, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

³⁷ The mitigating factors would be Montgomery's main effort being the Ruhr, First Canadian Army's extended front, and the Allied supply satiation.

the creation of combined arms brigade groups was a logical and tactically sound application of lessons learned.³⁸ There is however, a line between a tactically sound decision and a desperate one. In the case of I British Corps, it was stripping infantry away from its brigades, using its reconnaissance regiment in a direct fire capacity, and scraping the bottom of the proverbial barrel to create sufficient manoeuvre units to maintain a continuous defensive line.³⁹ According to first-hand accounts from soldiers of the 49th (WR) Division, the overextension of I British Corps allowed German units to constantly infiltrate their positions. In one case, a battalion headquarters was attacked, forcing the OC's and clerks into battle.⁴⁰ Similar examples of corps units being isolated and either destroyed or captured are recounted frequently within the I British Corps message logs.⁴¹

If we tie all of these factors together, it is difficult to argue that Crocker adopted a methodical and cautious approach to this phase of operations. Substantial risk was assumed when 2nd Canadian Division was directed on South Beveland and a weakened 1st Polish Armoured Division was ordered to attack towards Hertogenbosch. By mid-October, both units would be combat ineffective due to the high levels of casualties they had sustained. It can also be argued that the concept of alternative thrusts was not employed, which allowed von Zangen to concentrate his fire brigades at decisive points during the battle. Primary German sources indicate that LXVII Corps was not unbalanced by I British Corps' operations during this period. Penetrations were, for the most part, contained and a large part of their front saw limited offensive action.⁴² The best example of this was his use of Battle Group Chill. While 2nd

³⁸ Charles Forrester, *Monty's Functional Doctrine: Combined Arms Doctrine in British 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe, 1944-45* (West Midlands, UK: Helion & Company Limited, 2015), p. 74.

³⁹ 49th (WR) Division Operation Instruction 48 and 52. First Canadian Army, General Staff, October 1944, October 1944, Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 13628, Library and Archives Canada (LAC). Delaforce, *The Polar Bears*, p. 162. Op Instr 47 identifies that 49th Recce Regt would provide recce squadrons to the three infantry brigades for close support. At this point 49th (WR) Division no longer had Division recce elements, which forced 1st Polish Armoured Division and the 49th (WR) Division infantry brigades to rely on their integral recce assets for intelligence. Op Instr 52 outlines the creation of Bob Force, which absorbed two companies and a platoon of infantry and the 89 LAA Regiment converted into infantry.

⁴⁰ Delaforce, *The Polar Bears*, pp. 155-156.

⁴¹ GS Log and Summary of Events, Sheet 972, dated 27 September 1944. I British Corps, War Diary and Message Logs, August - September 1944, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), Kardex, 79.681, Reel 3.

⁴² Elmar Warning, "Battles of 67 German Corps between Scheldt and Maas, 15 September – 25 November 1944," Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C17, 20 523, Library and Archives Canada. CMHQ,

Canadian Division was advancing west from the 49th (WR) Division bridgehead, von Zangen used the Chill's forces to halt 1st Polish Armoured Division's advance and inflict considerable casualties. This effectively ended the threat of Fifteenth Army being split, and in turn allowed von Zangen to redeploy Chill's forces to the South Beveland isthmus with similar results against 2nd Canadian Division.

The obvious criticism that could be leveled against Crocker, from a Canadian perspective, would be that he did not do enough to support 2nd Canadian Division's advance towards the South Beveland isthmus. If accepted as a legitimate criticism then we must examine what other options were available to him. One option would have been to send 1st Polish Armoured Division alone to secure XII British Corps flank. However, previous experience in Normandy with executing a singular thrust by an armoured division had produced decidedly negative results. Lacking infantry support, armoured divisions found themselves exceptionally vulnerable to tank hunting teams and AT guns. Additionally, attacking with a reduced force in order to support what Montgomery obviously did not consider the main effort would have been a failure at the operational level. Compounding this were the limited replacements available to the Polish division. Heavy Polish casualties would be difficult, if not impossible, to replace given their limited replacement pool. With 2nd Canadian Division tasked to capture the South Beveland isthmus, the only infantry available to Crocker to support Maczek's advance were Barker's brigades.

It is at this point that serious consideration must be given to the external influences and limitations imposed upon Crocker during this phase of battle in order to properly evaluate his performance. To charge Crocker with insufficiently supporting 2nd Canadian Division would be a myopic approach to examining the facts, which ignores the strategic situation, Montgomery's intent, and the limited forces available to Crocker. By supporting 1st Polish Armoured Division with infantry brigades from 49th (WR) Division reinforced with the limited number of tanks available to I British Corps, Crocker secured the flanks of his (and more importantly Montgomery's) main effort and maintained a continuous defensive line in cooperation with XII British Corps on the right flank. From a Corps perspective, Crocker did the best he could with the forces available in order to achieve his higher commanders' intent. He focused the majority of his combat power on the attack towards Hertogenbosch, with the remaining forces executing the necessary task of securing the bridgeheads, flanks, and lines of communications. While Crocker likely would have preferred a broad front approach based on alternative thrusts similar

to Operation Charnwood, he lacked the resources or support of his higher headquarters to execute such an operation.⁴³

This concentration of Crocker's forces on the main operational effort extended to the employment of his artillery forces. At some point prior to 1 October, 4 Army Group Royal Artillery (AGRA) was attached to I British Corps to provide fire support for its operations. It seems evident that Crocker maintained some elements of it at Corps level while the remaining units were attached to its divisions. Both 2nd Canadian Division's and 49th (WR) Division's operation instructions indicates that medium artillery regiments were attached from 4 AGRA to provide indirect fire support during their operations.⁴⁴ A more detailed account of the usage of artillery during this operation could not be found and it is likely that specific details were coordinated verbally between the Corps CRA and the division artillery representatives. What is important to note is that Crocker had received 4 AGRA to support his operations and, in turn, he provided artillery units as integral support to his division's operations. Thus, it can be said with a fair degree of certainty that the Corps as a whole relied on the concept of firepower-based attrition to facilitate its operations.

