



A Kingdom Saved by the Sea

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The Belgian Army had been fighting a defensive war since the German invasion of Belgium on 4 August 1914. In quick succession the fortified position of Liège fell, and the Belgians withdrew to the outer fortifications of Antwerp. As commander in chief of the armed forces, Belgium's King Albert intended to maintain his nation's independence during this essentially Franco-Prussian conflict. Bound by a pledge of neutrality, he aimed to expell the Germans without favouring the French; he knew to fear post-war French dominance as much as German victory. Although Article VII of the Treaty of London (1839) promised European aid to protect Belgian neutrality, the king did not know when help would arrive, as the Anglo-French forces had troubles of their own in northern France. To show his support, the king launched 2 sorties from Antwerp,¹ which succeeded in diverting 60,000 German soldiers destined for France. Despite the valiant efforts of little Belgium, foreign military assistance was not forthcoming. First Lord of the Admiralty Winston S. Churchill suggested that the Dutch hold the River Scheldt open to allow supplies to reach Antwerp, but the Dutch insisted on maintaining their neutrality. The British, with much more at stake in the defence of Antwerp, began sending guns and ammunition.

Unfortunately, German artillery bombardments began in late September. Just as at Liège and Namur, Antwerp's defences were no match for German guns. The Belgian clearance of the suburbs looked even worse than the aftermath of the San Francisco earthquake. For the military it was 'dégorgement du champ de tire', the destruction of mansions, castles, villas, parks and lanes. There was no real purpose though, as the shelling and aerial bombardment resulted in:

- the evacuation of the Belgian army and British naval troops into Flanders
- the flight of civilians and up to 40,000 disarmed soldiers into the Netherlands
- the diversion of French and British aims.

Although the coast had not been a German priority, they sent in reserve corps in October, which started the run to the sea. As a result, the Belgian army was stretched over a 130 km front from Antwerp to Ostend. The Belgians could not

1 25-26 August 1914 and 9-13 September 1914.

maintain such a deployment for long.

Towards the West and the Yser Front

The Belgian High Command and Royal Family gradually withdrew to Nieuwpoort, arriving on 13 October. As the Army was transported by rail and on foot, a cavalry division diverted German attention along the Scheldt. The arrival of a brigade of French Marine Fusiliers and a British Infantry division in Ghent then formed a rear-guard.

The High Command now needed to establish a temporary camp, preferably in a well-defended region of Belgium. Amidst competing suggestions by the French, including one to integrate the Belgian command under the Allied command, King Albert maintained that he must retain control of the army and the right to assert Belgian jurisdiction in the remaining free areas of the country.

This left the Veurne-Ambacht region² as the only viable option for a temporary command post. Lying in the western corner of Belgium, enclosed by the Yser River, this region was comparable in size to the Antwerp national refuge. It was well situated along the coast, between the fortified position at Dunkirk and the British bridgehead at Ostend. The High Command therefore agreed that, for the time being, this region offered the best temporary refuge within Belgium.

The recently arrived head of the French mission was Colonel Brécard. Unlike his predecessors, however, who had dealt with the Belgian High Command, he would now have to communicate directly with the king. On Wednesday 14 October, he presented a message from General Foch;³ the Belgian Army needed to offer a stubborn resistance.

Late in the evening, in Nieuwpoort,⁴ the Army Orders were issued. Three Belgian divisions, together with the French Marine Fusiliers, were to move behind the Yser River and prepare the defence of the crossings between Nieuwpoort and Dixmude. Two divisions were to deploy east of the river, to the south of Dixmude. In the east, they would be covered by the First Cavalry division, while the Second was to patrol south of Ostend. Only one Army division was to be kept in reserve.⁵

2 Ambacht = Middle Dutch equivalent of the Latin *Ministerium*, a judicial subdivision.

3 Commander of the Northern sector of the French Army.

4 The beginning of the Western Front on the Belgian coast.

5 The Belgian Army had only six Infantry divisions and two Cavalry divisions in the theatre.

Nieuwpoort (Nieuport)

The scene at Nieuwpoort was indescribable. The main road from Ostend to Dunkirk passed over the Five-Bridges route⁶ just outside town. A constant stream of horses, soldiers and refugees flowed across the narrow bridges. Any manoeuvring of the drainage structures, let alone opening a bridge and blocking the main 'escape' road was impossible. The situation for lock-master Gerard Dingens grew more tense by the hour, with orders and counter-orders creating confusion.

