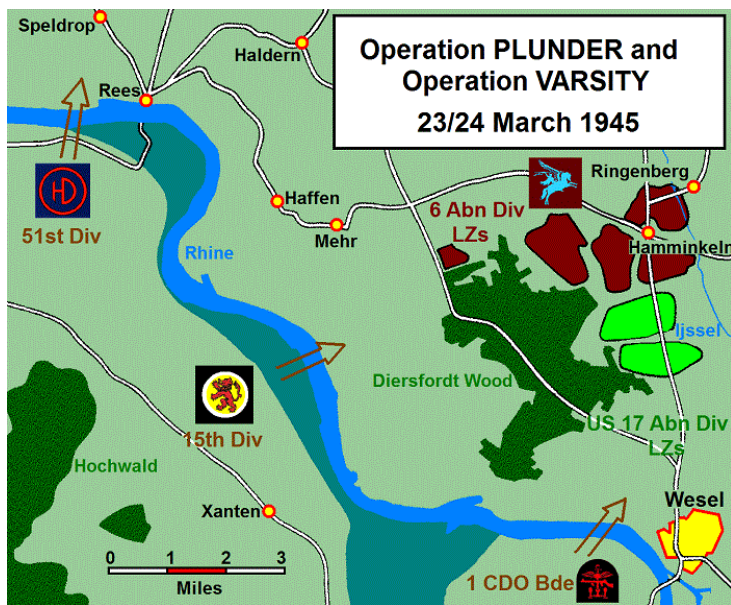


## THE RHINE CROSSING - OPERATION PLUNDER

Preparation for an assault crossing of the Rhine started many months in advance since it was clear that eventually this major obstacle would have to be tackled. Of course there was the possibility that Germany would surrender before the Rhine was reached.

Twice it seemed that it might be possible to avoid an assault crossing by seizing bridges. The bold airborne action to seize bridges, including the major Rhine crossing at Arnhem, nearly succeeded. Later US forces did seize the bridge at Remagen when the Germans failed to demolish it, but it collapsed soon afterwards.



Montgomery was determined that this crossing was to be a text book set piece assault, planned in the greatest detail. This was what he was best at. The assault would take place along a 15 mile stretch of the lower Rhine. This area was a wide, level flood plain and the river had high dykes to prevent flooding. The main advantage was that the river was slow moving at this point.

The right wing of the assault was entrusted to the US 9th Army, which was placed under command of 21 Army Group for the operation. The British assault was to be carried out by XII Corps on the right and XXX Corps on the left. II Canadian Corps was holding the left flank but would not take part in the assault, although 3 Canadian Division would do so under command of

XXX Corps.

The assault divisions were 15 Division of XII Corps and 51 Division of XXX Corps plus 1 Commando Brigade on the right. The Commandos would hold the town of Wesel, with its important road junctions, until relieved by airborne forces.

H Hour was 2200 on 23rd March.

### 51 Division Assault

Two battalions of 154 Brigade and two battalions of 153 Brigade launched the assault in Buffaloes. They crossed the river in 2 ½ minutes and the third battalions crossed as soon as the Buffaloes returned. 3.7" howitzers of 454 Mountain Battery RA landed with the leading troops and gave close support. Just before midnight two battalions of 152 Brigade crossed in storm boats while the third battalion was held in reserve until dawn when it crossed in such storm boats as had returned.

## 1 Commando Brigade Assault

The Commando Brigade launched their assault at the opposite end of the British front at the same time as 51 Division launched theirs. 46 Royal Marine Commando crossed in Buffaloes of 77 Assault Squadron RE, followed by 6 Commando in storm boats. As soon as possible the Buffaloes returned to ferry 45 Royal Marine Commando and 3 Commando.

## 15 Division Assault

With troops established on both flanks the assault on the centre was launched by 15 Division at 0200 hours. 44 Brigade and 227 Brigade each deployed two battalions, each with assault troops in Buffaloes and a follow up in storm boats. Soon 46 Brigade was ferried across also.