Crocker's command presence was also evident on the battlefield. Douglas Delaney identified that Crocker preferred to remain with his Tactical (Tac) HQ close to battle in order to provide the necessary command and control of his subordinate units.⁴⁵ After issuing orders on 30 September, Crocker's Tac HQ moved east and advanced north with 1st Polish Armoured Division and 49th (WR) Division in order to facilitate the command and control of this attack on Tilburg-Hertogenbosch. While this sacrificed direct involvement with 2nd Canadian Division, Crocker's position allowed him to focus on the operations that would achieve his and 21st Army Group's operational objectives. While many have perceived the operations to open the Scheldt as the main effort of 21st Army Group, at this point it was a supporting operation to Montgomery's advance on the Ruhr. Between 28 September and 5 October, Crocker's Tac HQ sent no less than forty-three messages back to the Main HQ providing situation reports on Division operations. Even though the majority of Tac HQ messages related to operations on I

⁴³ Douglas Delaney, *Corps Commanders: Five British and Canadian Generals at War, 1939-1945* (Toronto: UBC Press, 2011), pp. 148-152.

⁴⁴ 49th (WR) Division Operation Instruction 47. First Canadian Army, General Staff, October 1944, October 1944, Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 13628, Library and Archives Canada (LAC). 2nd Canadian Division Operation Instruction 1, 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, General Staff War Diary, August-November 1944, Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 13 751, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

⁴⁵ Delaney, *Corps Commanders*, p. 130.

British Corps' right flank, Crocker was still managing, albeit to a lesser degree, 2nd Canadian Division's operations. This is indicative of a commander who has a high situational awareness of his battle space and a firm grip on his formations' actions while at the same time providing them the necessary support and direction.

The final question that must be asked is if Crocker voiced his concerns to Montgomery or Simonds on the dissonance between his assigned tasks and forces available? No record could be found but given Crocker's personality and integrity, it would not be surprising if he did.⁴⁶ That being said, Crocker recognized that Antwerp and the Scheldt were a secondary priority to Montgomery at the time, thus, voicing concerns about his inability to complete a subordinate task would likely not be a hill Crocker was willing to die on. Simply put, Montgomery's overarching operational objective to seize the Ruhr meant that he was prepared to assume risk with I British Corps and the opening of Antwerp. Montgomery's letter and meeting were, without a doubt, designed to leave no question as to what was expected of Crocker.

As German resistance to I British Corps' advance towards Tilburg stiffened between 5 and 6 October it became increasingly necessary to adopt a defensive posture. This had as much to do with the number of manoeuvre units available to Crocker as it did with the heavy casualties that had been inflicted upon 1st Polish Armoured Division. Crocker's Operation Instruction Number 16 issued on 8 October is indicative of the limits imposed upon I British Corps. On 7 October, 2nd Canadian Division reverted to II Canadian Corps command while 7th British Armoured Division, 51st (H) Division, 34th Armoured Brigade, and 1st Royal Dragoons were attached to I British Corps in order to provide right flank security to 2nd Canadian Division and clear all German forces south of the Maas.⁴⁷

Yet the addition of these three formations also meant that Crocker had to assume responsibility for the entirety of XII British Corps' front while it was redirected northwest towards the Ruhr.⁴⁸ This added responsibility meant that I British Corps now held a front more than sixty kilometres long that stretched from Oostmalle to Eindhoven in the south, which increased to over ninety kilometers north, anchored on Dinteloord in the west and Grave in the east. Thus, while I British Corps did see a gross increase in combat power, these formations had

⁴⁶ Delaney, *Corps Commanders*, p. 142. Delaney has described Crocker as a man of impeccable integrity and willing to voice his opinion to his superiors whether it was popular or not.

⁴⁷ I British Corps, Operation Instruction No. 16, 9 October 1944, Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 10 790, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

⁴⁸ Harrison, CMHQ Report #188, p. 78.

to remain in situ to maintain flank security for Second British Army and were unavailable to support either of I British Corps assigned tasks. This was compounded by the fact that the remainder of Crocker's forces, that is 1st Polish Armoured Division and 49th (WR) Division, had been fixed along their front by elements of 85th, 245th, and 719th Divisions since 5 October.

The question for Crocker essentially became what could he attempt to accomplish with the forces available to him. The answer was essentially very little. "Looking after a Corps front of some 80-100 miles with five Divisions and strung out in a long line did not amuse." were the sentiments espoused by Crocker when recounting this phase of the battle.⁴⁹ That being said, Crocker recognized the need to maintain some form of offensive action in order to maintain situational awareness on German activity and to keep their forces fixed within his area of operations. It is clear that he did not envision any major operations until he was reinforced as it risked heavy casualties and he had insufficient forces to exploit potential gains.⁵⁰ The manpower shortages now facing 1st Polish Armoured Division did not help the situation. In a letter to Crocker, Simonds asked that 1st Polish Armoured Division be moved into a static role and to not "...count on them being used offensively until they have had a chance to reorganize and properly train and absorb reinforcements."⁵¹ A memo attached to the letter identified that 1st Polish Armoured Division was short 90 officers and 750 other ranks with no reinforcements available in Northwest Europe. It was believed that the earliest 1st Polish Armoured Division could be reinforced was mid-November, once the captured Polish conscripts from the German Army had been retrained. Crocker found himself once again in a situation where he had insufficient forces to accomplish his assigned tasks. Moreover, his assigned tasks were still subordinated to Montgomery's main objective of attacking to the Ruhr.