The Belgian Government had left the country for Le Havre; only the Minister of War remained near the border to keep contact with the monarch. The King and Queen left Nieuwpoort for De Panne and the High Command for Veurne.

The defensive preparations on the Yser were now well advanced. The Second Army division, under General Dossin, was responsible for a sector stretching from the river's mouth to the 4th kilometre stone along the river. Three advance posts were set up in front of this sector. The military became increasingly nervous about the presence of the locks men in this strategic location. They felt that these civilians did not realize the danger that they and their families would soon face. The first shell hit the town on 18 October, and the next day the civilians on the locks had to endure: 'Don't try to save your furniture, but save your life! Come back in eight days when the battle will be over.'

Inundation as Strategy

Nieuwpoort had a 400-year history of flooding the region for defensive purposes. This peculiar tactic had been employed dozens of times. However, due to changes to the National Defence Programme in the nineteenth century, the locks, doors and sluices had been altered so that they could only be used for normal drainage purposes. The strategy of flooding was known to the military, but not in the coastal area. They made attempts in August and September on some rivers in and around Antwerp. Some British officers also learned from Dingens about the history of the strategy in Ostend in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In fact, a farmer, a schoolteacher and a magistrate had suggested the idea to the generals.

The Battle on the Yser

At noon on 17 October, a message arrived that 6,000 enemy troops were advancing on Nieuwpoort from Ostend. King Albert was not confident. He sent his adviser, Captain Commandant Galet, to Colonel Bridges to inquire

⁶ This name was used on old maps, but there were actually six bridges.

about support from the British Fleet on the Belgian left flank. This request was transmitted to Winston Churchill at the Admiralty. Following a similar request from Joffre, Rear-Admiral Hood received his orders the next day. Two cruisers and some destroyers were sent with three monitors. The latter had a shallow draft and low freeboard, allowing them to approach within a few hundred meters of the Belgian shoreline. They could then precisely shell German positions four or five kilometres inland. This bombardment would soon force the Germans to shift their attacks away from the coast.