The Rhine was considered too wide and too fast flowing to allow the use of assault boats manned by infantry. Buffaloes were used for the assault waves. Storm boats manned by engineers and powered by outboard motors were used instead. Buffaloes also replaced the lighter rafts since they could carry light weapons, 6 pdr anti tank guns, jeeps, 3.7" howitzers and carriers. Some were converted to carry 17 pdr anti tank guns. Storm boats could also carry jeeps and 6 pdr anti tank guns.

Once the assault force and close support weapons were across the river Buffaloes and storm boats ran a ferry service while the raft ferries were constructed.

Xanten on XII Corps front was an ideal bridging point for access and exit. The first bridges were completed here since the site was safe from enemy interference. The following were constructed.

- **Draghunt Bridge.** A Class 9 Folding Boat Equipment Bridge. Built by XIII Corps Troops Engineers. 1,440 foot long. Construction started 13.00 hours on 24 March, having being delayed by enemy action. It was completed in ten hours because the component rafts had been assembled earlier. This was the first bridge to open.
- **Sussex Bridge.** A Class 12 tactical Bailey Pontoon Bridge. Built by XII Corps Troops Engineers. 1,940 foot long it was in fact two bridges with the second, 360 foot, part crossing a secondary obstacle. Construction started at 08.00 on 24 March. Completed 10.00 on 25 March. This was to carry support troops and then wheeled transport.
- **Digger Bridge.** A Class 40 tactical Bailey Pontoon Bridge. Built by 7 Army Troops Engineers. 1,091 foot long. Construction started at 09.30 on 24 March. Completed 16.00 on 25 March.
- **Sparrow Bridge.** A Class 40 all weather Bailey Pontoon Bridge. Built by 15 GHQ Troops Engineers. 1,713 foot long. Construction started on the morning of 27 March and took six days to complete. It was a more permanent bridge which replaced the previous two. It was later extended by an approach bridge and approach road to speed the passage of traffic. Although still Class 40 vehicles were not so restricted by speed and spacing as on the tactical bridges.

Rees was the bridging point on XXX Corps front and again had good road communications. Bridge building was delayed by enemy action. The following were constructed.

- **Waterloo Bridge.** A Class 9 Folding Boat Equipment Bridge. Built by 18 GHQ Troops Engineers. 1,300 foot long. Construction started under the cover of smoke at 08.00 on 25 March. Completed 02.00 on 26 March.
- **Lambeth Bridge.** A Class 15 tactical Bailey Pontoon Bridge. Built by XXX Corps Troops Engineers. 1,206 foot long. Construction started early on 25 March. Completed early on 26 March.
- **London Bridge.** A Class 40 Bailey Pontoon Bridge. Built by 8 GHQ Troops Engineers. 1,174 foot long. Construction started at 17.00 on 25 March. Completed 23.00 on 26 March.
- **Blackfriars Bridge.** A Class 40 Bailey Pontoon Bridge. Built by 2 Canadian Corps Troops Engineers (29th Field Company RCE, 30th Field Company RCE, and 31st Field Company RCE). At 1803 feet total length, it was identified as the longest Bailey Bridge at the time. Construction started at 1000 Hrs on 26 March. Completed at mid day on 28 March. The officer in charge of construction of Blackfriars Bridge was Lt. W. F. Brunit from 30th Field Company RCE
- **Westminster Bridge.** A Class 40 all weather Bailey Pontoon Bridge. Built by 6 Army Troops Engineers. 1,402 foot long. Construction started at 11.00 on 26 March. Completed 18.00 on 29 March. This bridge had to cater for a wide range of river level. This was the last of the bridges constructed for the assault and it was officially opened by General Dempsey, GOC 2 Army, in the presence of detachments from all engineer units involved in the crossing.



Emmerich was outside the assault area but a bridge was constructed by and for the Canadian Army.

- **Maclean Bridge.** It was a Class 40 all weather Bailey Pontoon Bridge built by 1st Canadian Army Troops Engineers. 1,656 foot long. Construction started on 2 April 1945.

British troops also had the use of bridges built by 9 US Army which was at the time part of 21 Army Group.

Sources:

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