He instead directed his formation commanders to conduct patrols and local offensive operations when the tactical situation was favourable. While this meant that I British Corps would remain in the defensive, it was a tactically and operationally sound decision given his weak combat power in comparison to his area of operations and the main effort of Montgomery. Major operations risked the further erosion of Crocker's Divisions, which

⁴⁹ Crocker Personal Papers. Letter to George Crocker.

⁵⁰ I British Corps, Operation Instruction No. 16, 9 October 1944, Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 10 790, Library and Archives Canada (LAC). Crocker indicated in his operation instruction that until 4th Canadian Arm'd Division was transferred to I British Corps on 12 October 1944, no major offensive operations could be conducted. Further, he indicated that he likely could not clear Tilburg until 15 October and Hertogenbosch until 21 October.

⁵¹ Crocker Personal Papers. Letter from Lieutenant-General Simonds, A/GOC First Canadian Army to Lieutenant-General Crocker, dated 12 October 1944.

subsequently risked the flank security of Second British Army. While a defensive policy prevented him from accomplishing his assigned tasks, operationally this was irrelevant. Montgomery's push to the Ruhr remained the priority and by securing Second British Army's left flank, Crocker directly supported his operational intent.⁵² Given the forces eventually required to clear south of the Maas River after Montgomery issued his 16 October directive, that is two corps directing three armoured Divisions, five infantry Divisions, and two independent armoured brigades, Crocker's decision to adopt a defensive posture was reasonable based on the forces available, operational main effort, and tactical situation. Until Montgomery altered the priorities of 21st Army Group, there was little that I British Corps could do to support First Canadian Army's task of clearing the Scheldt and opening Antwerp.

The fallout of the Eisenhower/Montgomery strategic debate set the stage for the final phase of the battle to open Antwerp. Montgomery's 16 October directive specified that Antwerp was now the priority for 21st Army Group and would be given priority over all other operations within its area of operations.⁵³ At the Army Group level, Second British Army was ordered to go into the defensive on VII and XXX Corps' fronts while a reinforced XII British Corps attacked west towards Fifteenth Army's main bridgehead over the Maas. First Canadian Army was ordered to direct all of its resources to the clearance of the Scheldt and the opening of Antwerp. For I British Corps' part, it was initially tasked to clear the right flank of 2nd Canadian Division so that it could attack west into South Beveland. Recognizing its lack of combat power, Crocker was reinforced with 4th Canadian Armoured Division, 34th Armoured Brigade, and 104th (US) Division, recently arrived from the United States.

In phase one, Crocker directed I British Corps to advance towards Roosendaal/Bergen Op Zoom on 20 October in support of 2nd Canadian Division's efforts to isolate the South Beveland isthmus. This included the recently attached 4th Canadian Armoured Division, and a reinforced 49th (WR) Division.⁵⁴ On its right flank, 1st Polish Armoured Division, with 2nd

⁵² Stacey, *Victory Campaign*, p. 388. Stacey argues that Montgomery's 8 October directive made the opening of Antwerp the main effort of First Canadian Army, with the exception of flank security for Second British Army. What Stacey failed to understand was that the task to secure Second British Army's flank meant that I British Corps was unable to secure 2nd Canadian Division's right flank, essentially preventing any chance of clearing the Scheldt and opening Antwerp.

⁵³ Montgomery's 16 October 1944 Directive reproduced in Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, p. 655.

⁵⁴ 49th (WR) Division had been reinforced with 34th Armoured Brigade. I British Corps, Operation Instruction No. 17, 17 October 1944, Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 10 790, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

Canadian Armoured Brigade, minus one regiment, would maintain a defensive posture anchored on Alphen.

As I British Corps began operations, it faced LXVII Corps, composed of 85th Division, which had been redeployed from LXXXVIII Corps to counter the threat of 2nd Canadian Division at the South Beveland isthmus, 346th Division, 711th Division, and the 719th Division. First to cross the line of departure, 4th Canadian Armoured Division advanced along 2nd Canadian Division's flank towards Esschen and Bergen Op Zoom, while the 49th (WR) Division provided flank security by attacking Wuestwezel. Such was the threat posed to the integrity of LXVII Corps' defensive line by the advance of 4th Canadian Armoured Division and the Polar Bears defeat of 711th Division at Wuestwezel, that it precipitated the redeployment of 245th Division from Fifteenth Army' left flank to LXVII Corps.⁵⁵

The threat to Fifteenth Army was magnified on 22 October when 49th (WR) Division defeated the 245th Division and forced them to withdraw northeast to Zundert. In the face of the mounting casualties taken by 85th and 346th Division, the inability to provide reinforcements in the Woensdrecht area, and the continued advance of 4th Canadian Armoured Division, von Zangen was forced to conduct a withdrawal along the entire Fifteenth Army front. On 23 October, Sponheimer indicated,

Now a withdrawal of the whole front had to be carried out, come what might, regardless of OKW orders, if the whole corps was not to be sacrificed and the way to the Maas left open to the enemy. As a result of the Corps' strong insistence, permission was given for the whole front to be withdrawn to the general line of Halsteren (north of Bergen Op Zoom)/South Roosendaal/South Breda/Alphen North.⁵⁶

With this withdrawal, I British Corps had forced Fifteenth Army to abandon their attempts to retain some measure of influence on the South Beveland isthmus.

