



How we liberated Ostend

by Brigadier J.A. Roberts

In the afternoon of the seventh of September, 1944, the 12th Manitoba Dragoons were reconnoitering far in advance of the leading troops of the Second Canadian Corps and had reached the Town of Nieuport where they ran into the German fire from the enemy entrenched in the dune positions of the Atlantic wall.

Screening troops were left to engage the German positions, and the leading armoured cars of "B" Squadron under the command of Lieutenants Phelps, Jefferson and Wilson, were ordered to proceed forward to test the enemy strength in the outskirts of Ostend.

The liberation and capture of Ostend was of early importance to the Allied Forces in order to open up a seaport to accept supply tonnage in view of the heavy administrative strain caused by reason of the long supply route from the Normandie beaches into Belgium.

On mid-afternoon of September seventh, the leading armoured cars reported that they had encountered a Belgian civilian on a roadside several kilometers outside of Ostend who advised them that the German evacuation of Ostend had

commenced, and that he was prepared to guide our leading troops into the Town. Orders were given to proceed under the guidance of the Belgian civilian, who was later identified as M. Robert Lanoye, journalist of Ostend.

M. Lanoye mounted the back of the leading armoured car and slowly guided the troops into the City.

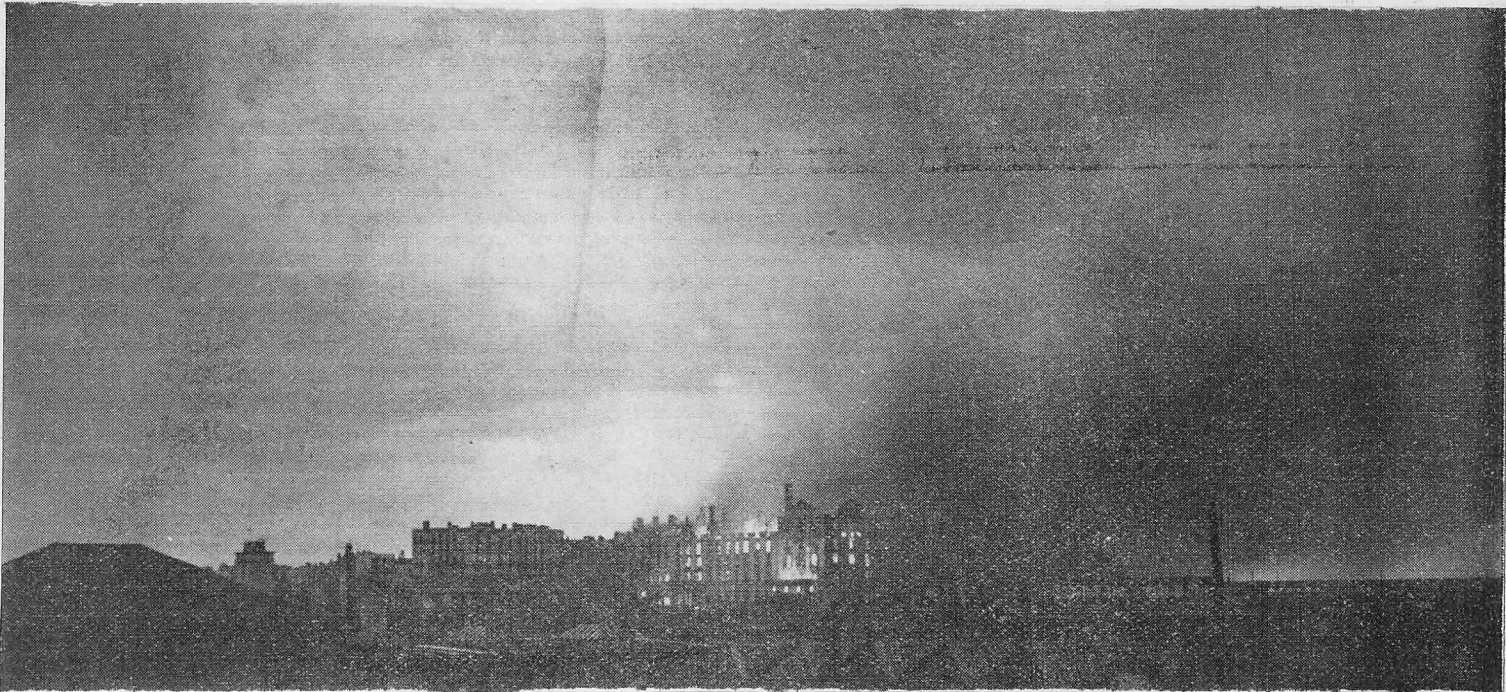
About 4 p.m. a tremendous explosion was heard and clouds of thick black smoke rose in a pillar to the sky. This was the final act of demolition of the German Naval Installations in the harbour of Ostend which reeked havoc there and seriously damaged many properties throughout the City.

In the late afternoon the leading troops, now in Ostend, which they had reached through mine infested roads, reported the City itself clear of enemy, and the welcome of the inhabitants as being tumultuous.

The Commanding Officer immediately ordered the leading cars to proceed south to seal off the road to Nieuport and the remaining available troops of the Regiment were hurriedly moved into town after clearing the road of mines and leaving the covering troops to hold the intact bridges over the southern canal.

Regimental headquarters reached the Hotel de Ville after nightfall and in a tremendous downpour of rain. Contact was established with the Burgomaster of Ostend and instructions were given to keep the citizens off the streets until daylight while the troops took up positions covering the harbour and the Nieuport road.

Human nature being what it is, it was quite impossible to restrain the enthusiasm of the liberated citizens of Ostend. They paraded the streets in pouring rain cheering and savou-



Vooraleer Oostende te verlaten, hebben de Duitsers het Palace Hotel in brand gestoken.

ring their release from long years of German occupation. The wet and tired Canadians sat quietly beside their machine guns peering into the darkness until dawn.

During the night, the Burgomaster and the City Engineer arranged with the Canadian Commander to assist in the temporary repair of the demolished bridges across the main canal on the road to Zeebrugge.

By mid-morning of the eighth of September, Infantry of the Second Canadian Division reached the City and the 12th Manitoba Dragoons were thus released from their holding role to proceed again in the pursuit of the fleeing enemy.

Largely through the efforts of the willing citizens of Ostend, a bridge was repaired sufficiently to allow the Canadian armoured cars to cross the large canal and proceed northeast toward Bruges.

In the weeks that followed, the Dragoons remained facing the enemy across the Leopold Canal and, as time went on, opportunities arose for occasional visits to Ostend to renew the friendships made in our short but happy time there.

It was a proud day for the 12th Manitoba Dragoons when they returned to Ostend in June of 1945, their fighting days over, to accept the good wishes and thanks of the citizens for the part which the Regiment had played in the liberation of the City of Ostend. There was no limit to the hospitality of our Belgian friends, and the name of the City brings again its pleasant memories in many Canadian home.

