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DIARY OF A POLISH SOLDIER /1/

/First in a series of articles by 2/Lt. Leopold Lorentz, on his experiences with the 1st Polish Armoured Division through France, Belgium and Holland up to the time he was wounded. The writer, commissioned after action in France, is at present on convalescent leave in Scotland/.

/Swiatpol/ I was hit on the 31st of October, 1944 at the Mark Canal in Holland which marks a bloody battle for our division equal to the terrible closing of the famous "Falaise - gap" at Chambois.

The Polish 1st Armoured Division has a brigade of infantry, the 8th Rifle Battalion of which is my unit. There I grew up from rookie days, when the battalion was created and trained in Scotland. And it's about the 8th Rifle Battalion we shall write, and the crimson, fiery path the Polish soldiers forged and hammered-out from Caen, France to the Maas in Holland.

That 31st of October was a bad day from the start. We left the outskirts of Beek / a hamlet just north of Breda / at dawn. The path of my platoon was along a northbound road, with orders to make a bridgehead across the Mark Canal.

Trudging along in our great-coats, the march and forcing the German from his shallow holes in the earth very soon made the cold wind a myth. Our artillery pounded his positions up ahead of us. "Swish - swish" went our shells overhead to explode fiercely on Jerry outposts. But the Boche was not silent. His tanks and tank-guns fought our tanks. His deadly artillery and mortars, kept up an incessant, deadly barrage along the road we must travel.

Not a bit of shelter in that flat country. You can't dig a decent trench in water-logged Holland and one of its thousands of canals ran slogg ishly alongside our road. We of the 2nd Company, to the left of the highway, marched ever forward in that small canal. It was our only cover and protection. Whenever a German shell whined its warning, every man-Jack of us feel face down in that cold and dirty water. If the scene were not desperately tragic, it might be comedy as you looked ahead and behind you.

Soldiers, crouching or lying in the water till the shell hit somewhere. Only their rifles and machine guns above the water, retaining a semblance of dryness. And if the grenade found its way into the canal / tho' usually on the road above or the fields, to our left / you passed the dead or dying as you pushed on, sometimes to see a carbine slowly sink into the water beside its comrade.

A halt is called and I can remember my sweating, cursing self, taking what little shelter one could behind a clump of willows, checking over the state of my worn platoon. Two lads out of the fight already. Then, feverishly digging into the embankment, carving out a place to sit in after several minutes ; but feet still in that cold canal. Hours had gone by. Your tired body was oblivious to the gnawing in your stomach.

Down the line comes the word "Forward..." when the reason for the halt is apparent. Up to this point only his shells could harass us but now came a point open to Jerry mg and rifle fire. This called for a quick spurt across the road, one at a time, and quick as lightning. Those who weren't quick enough, got it from the snipers who covered that road.

My platoon next. Quick, terse orders to the lads : "One at a time, now. Crouch... tense yourself. A deep breath and spurt with all you've got..." Every one of them made it. Forward again, now to the right of the road. A similar ditch here but one could walk on a tiny strip of land alongside it.

Onward, the shells ever whining overhead. Some kind of instinct forces you flat on your face with each shell that warns you it will crash nearby. So it was when I lost Zymka, my radio-man.

On a tiny stretch of open land, the whine of a shell shrieked "Cover!". Just ahead of us was an uprooted tree and the hollow its roots had left. I reached it first. Zymka after me, but a second too late for his torn body topples upon me. It takes only a second to know he is gone. Hurriently unstrap the 38-set from the lifeless lad and shout a name. Another boy crawls into the haven and becomes the platoon radio voice. On again.

A bare hundred yards to the Mark Canal now. Already the 4th Coy is on the other side. In just a few minutes we will be crossing. These are my thoughts in that noise and hellish confusion when it struck. Soldiers always say "You never hear the one that gets you". It's true, too.

An instant before a sharp pain tore into my back, right arm muscle, and a severe concussion knocked me roughly to the ground; I saw a burst of black smoke ahead and to the right but a few feet away. "Mortar grenade... Never heard it..." I cursed. I wanted to get up and go on, thinking I was lucky as hell. A few steps made me realise I wasn't crossing the Mark Canal that day.

By this time my faithful boy, hit with the same shell over his heart and in the face, was crying loudly "Sanitariusz... sanitariusz... Pan porucznik ranny... ranny!!" - /"The C.O. is hit... Medico... Medico!!"/ Excited, he was exposing himself and I expected him to get a full dose any minute. "Shut up... Shut up... Lie down... Flat! Damn you... or I'll shoot your damned brains out!!", I swore and shouted for my adjutant, a cadet officer, to hurry up. They passed the word down the line and in a moment he was lying beside me.