Phase two of the operation began on or about 25 October, when Montgomery altered 21st Army Group's scheme of manoeuvre.⁵⁷ XII British Corps' limit of exploitation was now set at

⁵⁵ Warning, "Battles of 67 German Corps," pp. 33-34.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵⁷ The development of Montgomery's scheme of manoeuvre to clear Fifteenth Army south of the Maas is ambiguous. XII British Corps Operation Instruction 17 dated 20 October 1944 indicates that the advance to Moerdijk was an expected task. However, XII British Corps Operation Instruction 18 dated 27 October 1944 makes no mention of the Moerdijk task. Terry Copp was the first to posit that Montgomery changed the scheme of manoeuvre on 25 October 1944 and briefed the change to 4th Canadian Armoured Division

Geertruidenburg while Crocker was ordered to advance to the Maas, clearing all German forces in his path. By 27 October, I British Corps was threatening LXVII Corps' newly established Halstren/South Roosendaal/South Breda/Alphen line. 4th Canadian Armoured Division had finally cleared the northern outskirts of Bergen Op Zoom on 28 October, while the 49th (WR) Division had advanced just south of Roosendaal in preparation for an assault on the town. Major-General Terry Allen's 104th (US) Division, which had relieved the Polar Bears at Esschen, had attacked northeast, capturing Zundert in its first combat operation, while the 1st Polish Division was preparing to break the stalemate at Alphen. From this position, Crocker ordered 4th Canadian Armoured Division to attack towards Steenberg while 49th (WR) Division cleared Roosendaal on its right flank. Meanwhile the Timberwolves would attack towards Standdaarbuiten to seize a crossing point over the Mark River at the same time that 1st Polish Armoured Division captured Breda and attempted a crossing over the Wilhelmina Canal.

Opposition was fierce as I British Corps attempted to push the bulk of Fifteenth Army north of the Maas, which had anchored its defences on the Mark River. Between 28 October and 2 November, 4th Canadian Armoured Division fought a hard campaign against 85th Division and 6th Para Regiment north of Bergen Op Zoom and onto Steenberg. On 3 November, the Division entered the town, forcing the Germans to withdraw to Dinteloord the next day. To the east, 49th (WR) Division successfully captured Roosendaal on 30 October and continued its advance to the Mark River. On the same day, Allen's Division captured Oudenbosch, just south of the Mark River and was directed to force a crossing in the hopes of catching the Germans off guard.⁵⁸

Unfortunately, after a two-day battle and heavy casualties, the Americans were forced to withdraw and reattempt the crossing with 49th (WR) Division. Both 49th (WR) Division and 104th (US) Infantry Division successfully crossed the canal on 2 November under heavy fire causing the collapse of the Mark River defensive line. The Polar Bears then moved towards Willemsted on the Maas, capturing the town on 5 November, and linking up with 4th Canadian Armoured

while meeting with Maj-Gen Foster. Copp's argument is supported by British and American official histories and Harrison's CMHQ report 188. All three indicated that Crocker issued verbal direction to his divisions, which indicated that I British Corps would now advance to the Maas. Copp, *Cinderella Army*, 157. L.F. Ellis, *The Defeat of Germany*, vol. II, *Victory in the West* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1968), 193. Charles B. MacDonald, *The Siegfried Line Campaign*, United States Army in World War II (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), p. 224.

⁵⁸ Leo Arthur Hoegh and Howard J. Doyle, *Timberwolf Tracks: The History of the 104th Infantry Division, 1942-1945*, (Washington, D.C.: Infantry Journal Press, 1946), p. 77.

Division further east in Dinteloord.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, the Timberwolves continued towards Moerdijk, and assaulted the German bridgehead in cooperation with 1st Polish Armoured Division. Following up their success, on 5 November, the Division linked up with elements of the 49th (WR) Division on the outskirts of Dinteloord and subsequently drove the remaining Germans north of the Maas.

On the right flank of I British Corps, 1st Polish Armoured Division had successfully broken the stalemate at Alphen and captured Breda on 28 October in cooperation with Imp Force. The Poles then split into two brigade groups – one attacking along the I/XII British Corps boundary to Geertruidenberg and the other towards Moerdijk in a converging attack with 104 (US) Infantry Division on 8 November. This final action by the Poles and Americans successfully cleared the remnants of Fifteenth Army from south of the Maas and concluded 21st Army Group's operations to open Antwerp.

Even after Montgomery issued his 16 October directive, considerable issues with the development and implementation of a master plan still existed. The First Canadian Army order indicated that I British Corps' task was to prevent the Germans from interfering with 2nd Canadian Division during its ops into South Beveland.⁶⁰ Crocker's solution to this problem was for 4th Canadian Armoured Division, with 49th (WR) Division in support, to attack along 2nd Canadian Division's extended right flank. 1st Polish Division would remain in a static defensive role in order to regroup and reconstitute. However, what I British Corps was expected to accomplish after securing 2nd Canadian Division's right flanks was not articulated. Absent this direction, Crocker likely still appreciated that subsequent operations would have to be developed north in cooperation with XII British Corps to achieve Montgomery's desired operational and strategic end state. For Crocker's part, he did develop a comprehensive and logical plan to achieve the Montgomery's operational objectives.