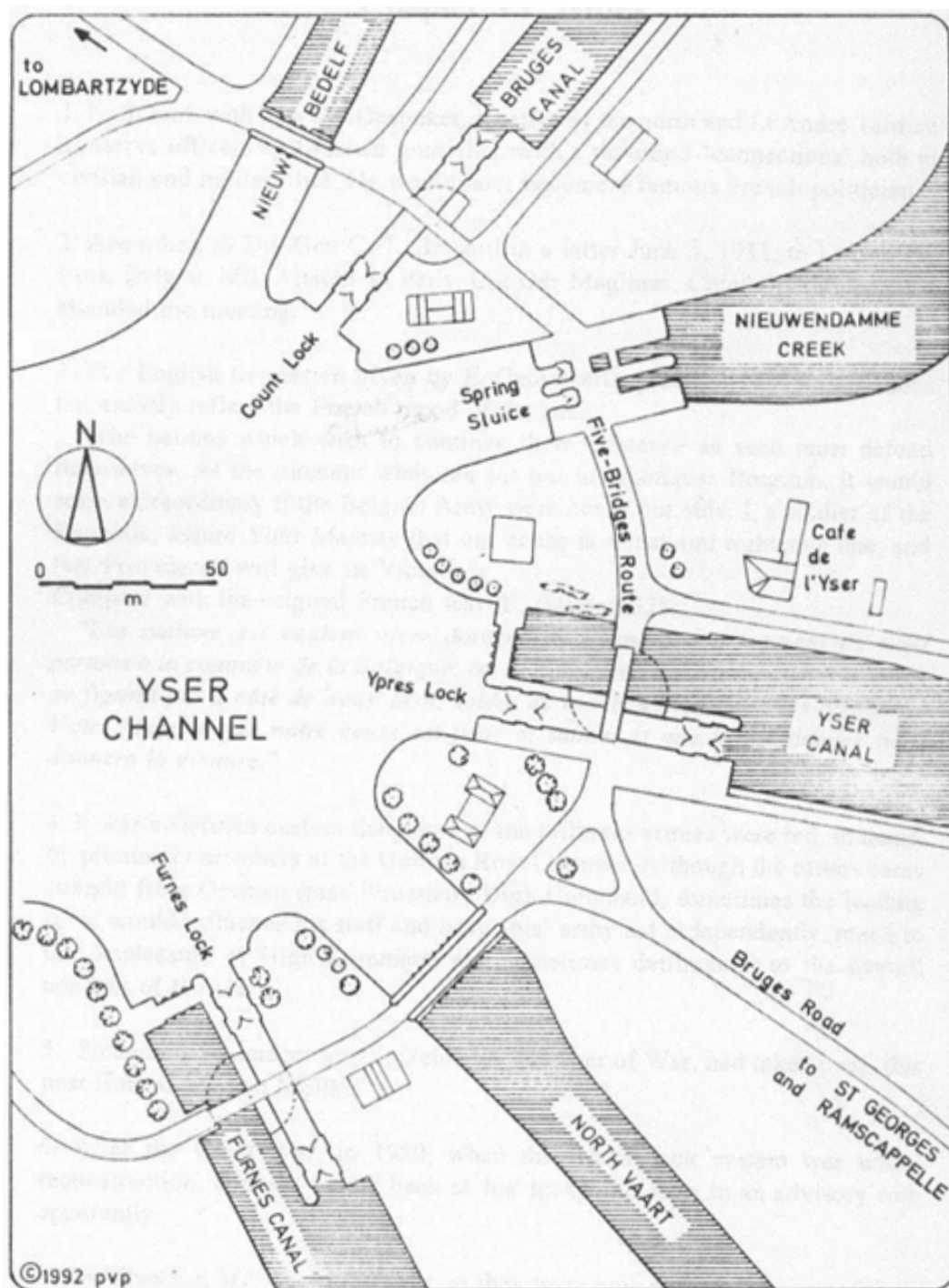


Figure 1. Plan of the 'Ganzepoot' © P. Van Pul

A First Tactical Inundation

Owing to the loss of the advance outpost of Lombardsijde, north of Nieuwpoort, the Belgian HQ missed accurate information about the *Goose Foot*.⁷ This range of locks, doors and sluices of six waterways in the tailbay obtained that nickname because of its outline on a map. It consists of the canalized Yser, two navigation canals, and three watercourses used to drain the *polders*⁸ of the coastal plain (Figure 1).

Rumours spread that the right bank of the Yser could be flooded. Three officers gathered in Nieuwpoort to discuss the defence of the lower part of the Yser. Flooding the land between the canalized river and the dyked Bruges Canal [Brugsevaart] would prevent the enemy from moving in their artillery to bombard the areas around Saint Georges [Sint-Joris], east of Nieuwpoort. The proposal seemed feasible to the officers, and a major submitted the request to Lieutenant-General Dossin. He granted permission, but the army needed more technical assistance. Among the few civilians remaining in Nieuwpoort, there was Henry Geeraert (Figure 2), a bargeman in his early fifties. During the recent confusion, and eager to stay in the city, he had managed to obtain an assistant lock keeper's *kepi* and was able to circulate undisturbed.

Questioned about the Spring Sluice on the Nieuwendamme Creek, he reassured a subaltern officer, who then brought him in contact with the officers who planned to flood the area. The Spring Sluice was the only one capable of draining and flooding without any modifications. The Nieuwendamme Creek is what remains of the winding Yser as it was before the canalization in the seventeenth century. On the night of 21 October, Geeraert joined an officer, 2 subaltern officers and 15 soldiers, equipped with the appropriate tools to carry out the task. Geeraert

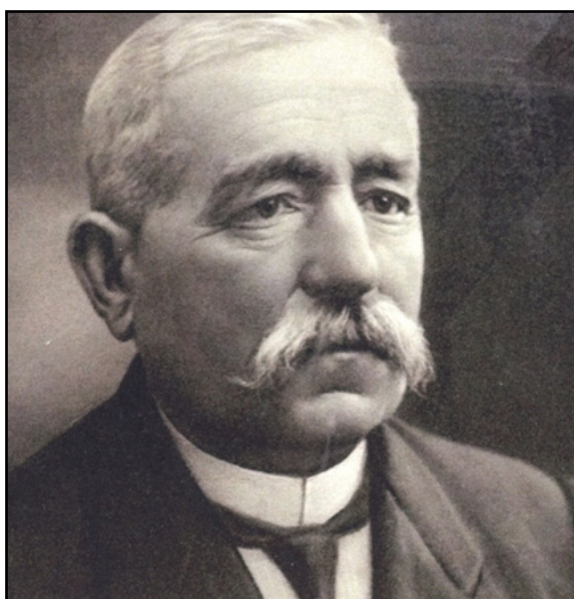


Figure 2. Henry (Hendrik) Geeraert (1863 - 1925) © Public Domain

signalled a peculiar precaution on a culvert, and that the flooding during high tide should be fixed before low tide. The next morning, the Germans were presented with buffer of inundated land. But those were rainy days, and the flooding had worked slowly over the course of five hours.