"You know our orders. Take the platoon across.. Can't make it..."

It was an effort not to just pass out there and then; but I watched my good lads pass by, bitter that I could not go on with them. Stifle the bitterness by cursing one or two of them for not taking advantage of every slightest cover, or something else.

And they were gone - on to cross the Mark. I and my boy are alone. The situation is hell: no way to get the wounded out, shells keep on pounding us, no cover. Desperation seizes me. Mad thoughts race through my mind like a trapped animal's "How to get out of here? How to get out of here now?"

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DIARY OF A POLISH SOLDIER /2/

/Second in a series of articles by 2nd Lt. Leopold Lorentz, on his experiences with the 1st Polish Armoured Division through France, Belgium and Holland up to the time he was wounded. The writer, commissioned after action in France, is at present on convalescent leave in Scotland/.

/Swiatpol/

It was the 31st of October, 1944 and our 8th Rifle Battalion was crossing the Mark Canal in Holland. About 4 PM, I and my faithful boy were put out of battle by Jerry mortar shrapnel. I have just ordered my platoon on in charge of the adjutant. We were alone with the dead and dying.

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I struggle back a few yards to a slit trench, one of a very few good ones Jerry had made above on the narrow strip alongside the road. Holland was not made for the infantry. Falling into it, I shout at our artillery observer, "Corporal... corporal... Hit... Wounded... Help me off with these things..."

Unbuckle the wide, leather belt. Luger pistol, knife, two grenades, German map-case fall to the dugout floor. With my German knife "Dieppe-1944" inscribed on its handle, the corporal cuts the sleeve off my tunic and shirt. A shell whines. We duck instinctively. My bare arm rubs against the rough side of the trench and I wince, cursing, after the detonation, to see the dirt on my wound. But he manages to bandage the arm quickly, crudely.

Meanwhile, my lad produces another emergency bandage. The corporal hurriedly places it over the wound in my back, winds the gauze about my waist and ties it. But I still bleed and am sure my face has been bleeding. He tells me there is not a mark on it. Must be the concussion.

I am still deaf; the explosion rings yet in my ears. But I am bandaged and can take stock of the situation.

First, I order my boy away. Point to the shell hole "our" grenade has made. Curse him again and tell him to wait for the first medical orderly and to lie still.

I struggle into my coat again and gently buckle the belt, hoping the pressure will stop the flow of blood.

I am oblivious to the cries of the dying. This is the end of the third month, not the first day anymore.

The corporal is at his work again, peering through binoculars, searching for targets to relay to our guns. We duck each time another shell whines terribly close by.

The wounds begin to make themselves felt. You become desperate and boiling mad at the Hun and want to get out and kill...but can't. You think of all the times through France and Belgium you got out of tight scrapes and wonder and hope and pray that you'll get out of this one. Then again, you are too tired and hungry and dirty and wet to give a damn.

It is late afternoon now. Not a vehicle dare come on this road, high in this flat country and under fire of German guns. How to get out of here? Out of the question at present. Not a medico around. Not a jeep or vehicle of any sort can come to take out the wounded.

You begin to feel dizzy and faint, thinking you're about done when a great Canadian engineer-truck whizzes past. What! A truck on this road?! Two Canucks bringing more collapsible boats. Jerry got a couple of shells directly into the Mark at that point. What a mess it is now. More boats must be had to get across...That's why the Canucks are here.

But how to get out and to a doctor is the question and you faint and dizzy...and terribly tired...

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DIARY OF A POLISH SOLDIER /3/.

Third in a series of articles by 2nd Lt. Leopold Lorentz, with the 8th Rifle Battalion of the 1st Polish Armoured Division, on his experiences through France and Belgium. Wounded at the Battle of the Mark Canal in Holland, the writer is at present on convalescent leave in Scotland./

/Swiatpol/

Wounded that 31st of October by German mortar shrapnel; I was faint and dizzy in the slit trench with our artillery observer who had bandaged me. Giving over command of my infantry platoon to the adjutant I watched them pass on to cross the Mark Canal. The dead and dying were grotesquely sprawled all about. My boy, wounded with the same mortar grenade that got me was in a nearby shell-hole. Not a vehicle dare come on that terrible road from Breda, under Jerry fire, and about the highest bit of land in that vicinity. Beginning to feel the pain, weak from loss of blood - wondering how to get out of that hell to a doctor - knowing I couldn't move far; made me desperate...

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That was the situation when a huge Canadian sapper-truck sped along to the very edge of the awful Mark. Two Canucks threw down more collapsible boats for the infantry, turned the truck about and were starting back when sudden inspiration struck: "Hey, fellas! Stop a second...a second! Wounded...!"