When looking at the organization and employment of I British Corps' forces, Crocker's use of 4th Canadian Armoured Division with 49th (WR) Division on the Corps' right flank was well in line with what Montgomery considered the appropriate cooperative employment of armoured and infantry divisions. An independent attack by Foster's Division, where he

⁵⁹ Harrison, CMHQ Report #188, p. 96.

⁶⁰ II Canadian Corps Operation Order dated 19 October 1944. First Canadian Army, General Staff, October 1944, October 1944, Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 13628, Library and Archives Canada (LAC). Reproduction of Field Marshal Montgomery's directive dated 16 October 1944 in Stacey, *Victory Campaign*, 655. I British Corps, Operation Instruction No. 17, 17 October 1944, Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 10 790, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

retained responsibility for his own flank security risked heavy casualties from German panzer grenadiers or AT Guns appropriately sited in the defensive.⁶¹ Maintaining flank security also degraded their ability to focus their efforts on operations to secure 2nd Canadian Division's right flank.

From Crocker's perspective, the employment of a heavily reinforced 49th (WR) Division must have appeared as an operational necessity in order for Foster to accomplish his primary task of supporting 2nd Canadian Division into South Beveland. Further, the concentration of the majority of Crocker's available combat power enabled him to exploit any success he achieved at LXVII Corps' defences north of Antwerp. From a purely tactical perspective, Crocker's scheme of manoeuvre was sound as his forces had the necessary resources and support to accomplish their tasks. At the operational level, it stretched LXVII Corps forces to the breaking point and threatened to undermine von Zangen's entire concept of operations.

This was in large part due to Crocker concentrating the vast majority of his available combat power at the decisive point of Fifteenth Army's and LXVII Corps' line of defence. Both divisions were reinforced with medium artillery regiments and heavy AA regiments, while also being able to draw upon Corps fires.⁶² In addition to indirect fire support, they were reinforced with SP AT guns and Crocodiles in the direct fire support role, while the 34th Armoured Brigade was also attached to the Polar Bears to provide intimate armoured support. This in turn gave the 49th (WR) Division a greater capacity to engage the remaining armour, AT guns, and SP guns that existed within their area of operations. In application, both Foster and Barker employed these assets to good effect during the advance in order to execute the concept of firepower-based attrition. Given the addition of this amount of combat power, it demonstrates that Crocker understood what was required to secure 2nd Canadian Division's right flank and resourced it accordingly.

While he devoted the majority of his combat power on the Corps' left flank, Crocker still had the foresight to prepare for the anticipated second phase of his operation. Recognizing that 1st Polish Armoured Division was unable to execute operations independently, he created Imp

⁶¹ Forrester, *Monty's Functional*, p. 128.

⁶² 49th (WR) Division Operation Instruction 55 (Operation REBOUND) dated 17 October 1944, First Canadian Army, General Staff, October 1944, Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 13628, Library and Archives Canada (LAC). 4th Canadian Armoured Division Operation Instruction 11 (Op SUITCASE) dated 17 October 1944, 4th Canadian Armoured Division, General Staff War Diary, September-October 1944, Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C3, volume 13788, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

Force. Based on an infantry battalion from the 49th (WR) Division, 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade (not at full strength as one of 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade's regiments was tasked to 2nd Canadian Division) and a Belgian detachment, Imp Force moved to the right flank of the Corps in support of 1st Polish Armoured Division.⁶³ Imp Force was subdivided into White Force and Gord Force, which were Canadian armoured regiments reinforced with infantry companies. The creation these proto-Battle Group/Combat team formation demonstrates that Crocker had a clear understanding of the need for infantry-tank cooperation and the capabilities of his formations. In effect, his continued use of composite forces enabled him to magnify his combat power, making I British Corps stronger than its constituent parts.

At the same time, placing Imp Force and 1st Polish Armoured Division in a temporary defensive role made sense both tactically and operationally. Tactically, the Poles were still reeling from the casualties they had suffered in August and September. Further, any advance by these two forces extended the salient 1st Polish Armoured Division had created during its advance to Alphen earlier in October. Further offensive operations without left or right flank security not only accepted considerable risk, but offered no real tactical value as it likely would have drawn unwanted attention from Fifteenth Army. Linked to this is the operational risk associated with further operations by 1st Polish Armoured Division. Had the Poles been further reduced and rendered combat ineffective, it would have jeopardized their employment in future operations to clear the Germans south of the Maas and Crocker's ability to accomplish Montgomery's operational objective. Once the remainder of I British Corps and XII British Corps had caught up with these forces, they would be in a better position to continue their advance. In this sense, leaving 1st Polish Armoured Division and Imp Force in a defensive role in the short term to reorganize and, in the Polish case reconstitute, was a rational decision.

Much of the same can be said for the remainder of I British Corps' operations to Maas. Once Montgomery finalized his scheme of manoeuvre, Crocker was finally able to execute what could be considered a fully developed master plan. Essentially, he advanced four divisions up, with 104th (US) Division coming out of the Corps reserve to attack between 1st Polish Armoured Division and 49th (WR) Division.⁶⁴ Operations in I British Corps centre allowed Maczek's Division and Imp Force to break out of Alphen and cooperate with XII British Corps on their right flank. While Crocker maintained a small reserve, the vast majority of his combat power

⁶³ Delaforce, *The Polar Bears*, p. 171. I British Corps War Diary, entry for 24-25 October 1944. I British Corps, War Diary and Message Logs, October-November 1944, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), Kardex, 79.681, Reel 4.