7 Dutch *Ganzevoet*, French *Patte d'Oie*

8 English 'Fens'

Debate on the Yser Line

The same night as the tactical flooding, two German battalions managed to sneak into the thinly occupied outposts of the First Army division on the east bank. The Belgian HQ did not find this alarming. A local counter-attack was considered, as before, to be underway. The need to send virtually all dispatches 14 km by foot or horseback resulted in a lack of reliable communication between headquarters and the defenders along the Yser.

That same morning, French General d'Urbal arrived in Veurne [Furnes], with bad news for the Belgian staff. The French supporting forces were to launch an offensive from Nieuwpoort, Diksmuide, and Ypres the next day. Apparently overconfident, he continued saying that this offensive would clear the Belgian front. With the king's approval, orders were drawn up to recapture Lombardsijde and to hold the bridges of the Yser at all cost. Despite incessant Belgian artillery support, however, the situation had been deteriorating steadily. German guns had been moved in close to the eastern river embankment.

In the occupied Tervate loop, Belgian Grenadiers and Carabineers heroically attacked two battalions armed with a dozen machine guns. The flat, treeless countryside did not offer much protection though, and countless ditches prevented a rapid advance. The assault became stuck, and the High Command had to concede that the Tervate Loop was lost.

On 23 October, the sixth day of relentless combat, the bridgehead at Schoorbakke became untenable. Before daybreak, the defenders evacuated and blew up the bridge. The Germans were building footbridges in several locations, and were able to penetrate the front line in many places. Only one major bridgehead on the east bank held out: the town of Diksmuide, held by Ronarc'h's brigade of French Marine Fusiliers. The results of the French offensive were also not encouraging. In Ypres, where the French Ninth Corps was supposed to attack, the British were still awaiting their arrival. Near Diksmuide, Rear-Admiral Ronarc'h was convinced that '... any offensive undertaken with exhausted troops will lack vigour ... An offensive will be halted at a hundred metres from its starting line ...'

At Nieuwpoort, the first promised French aid arrived. The 42nd division crossed the lock system at the harbour. They were able to press the enemy a hundred metres behind, thanks to the British Naval artillery. Colonel Brécard, French liaison, wrote the following in his daily report:

In the centre the enemy had progressed significantly. It arrived at 500m of Pervyse and occupies Schoorbakke and Stuivekenskerke. So I evaluated the situation as serious.

Finally, the arrival of the French at Nieuwpoort allowed the Second Army division to withdraw. They were the only Belgian reserves remaining.

The Railway Embankment

On the morning of 24 October, the situation seemed grim. The German Sixth division had crossed the Tervate loop. Due to Franco-Belgian shelling though, the German artillery had not yet been able to cross the river. At general headquarters everyone was pessimistic about the collapsed defensive line. The First Army division, on the north side, fell back to the Grote Beverdijk Vaart:⁹ a drainage canal parallel to the Yser, but less than half as wide. Captain Commandant Nuyten was sent to serve under French General Grossetti. At Pervijze, he noticed a railway embankment between Nieuwpoort and Diksmuide, a little west of the front. He perceived that the embankment could be transformed into a new defensive obstacle. Shortly after noon, General Foch arrived to investigate the situation. On the one hand, the general noted the possibility of flooding the area, on the other, he mentioned that shortening the frontline could be preferable. At the end of the day, an order was issued:

The positions held from Nieuwpoort to Diksmuide will be held as long as possible. One will hold, in any case, at any price, on the line of the railway Nieuwpoort-Diksmuide.

One Day in Veurne

On Sunday 25 October, at the Belgian HQ in Veurne, a major decision was made. That morning, Colonel Brécard called on the HQ and announced that the Military Governor of Dunkirk was preparing to flood the perimeter of his fortified position. He warned: 'These inundations could spread onto Belgian territory and extend on a scale we are unable to determine.' This prompted an outburst from Captain Commandant Nuyten:

'So, under those conditions we will have the enemy in front of us and water in our rear!'

Maglinse, chief of operations at Belgian HQ, quickly grasped the seriousness of the situation, which called for prompt action. He ordered Nuyten to collect all available information on the drainage system of the area to avoid a disaster on the Belgian side of the border. Nuyten then asked the Mayor if he knew the name of any engineer who could advise him regarding the local *watering*.¹⁰

⁹ The local meaning of dyke is a ditch with a ramp on both sides. Vaart is the local name for man-made canal.