Thank God! The great lorry braked to a halt and the brave lads hopped out. With a great effort, I struggled out of that trench, shouting to my boy to come on. They helped me aboard. No place to sit down as it was only a framework affair, sort of forming shelves for the boats. Twisted my arms about a bar of steel, hanging on for dear life, and away we sped. In nervous fear, I cursed the boy "Keep low. Low as you can, damn you..."; myself trembling, hugging the only shelter, a spare tire, while bits of shrapnel "pinged" off the steel framework.

It was with mixed emotions I watched that horrible scene pass from my eyes. First, gratitude that God had sent the Canadians at that moment; then respect for the lads risking their lives to stop on that dreaded, open road. I thanked God over and over again that Jerry did not get our range, hoping that we would escape the shells exploding all about us. Boiling mad at the Hun, the jarring ride, the pain more and more clear now. Cursing all the Eoches to wile Hades, I managed feebly to shake a fist

in their direction and shout "I'll be back. I'll be back!"

By a miracle, nothing touched us. Gradually fewer and fewer shells then out of range, we slow down a bit. One of the Canucks pokes a head out of the window to ask if we're OK. "Hell, yes. Good work, fellas!" Eventually we reach our battalion medico, busy back of the lines. An M.O. helps me down. I can only gasp "Thanks, fellas. Really great of you." The brave Canadians wave goodbye and drive off.

Stripped of my grimy, bloody clothes, my wounds are cleansed. He hands me a shot of rum. I could hardly stand. "Doc.. Doc.. better grive me something. Eesen holding out on nerves, I guess.. Hurts like hell now.." Morphine. Wounds bandaged, dressed in a pair of pajamas; I was soon on a stretcher and in an ambulance, smoking the first cigaret in a long time.

Morphine kills the pain as we speed southwards, the din of battle gradually fading away. In Breda I am carried out at a Polish depot for wounded. One of our medicos busy sorting us out as we come in. He scrawls something on the card fastened to my stretcher and I find myself at once in another ambulance. Southward again. To Turnhout in Belgium now, a long ride to a British hospital. Wounds redressed by an English captain and more notes on my card. Yet another ambulance, my boy still with me all this time. We smoked incessantly, not talking much. On to Antwerp, arriving about 10 PM at a Canadian Hospital. A great waiting room filled with Polish, English, Scots, Canadian and American wounded. Finally taken to a waiting ward, my boy somewhere else. Never saw him again.

Terribly ravenous, I was told I could eat nothing till after the operation, which was constantly put off. Each time my turn for the "theater" came up; more serious cases, amputations and such, came in. This I waited all through that night, interrupted regularly by a gentle and efficient Canadian nurse again injecting penicillin or something else. And so it dragged on till 10 the next morn when I was finally wheeled into the "theater".

Woke up about 3 that afternoon, in a different ward. Everything kind of hazy. Someone asks how I am. "Ok. Do I eat now?" The orderly replied "Yep. In about 20 minutes, son.."

Looking about, I see lads in various conditions. Realise how very fortunate I am to be in one piece and thank God again. Am fascinated by the Canadian male orderlies and the nurses. Surprised at how really gently they work and yet they must have handled thousands of us. It is something I will never forget and something I never truly met again, that most extraordinary gentle handling and understanding of battered and bitter boys at that Canadian hospital in Antwerp.

At that time, Antwerp was suffering Jerry V2 rocket bombs one every three hours. I remember now, 4 o'clock, and although all would carry on with their routine; there was a hushed expectancy until that great detonation, sometimes far off, sometimes nearer. The same at 7 and 11 etc.

And I won't forget the German "SS Mann" across from me who could not restrain himself and had to laugh loudly after each V2 struck. The good Canadian M.O. was disgusted and said to us "Why you fellows ever bring in stuff like this is beyond me. We can't do anything to him now. Out there is the place to finish him off". And right he was.

Fitful sleep throughout the night, though the nurses, wonderful women, awakened you gently for the everlasting injections. The next morn, 8:15 on the dot found me in an ambulance bound for the airport. There were 18 of us in the Dakota which took off gracefully at 10:15. By 12:30 we were in England and later I was in quiet Dartmouth Ward of the Royal Hospital in Wolverhampton, Staffordshire.

Life begins in a English hospital....

Leopold Lorentz.

Od Redakcji: P.A.P. "Swiatopól" zawiadomia pisma polskie w Ameryce Północnej, że w przyszłości podawać będzie stale artykuły swego korespondenta p. Leopolda Lorentza, w języku angielskim.