⁶⁴ Hoegh, *Timberwolf Tracks*, p. 62.

was attached to his divisions, in order to provide them with the necessary direct and indirect fire support to achieve their objectives.⁶⁵ I British Corps' alternate thrusts across the entire Corps front meant that Fifteenth Army and LXVII Corps no longer had the ability to transfer forces to threatened points on their defensive line. More importantly, it meant that his division commanders now fully understood what their expected end state was and how they were going to achieve it.

While Crocker's alternate thrusts exerted considerable pressure on the Germans, it still adhered to the concept of a methodical and cautious approach. When 1st Polish Armoured Division and 104th (US) Division suffered heavy casualties during the initial crossing of the Wilhelmina Canal and Mark River respectively, Crocker had the good sense to withdraw them. Though Maczek and Allen's Divisions likely could have expanded the bridgehead, Crocker recognized that casualties would have been heavy and that a temporary tactical withdrawal was the best course of action. Shortly thereafter, he ordered a Corps level deliberate attack that overwhelmed the final German defensive barrier before the Maas River.⁶⁶ As much as this demonstrates that Crocker ensured his divisions were operating in accordance with his overarching intent, it also highlights Montgomery's dogma of minimizing casualties through the methodical and cautious approach.

The reduction of the Mark defensive line was not the last instance of this approach. During the final stages of the battle, Crocker had the option for 1st Polish Armoured Division drive to Moerdijk to cut off the withdrawal of the remnants of LXVII Corps and Fifteenth Army. From a tactical and geographical perspective, this would have been a logical course of action. Other factors must be considered though. The isolation of the Moerdijk bridgehead would have likely resulted in fierce opposition from German forces, both those attempting to withdraw and the artillery assets that had already moved north of the Maas. Given this likely resistance and the fragility of 1st Polish Armoured Division's manpower, Maczek's Division would have been reduced to the point of being combat ineffective. Just to get the Poles across the Mark Canal and advance to the Maas required considerable support from 7th British Armoured Division and 2nd

⁶⁵ Division orders clearly indicated that Crocker had attached tanks, SP AT guns, Crocodiles, and additional artillery assets to his two infantry Divisions. 104th (US) Division Operation Instruction dated 29 October 1944. 49th (WR) Division Operation Instruction 62, dated 29 October 1944. First Canadian Army, General Staff, October 1944, Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 13628, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

⁶⁶ I British Corps, Operation Order No. 5, 1 November 1944, Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C17, volume 10 790, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

Canadian Armoured Brigade.⁶⁷ It seems evident that casualty minimization was an overarching operational concern during the conduct of operations under Crocker's authority.

When assessing Crocker's direct command of I British Corps and its subordinate formations, it is clear he had great confidence in his division commanders. The concept of mission command was prevalent during this time period and focused on bottom-up plans instead of Crocker imposing detailed schemes of manoeuvre. The initial operation instruction provided very broad direction for the execution of 4th Canadian Armoured Division and 49th (WR) Division tasks, which allowed Foster and Barker to develop their own division level plans. Evidence of this is twofold. First, Barker was given considerable resources to attack up the right wing of 4th Canadian Armoured Division, which he had the flexibility to reorganize as he saw fit. The creation of Clarke Force, a proto-battle group formation, was not dictated in I British Corps' orders and was likely Barker's initiative. Similarly, the official history of the 34th Armoured Brigade recounts,

The Division Commander's (Barker) briefing was wide in its terms and gave the O.C. (officer commanding) Force the fullest freedom to operate over a generous area of country to the EAST of where the Canadians right flank was expected to move.⁶⁸

Clearly, the concept of mission command was established within 49th (WR) Division, which would only have been possible with Crocker's consent. By affording his subordinates the flexibility to plan their division's operations within the context of Crocker's intent, it synchronized their operations and inspired trust and confidence from the bottom-up. Division commanders fully supported Crocker's plan because it was as much their plan as it was his. Commanders such as Montgomery and Simonds did not afford their subordinates the same kind of flexibility or trust.

That is not to say that Crocker abdicated his role as GOC I British Corps to his division commanders. For example, when Crocker visited Foster to discuss Operation Suitcase on 19 October, considerable changes were made to 4th Canadian Armoured Division's scheme of manoeuvre. Instead of attacking to Esschen in two phases as outlined in the original operation instruction, it was altered to a more cautious approach with limited objectives. Esschen was

⁶⁷ Crocker Personal Papers. Letter from Major-General S. Maczek to Lieutenant-General John Crocker, dated 4 November 1944.

⁶⁸ The Story of 34 Armoured Brigade, Phase IV, I Corps operations in Eindhoven and flank protection of the Canadian advance from Antwerp to Steenberg. Accessed on 5 March 2018. http://www.royaltankregiment.com/9_RTR/History%20of%2034%20Armd%20Brigade.htm

only to be attacked with approval by Foster, who required approval from Crocker.⁶⁹ By limiting 4th Canadian Armoured Division's initial thrusts, it facilitated 49th (WR) Division's ability to maintain right flank security. Had Foster successfully attacked towards Esschen and, for whatever reason, Barker's operations had stalled, significant combat power could have been concentrated on Foster's right flank by LXVII Corps. Naturally, this would have delayed 4th Canadian Armoured Division's advance and the completion of its task to secure 2nd Canadian Division's right flank.