¹⁰ From medieval times the maintenance of dykes, waterways and related structures in the Flemish polders was entrusted to local polder boards called watering.

The Mayor replied that all such men had left town, but directed Nuyten to Charles [Karel] Cogge (Figure 3).¹¹

Cogge was sent for, but as it was Sunday, he did not arrive until after mass and a beer at a nearby tavern. Just before noon, Nuyten began by asking Cogge technical questions about the management of a large polder adjacent to the French border.¹² Cogge attempted to find the necessary details on a 1:40,000 scale map of the area, but requested to return home to get a dedicated map of his own. Cogge dismissed the French suggestion of a freshwater inundation out of France by the Bergenvaart,¹³ due to the fact that the Belgian section was normally higher.¹⁴ On the question of flooding the section between the Yser and the railway embankment, Cogge had a clear plan. The Noordvaart Gates could be used to flood that section. Therefore, all the underpasses of the railway embankment had to be closed. After checking its location on a map, Nuyten concluded that this structure was too exposed to enemy observation and bombardment.¹⁵



Figure 3. Charles (Karel) Cogge (1855-1922) © Public Domain

Seeking an alternative, Cogge suggested that the Spanish Lock could be used instead. The result would be slower, but could still work.

1. On the partly disused Spanish Lock they needed to improvise. It was out of sight of the enemy. The water could flow with a detour to the same sector.
2. But the railway underpasses needed to be closed: two dozen small and four large ones.
3. An extra dam had to prevent the flooding of the Belgian side of the front.

11 An elderly supervisor (59) of the NWV (Noord Watering Veurne) authority. At least on two other occasions his name was mentioned to Staff Officers.

12 The ordnance of the maps in France and Belgium are different.

13 Even with extra supply this curling long narrow brook would need days and the only Belgian base would be effected.

14 Cogge was obviously not aware of inundation manoeuvres out of Dunkerque on the French side.

15 The intelligence at that moment was very poor for that matter.

Nuyten agreed and informed the staff. Galet, close advisor to the king, but then the deputy chief of staff Wielemans who heard the plan from Cogge himself. He told that the inundation level could be set at 3.00 m to 3.25 m just behind the railroad embankment. Now, events began unfolding rapidly. Chief of Operations Maglinse, and Head of Transport Masure were informed, as was King Albert, who approved of the plan. That day, the 'Directorate of the Inundation Service' was created.

Nieuwpoort, a Nautical Knot

In the flat coastal region, water management is a matter of centimetres. Drainage is accomplished through a network of ditches, brooks, and *vaarts*,¹⁶ all of which terminate in the Noordvaart via eight gates. It should be emphasized that there are in fact two separate waterway grids superimposed on the region. The upper grid is the 'navigation layer', underneath which a series of ditches and *vaarts* constitute the drainage basin. Tidal fluctuation on the Belgian coast can be up to five metres. For altimetry, a zero level is chosen so that sea level is almost always higher. French, Dutch and German ordnance maps set their level approximately two and a half metres higher.¹⁷

Over the centuries, a vast system of dykes was constructed in the region to hold back the sea. Most have been flattened since the Middle Ages, because the *impoldering* has long been complete. Some traces can still be found on rural trails though. As a result, Nieuwpoort has had to build fortifications, sometimes against England,¹⁸ and often against France.¹⁹ With their knowledge of the local water sources, the magistrates of the town could initiate inundations to keep approaching enemies at a safe distance. Apart from a freshwater inundation, authorities could also use seawater. This was deemed disastrous for agriculture, however, and the peasants dreaded such measures.²⁰

The Alternative Inundation

Sunday 25 October, Cogge was picked up by officers Jamotte and Thys. They needed information regarding the 200 m dam that needed to be built that night. The next morning Cogge was again needed to inspect the critical points of the railway embankment (Figure 4). Cogge guided two officers to the huge

16 Flemish meaning an elaborated old creek with traces from the Middle Ages.

17 P. Van Pul suggested this as one of the reasons for the confusion by the German invaders in 1914.

18 Starting in the Hundred Years war between England and France in the 14th and 15th Centuries.

19 Especially during the 17th Century of Louis XIV and the French assault from 1793 on.

20 For obvious reasons farmers in general opposed any flooding and often they sabotaged attempts.

underpasses, ranging between six metres and nine metres in width. Meanwhile, the Germans bombarded areas beyond the embankment. The trip finally ended in Booitshoeke because some German pioneers had broken through at Ramskapelle.

