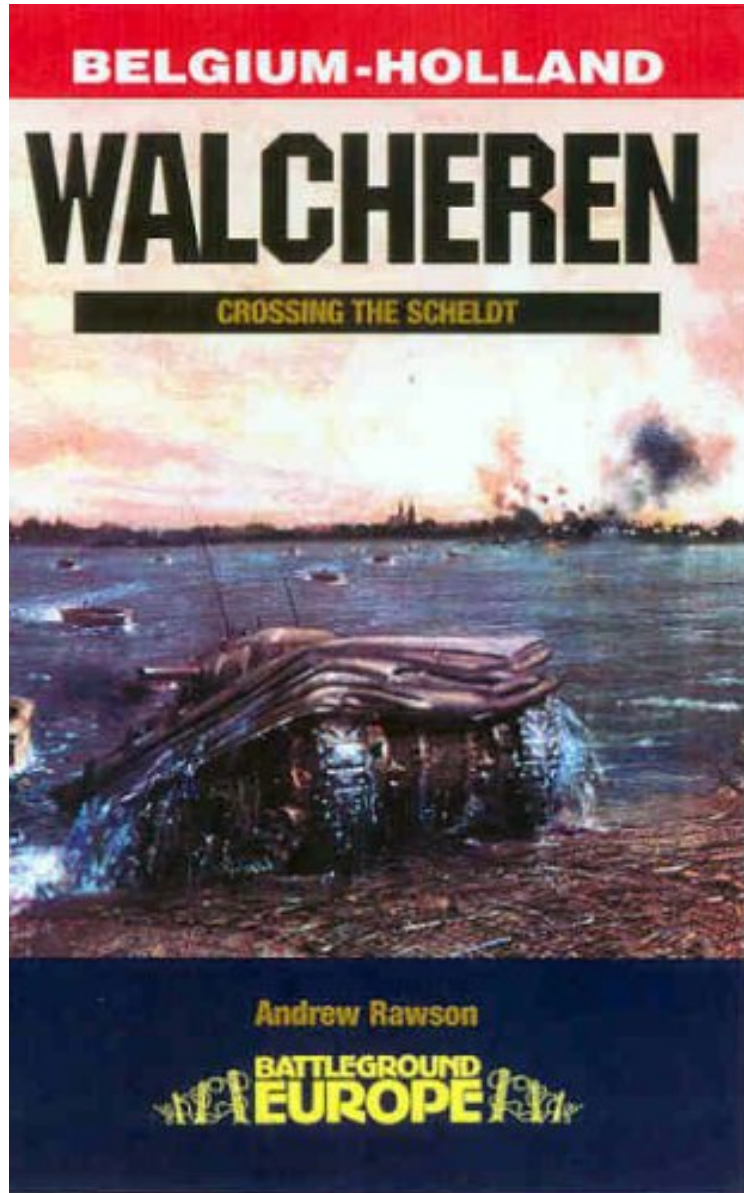


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WALCHEREN: Crossing the Scheldt (Battleground Europe)

Andrew Rawson

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Andrew Rawson : WALCHEREN: Crossing the Scheldt (Battleground Europe) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised WALCHEREN: Crossing the Scheldt (Battleground Europe):

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. An Unusual Military Operation By R. A Forczyk In late 1944, the