The 34th Armoured Brigade's account of the battle also supports Crocker's continuing presence. While understood that they had considerable flexibility to accomplish their tasks, they recognized there were limitations. Barker had promised them his full support as long as they continued their advance north. Clearly, if they were not prosecuting operations within Barker's intent, which was based on the direction he received from Crocker, changes would have to be made. So, while Crocker was prepared to give great flexibility to his Division commanders, they were constrained by I British Corps' concept of operations.

While Crocker's strong, yet flexible, command of I British Corps seems evident, his mental state during this time period has been questioned. Crocker's son Wilfrid, also an armour officer, was killed in Holland on 20 October 1944, the day 4th Canadian Armoured Division and 49th (WR) Division initiated their advance north. Delaney has argued Crocker's "steely resolve faded...but his skills...never left him."⁷⁰ Based on this argument, one would assume that there would have been a quantifiable decline in Crocker's command presence and performance during I British Corps' push to the Maas. However, primary sources present conflicting facts.

Contrary to operations to secure the right flank of Second British Army, Crocker's Tac HQ is noticeably absent from primary sources. From 20 October to 8 November, there is only one entry regarding the location of the Tac HQ.⁷¹ Similarly, the Main HQ operations log records

⁶⁹ 4th Canadian Armoured Division Operation Instruction 11 (Op SUITCASE) dated 17 October 1944, Confirmatory Orders Operation Instruction 11 (Op SUITCASE) dated 19 October 1944, and War Diary Entry for 19 October 1944. 4th Canadian Armoured Division, General Staff War Diary, September-October 1944, Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C3, volume 13788, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

⁷⁰ Delaney, *Corps Commanders*, p. 123.

⁷¹ I British Corps War Diary entry dated 24 October 1944. I British Corps, War Diary and Message Logs, October-November 1944, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), Kardex, 79.681, Reel 4.

no radio traffic from the Tac HQ throughout the duration of the battle.⁷² Given the regular war diary and operation log entries prior to the death of Crocker's son, it suggests a marked decrease in his command and control activities. If one only read these two primary sources, one could come to the conclusion that Crocker disappeared from the battlefield.

Yet a careful analysis of primary sources outside of I British Corps presents a different picture, one in which Crocker was present throughout the battlefield. From 20 to 31 October, Crocker visited 4th Canadian Armoured Division daily, with the exception of 28 October, to converse with Foster.⁷³ Given its proximity to 49th (WR) Division, it can be assumed that he visited Barker with this frequency as well. During this period, he also met with Allen on several occasions including a meeting on 25 October, which included Montgomery. Given that I British Corps' Main HQ was located thirty-two kilometers east in Turnhout, Crocker's Tac HQ must have been deployed forward during this time period. Crocker maintained this level of activity well into November, in particular during the planning and coordination of the Mark River operation in Roosendaal with 1st Polish Armoured Division, 104th (US) Division, and 49th (WR) Division.⁷⁴ So, despite the fact that I British Corps' war diary and message logs have little recorded on his Tac HQ's movements or communications, in order to accomplish this level of coordination, he must have been deployed forward in the battle space throughout operations.

This brings into question the idea that Crocker's "steely resolve" had cracked after the death of his son. While it undoubtedly had an impact on him, which is indicated in his correspondence with his brother George, he was still apparently able to continue with day-to-day command of I British Corps unabated.⁷⁵ Crocker's high level of activity and effective command and control suggests he compartmentalized the loss of his son and only dealt with

⁷² I British Corps GS Log and Summary of Events 20 October – 8 November 1944. I British Corps, War Diary and Message Logs, October-November 1944, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), Kardex, 79.681, Reel 4.

⁷³ 4th Canadian Armoured Division War Diary October 1944. 4th Canadian Armoured Division, General Staff War Diary, September-October 1944, Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C3, volume 13788, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

⁷⁴ Main HQ was located at Camp de Brasschaet, approximately twenty-five kilometers south of Roosendaal. Hoegh, p. 80.

⁷⁵ While Crocker does indicate in his letter, "It is hard to see clearly and think clearly. The awful finality of the physical separation keeps returning like a cloud. It isn't that one doesn't believe, if somewhat blindly and inarticulately, the love and wisdom with which things are ordered. It is just the pain of having a great chunk of oneself cut away, and the pain of seeing those dear to one hurt" this was seven weeks after Wilfrid had been killed and three weeks after he had returned home from visiting his wife. Crocker personal papers. Letter to George Crocker.

the true grief of his loss upon his return to England, after the completion of the drive to the Maas. So while Crocker was likely inconsolably distraught as a father, evidence exists that he maintained his “steely resolve” as a military officer until he was home with his family and had time to process his loss.

It is worth examining casualty levels within I British Corps during these operations. Part of Montgomery’s art was a methodical and cautious approach in order to minimize casualties to the greatest extent possible. Division daily casualties for October are nearly identical for 4th Canadian Armoured Division, 1st Polish Armoured Division, and 49th (WR) Division. Casualty rates from II Canadian Corps, specifically 2nd and 3rd Canadian Division are also comparable.⁷⁶ What can be ascertained from this comparison and the associated figures is that Crocker did not assume an unacceptable level of risk during I British Corps operations. By giving his formation commanders the resources they required to execute their tasks, he maintained casualty rates on par with the rest of First Canadian Army.