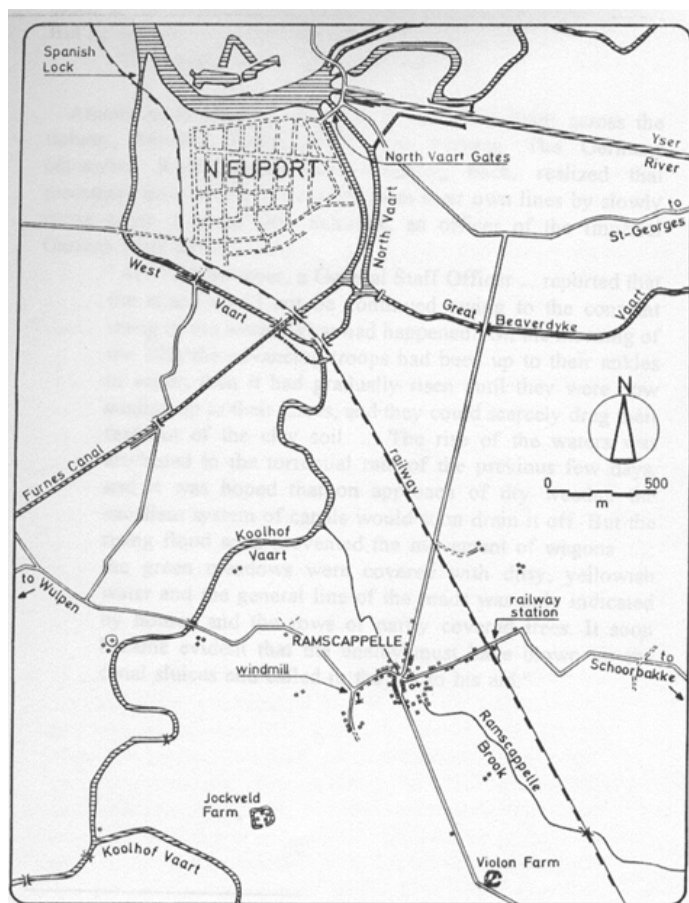


Figure 4. Map between Nieuwpoort and Ramscapelle
© P. Van Pul

At noon they reached Veurne, but it is now that there is some confusion in the reports. The officers had decided to use the Spanish Lock to create the flood. On the evening of 26 October Captain Thys retrieved Cogge from Veurne. That afternoon Colonel Brécard had wired an alarming message: '...Belgian High Command intended to order a retreat and meant to include the French troops...' There was panic in Veurne: 'kwade maandag'.²¹ Civilians saw a retreating Belgian unit, and fled out of the town.

Captain Thys and Cogge went by car to Nieuwpoort, and picked up a few soldiers. They then hid from the

bombardment for four hours until high tide, after midnight. The Spanish Lock was in disuse as a navigation device, and tools for operating the doors were no longer available. The doors had to be opened manually, but the rising tide made it difficult to hold them open. At first, seawater rippled through, and the set-doors began to open. Cogge was not a lockkeeper though, and even Thys was unable to keep the doors open. The rising tide slowly increased the pull on the doors, and the soldiers had a hard time holding them in place.

The flood attempt, at least for the time being, had failed. Captain Thys decided to open the small gate paddles in each door. It was the best they could do.

At daybreak, 27 October, there was some relief after two weeks of heavy rain, showers, drizzle and fog. The enemy seemed to be taking some time off. The shelling was lighter, sporadic, and concentrated mainly on

²¹ Flemish "Frightening/angry Monday".

Nieuwpoort, Ramskapelle and Pervijze. Two enemy attacks had taken place on the embankment. Later on, reconnaissance troops were spotted in front of Ramskapelle.

Cogge was summoned again that afternoon. With advice from the only lockkeeper in Veurne, they collected tools for the second attempt. They waited until shortly after midnight the next day for high tide. Accompanied by a corporal and a soldier, Captain Thys and Cogge reached the lock. To their astonishment, HQ had sent an artillery captain and a 75 mm gun to destroy the lock, and a lieutenant of engineers to blow up the doors if the attempt failed. Captain Thys sent them away.