Allied armies advancing across northwest Europe were desperately in need of a deep-water port that could provide access for the supplies required for the final drive into Germany. Although the port of Antwerp was seized intact, the port could not be used until the various German garrisons that guarded the Scheldt estuary leading to the port were subdued. In *Walcheren: Operation Infatuate*, Andrew Rawson covers the British amphibious invasion on 1 November 1944 to seize the island of Walcheren - certainly one of the more obscure and bizarre operations of the war. Rawson's narrative is decent, but not up to the standard of earlier volumes in the *Battleground Europe* series. Rawson's volume begins with short sections on the need to open Antwerp, the German occupation of Walcheren and the garrison on the island, which consisted of about 7,000 troops from the static 70th Division and about 1,000 naval troops. Rawson provides a fairly good section on the planning for Operation Infatuate - the amphibious landings on Walcheren - although the supporting maps are rather skimpy. One of the oddities of the Operation Infatuate was the British decision to use RAF Bomber Command to "sink" the island; just before the invasion, heavy bombers were used to breach the island's dikes and about 2/3rds of the island was soon knee-deep in water. While the interior of the island was mostly under water (with many civilian deaths), the German garrisons were isolated atop the rim of dikes and sand dunes on the outer edges of the island. This decision to "sink" the island would limit the tactical mobility of both sides and reduce most operations to clearing the outer edges of the island. Many elements of the British plan were risky if not downright dumb. The amphibious landings called for frontal assault against alerted and powerful coastal defenses. Furthermore, the British unwisely decided to split their landings up, with the 4th Special Service Brigade (4SSB) of Royal Marine Commandos landing on the south side of the island and an army brigade on the south side of the island; neither landing could support the other if it ran into trouble. However, the worst mistakes were in underestimating the enemy, the terrain and the weather. Straightaway, the main landings by the Royal Marines ran into much heavier resistance than expected, and the naval support group was shot to pieces by the German coastal batteries (the British had foolishly pitted unarmored landing craft gunships against heavy coastal guns in concrete bunkers). Both the Marine and army brigades succeeded in getting ashore, but most of their tanks and support weapons were lost in the landings. With the troops ashore - perhaps 5,000 men - the British were able to capture the German batteries near the landing beaches but they lacked the strength or mobility to do more than slowly winkle the Germans out of their bunkers. Poor weather and heavy seas virtually shut down more landings on the beaches for several days, meaning that the British troops were soon short on ammunition and wounded could not be evacuated. The British also had great difficulty getting across the breaches in the dikes caused by their bombing, with the amphibious tractors often unequal to the terrain. The British Royal Marines and army commandos were superb light infantry, but they were forced to tackle one bunker complex after another and they suffered at least 30% casualties in eight days of fighting on Walcheren. Walcheren bears certain resemblances to Arnhem, such as outnumbered but high quality British troops taking on second-rate German troops in a situation where the Allied plan took too many chances. Fighting on the island consisted mostly of urban combat and advances down the coastal strips, but everywhere the British were thinly spread. In one unusual incident, 47 Commando captured an important German coastal battery but had suffered such heavy losses that they could not hold the position and a German counterattack nearly overran the unit. German resistance was much heavier than expected and several times during the operation the British stuck their neck out too far with small forces and nearly got it chopped off. Finally, after nearly a week of fighting, a small British force of less than 200 men was able to trick the German commander and 2,000 troops into surrendering. Walcheren was secured after eight days of fighting and several weeks later, convoys began arriving in Antwerp. Rawson's narrative omits mention of casualties but they were quite heavy on the British side. The author also does not provide sufficient detail on the operations that immediately preceded Infatuate, nor does he spend more than a few sentences on the Canadian crossing onto the east side of the island on November 3, 1944. Indeed, the author might have questioned whether it might have been better to let the Canadians clear the island from the east, since most of the defenses were facing westward. Perhaps the costly amphibious assaults and "sinking" the island were unnecessary and wasteful. This volume should be useful for military professionals, such the circumstances of the operation were so bizarre, but there are more questions posed than answered herein.

The latest addition to the successful Second World War *Battleground Europe* Series, describes the fierce campaign, codenamed INFATUATE, mounted in November 1944 to clear the way through the port of Antwerp. This was a vital task as the Allies lacked sufficient port facilities to provide for the increasing quantities of war supplies required as the advance eastwards took them closer to Germany. There was a danger of lines of communication becoming overextended. A leading role was played by British Royal Marine commandos but all who took part in both D Day and this landing regarded the former as a picnic! As the book vividly describes, the Germans fought with extraordinary courage against overwhelming odds and refused to surrender although all must have known defeat was inevitable. The winter weather was another major problem and the terrain was extremely difficult