The exception to this argument was 104th (US) Division, which had a daily casualty rate almost double to that of the Anglo-Canadian Divisions. Allen was able to fight a different type of war, as the American Army had a much greater capacity to produce reinforcements. Their casualty rate can also be attributed to inexperience, as this operation was their first experience in combat. A first hand account of a standard operation executed by 104th (US) Division is provided by the CO of the Hallamshire Battalion of the 146th Brigade:

They (104th (US) Division) advanced gallantly across the open plains like out troops on the Tugela River in the Boer War of 1899. The enemy had reserved his fire and caught the defenceless B(attalio)n in the open with everything he had. Thank God ‘Bubbles’ Barker (49th (WR) Division Commander) always saw that our fire support was sufficient. It was contrary to out training to advance 3000 yards of open ground without the friendly cover of either smoke or darkness.⁷⁷ In their first three days of combat, the 104th (US) Division suffered three hundred and thirty-two casualties, and by the end of operations one thousand two hundred and thirty-six – four hundred more than the next highest divisional casualty total. However, on the whole, Crocker balanced the morale and operational necessity of minimizing casualties with the requirement to achieve Montgomery’s operational and strategic end state.

⁷⁶ Consolidated C and S state 1 September to 31 October 1944. First Canadian Army, Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General War Diary, September-October 1944.

⁷⁷ Lieutenant-Colonel Hart Dyke’s account of the 104th (US) Divisions’ relief of the 49th (WR) Division in Wuestwezel in Delaforce, *The Polar Bears*, p. 168.

The evaluation of leadership and positive influence by Corps commanders is also difficult. The transient nature of divisions, formations, and other attachments means that a commander's influence over his subordinates can be fleeting. That Crocker was largely well respected by his superiors is unquestioned. Delaney's account of his career from his early days as a subaltern to his command of I British Corps provides a plethora of positive reviews and admiration by his superior officers.⁷⁸ During his time north of Antwerp, Crocker seemed to elicit the same respect from his subordinates. In a personal letter to Crocker, Maczek thanked him for "... (Crocker's) helpfulness and leadership since my division came under your command."⁷⁹ At the same time this respect expanded beyond the interaction between Crocker and his division commanders. The operations officer of 104th (US) Division recounted, "The association with... I British Corps and their supporting troops was most pleasant. At all times the commanders, staffs, officers and men were most cooperative and helpful."⁸⁰ The war diarist of 4th Canadian Armoured Division echoed this assessment, ""The G Staff are agreed that I Corps are very pleasant co-workers. The absence of the Canadian habit of filling in pauses in the conversation with remarks very much in the vernacular, make our Brit cousins appear doubly cool and restrained."⁸¹ A commander's staff is a reflection of the commander himself. Their actions and manner in which they interact with other staffs is in accordance with the direction and personality of their commander. Staff members who act outside of this direction are normally brought into line or simply fired. Thus, the cooperation and mutual respect between Crocker's and the Division staffs would have largely been due to his influence.

This essay has proven that Lieutenant General John Crocker effectively commanded I British Corps during its operations north of Antwerp. During the first phase of operations north of Antwerp, Crocker was faced with a series of limitations that prevented him from achieving the tasks assigned to him by Montgomery. Regardless, he recognized Montgomery's main effort and tailored I British Corps' orders and operations to reflect this priority. While he violated several of the constituent principles of 21st Army Group's operational art, he did so because Montgomery's overarching operational and strategic priorities demanded it. In essence, Crocker made the best of a bad situation, organizing and fighting his formations in a manner that provided them the greatest possible support and protection while they attempted to realize

⁷⁸ Delaney, *Corps*, pp. 122-171.

⁷⁹ Crocker Personal Papers. Letter from Major-General S. Maczek.

⁸⁰ Hoegh, *Timberwolf Tracks*, p. 98.

⁸¹ 4th Canadian Armoured Division War Diary, entry for 22 October 1944. 4th Canadian Armoured Division, General Staff War Diary, September-October 1944, Department of National Defence Fonds, RG24, C3, volume 13788, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

Montgomery's objective of attacking the Ruhr. Crocker's command of I British Corps during this period was clearly effective, despite the overwhelming operational limitations imposed upon him.

This effectiveness was mirrored during the second phase of the battle. Crocker provided clear direction both written and verbal, shielding his subordinate formations from much of the operational and strategic dissonance caused by Montgomery's orders. During operations to clear 2nd Canadian Division's right flank, he successfully implemented the operational principles of 21st Army Group to achieve a devastating effect on LXVII Corps and Fifteenth Army as a whole. As Montgomery's scheme of manoeuvre changed, Crocker effectively reorganized his corps and plan to reflect this change. By attacking with fully resourced divisions on a broad front with alternative thrusts, he forced von Zangen to defend the entire LXVII Corps front, undermining his fire brigade defensive posture.

Finally, through the effective use of mission command, his formation commanders were given the flexibility to develop their own plans based on their intimate knowledge of their forces, the terrain, and enemy. This, in turn, meant that they had a stake in the battle; it was their plan as much as it was Crocker's. From this mutual trust developed a keen sense of respect for the Corps Commander and his staff. Throughout this, in the face of the loss of his son, Crocker maintained at a minimum his professionalism by coordinating operations and providing direction at key points in the battle. By no means did Crocker demonstrate the Clausewitzian phenomenon of the genius during the battle. However, he provided solid command and leadership while he oversaw I British Corps' operations, which ultimately led to operational and strategic victory for First Canadian Army and 21st Army Group and earned him the respect of his subordinate commanders.

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