Work began around 02.00. The soldiers dug foxholes on either side, and tied ropes to the flood doors. They then waited for the rising tide to reach the level of the old Veurnevaart. At 06.15, the set-doors slowly opened, and seawater began to flow inland. The set-doors could now function automatically, opening with the high tide and closing with the low tide. In the evening, a second high tide began pushing its way inland, but the results were not encouraging. The width of the Spanish Lock was acceptable (5.6 m), but the shallow Old Veurnevaart was constricted by two bridges. Secondly, water had to pass through the old culvert under the Veurnevaart. There was also the weir on the Koolhofvaart. Above and on both sides, Cogge had advised making a dam to prevent flooding the Belgian side of the railroad. As a result, the water first began to fill up the Noordvaart and the ditches in the fields along the embankment. In the evening, the water level had not changed much at the Venepevaart underpass, five kilometres south of Nieuwpoort.²² This was distressing to many on the Franco-Belgian side. The total area to be flooded comprised some 30 km, stretching as far as 12 km inland.

The Key Inundation

The news of the flooding circulated among the military, and Henri Geeraert was frustrated that no attempt had been made at the Noordvaart, where the gates were three times larger. He implored his military friends for assistance. When Captain Borlon and Geeraert made their move towards Noordvaart, Captain Thys informed High Command and the action was cancelled.²³ Thys was unsure if the Germans had occupied the locks, and thought that if they made the correct deductions, they could ruin the whole enterprise.

²² Nevertheless German reports mentioned that they could only move on the scarce tracks and country roads and for the rest trudged up to their ankles through the water on a clay surface. All of them thought it was the rainy weather that was to blame.

²³ Captain Thys was the only engineer with some experience in such matters.

On the morning of 29 October, after heavy shelling between Booitshoeke and Pervijze, the Germans launched another assault on the First Army Division, but were repelled by the Fourth Regiment. A more vigorous attack followed in the afternoon, accompanied by a diversion by the Second Army division near Ramskapelle. The Third and Fourth regiments were able to beat back the enemy. Several German artillery batteries were now located on the left bank of the Yser, providing close support to the infantry. It was obvious that a break through the Belgian lines was imminent.

With the threat of a German offensive to the south, and the unsatisfactory inundation from the Spanish Lock, High Command decided to allow an attempt at opening the Noordvaart Gates. Soon after dark, Captain Thys' assistant, Captain Umé, and Geeraert crossed the Veurnevaart on top of the lock doors and proceeded to Noordvaart. Some of the same soldiers from the Spring Sluice accompanied them, and a platoon of Carabineers fanned out to guard against a German encounter. With high tide approaching, there was no time to waste. Geeraert wound the windlasses and set five men to work. The same procedure was repeated 16 times to raise the doors.²⁴ With each gate the water flowed faster, and soon seawater was rushing inland. They retreated after 20 minutes to wait at a nearby tavern. 'We were sitting there, pale with fear', Umé confessed later. Before midnight, the men returned to lower the doors, by releasing the safety pins. A massive load of seawater was trapped in the polder.

Not a Day too Soon

The news from Ramskapelle was not good on the morning of 30 October. The Germans had reached the railway and set up machine guns to enfilade the line. At the same time, the Belgians learned of the horror of hand grenades. The Germans were halted at a cluster of houses 400 m past the line with a counter attack by the remnants of the 5th and 6th Belgian and 151st French regiments. After 11.00, an amalgamation of four battalions tried to regain a foothold. The Germans had captured a windmill, and set up machine-guns to cover the entire area west of the railroad. The loss of Ramskapelle and the fighting near Pervijze were detrimental. Rear Admiral Hood kept up his incessant bombardment to cover the French left wing, which now stretched from the coast to Nieuwpoort.

Around noon, bogs began to form in the fields across the railway from Ramskapelle to Pervijze. The Germans occupying Ramskapelle realized that they were slowly being cut off from their lines by the rising water. Captain Otto Schwink reported:

The attack could not be continued owing to the constantly rising water . . . On the

24 Eight double doors – for safety – in eight gates each 2m wide.

morning of the 30th the advancing troops had been up to their ankles in water, then it had gradually risen until they were now wading up to their knees, and they could scarcely drag their feet out of the clay soil.

The Germans first believed that the recent torrential rain was to blame.

But the rising flood soon prevented the movement of wagons . . . the green meadows were covered with dirty, yellowish water and the general of the roads was only indicated by houses and the rows of partly covered trees. It soon became evident that the enemy must have blown up the canal sluices and called in the sea to its aid.

That last remark soon travelled around the world, and stands out in the collective memories of many people, but it was not true.

A Lasting Success?

That afternoon, the water emerged into the Belgian trenches across the railway, 11 km from the Spanish Lock. Although the Noordvaart gates had only been opened once, five tides had now passed through the Spanish Lock. That evening, Captain Umé, Geeraert and their three assistants repeated their endeavour at Noordvaart. Surprisingly, they accomplished it without being detected.

The assault on Ramskapelle was renewed on 31 October with French artillery support. By 14.00, the exits of the village, and the last Germans were killed or driven out (Figure 5).

That night the doors of Noordvaart were opened again. The Germans were now in full retreat. By Nightfall they held only a few sites west of the river.

On 1 November, the last Germans around Oud-Stuivekenskerke retreated. The Noordvaart gates were opened for a last time that night. Belgian troops then reoccupied the locks, and this bridgehead remained in allied

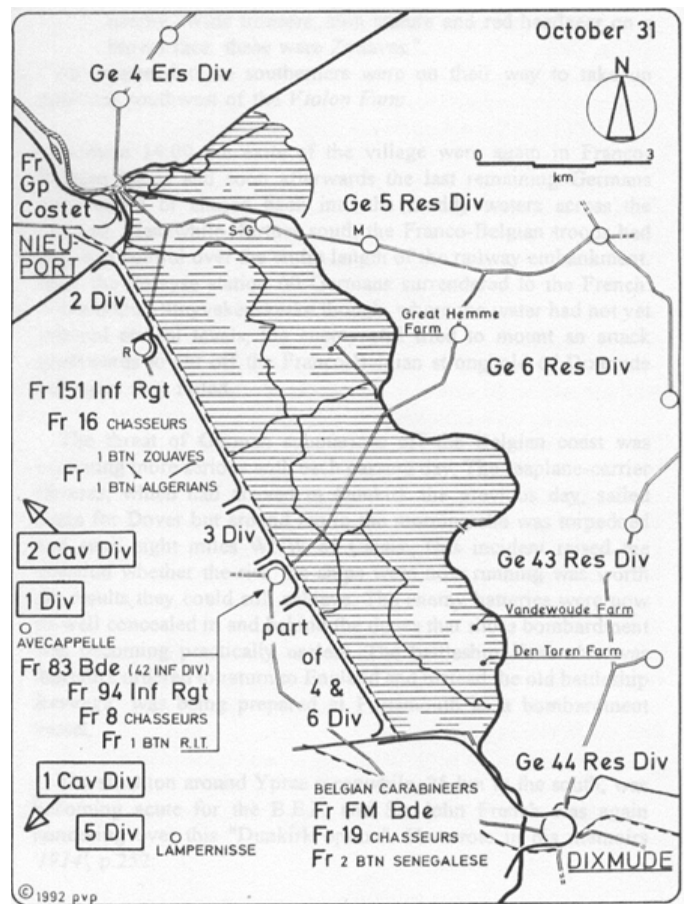


Figure 5. Situation on the defensive line, 31 October 1914 © P. Van Pul

hands for the rest of the war. The Germans dealt one last blow to the Yser front on 10 November when they captured the bridgehead at Diksmuide. At the end of the battle of the Yser River, the front was stabilized from the North Sea to Diksmuide, but at a heavy price to the Belgian army. Nearly one third of the infantrymen who had entered the battle were now killed, wounded or missing.

For the next four years, Captain – later Captain Commandant – Thys, led a company of sappers-pontoners to maintain the inundation. He surrounded himself with experts in hydraulics and mathematics. Together, they succeeded in extending the flooding east and south of Diksmuide into occupied territory. Despite frequent artillery bombardments, the structures at Nieuwpoort were kept operational.

Epilogue

On 1 November Colonel Wielemans suggested that Nuyten and Cogge should be promoted to Knights of the Leopold Order. Three days later, Cogge was called before the King, who thanked him in Dutch (uncommon at the time) for his help. Because there was no medal at hand, King Albert borrowed one from Colonel Wielemans' tunic. The official army report reads:

The plan to flood the area between the Yser and the Nieuwpoort-Diksmuide railway is the brainchild of Staff Captain-commandant Nuyten of the HQ, after close collaboration with the lockkeeper (sic) Cogge of the waterway-grid in the surrounding of the Yser.

At the age of 51, Henry Geeraert stayed to operate the locks for the remainder of the war. He became known as 'le père Henri' (Father Henry), and worked as an equal under dangerous circumstances, becoming a legendary figure. The French honoured him with a medal in 1914. When he passed away in 1925, a Leopold Order medal was placed on his coffin.

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