

# Operation HUSH, 1917 - A taste of D-Day?

## Introduction

*The International Journal of Naval History - A Global Forum for Naval Historical Scholarship* published in April 2002 an account of the plans for an attack on the Belgian coast - at Nieuport - in 1917.

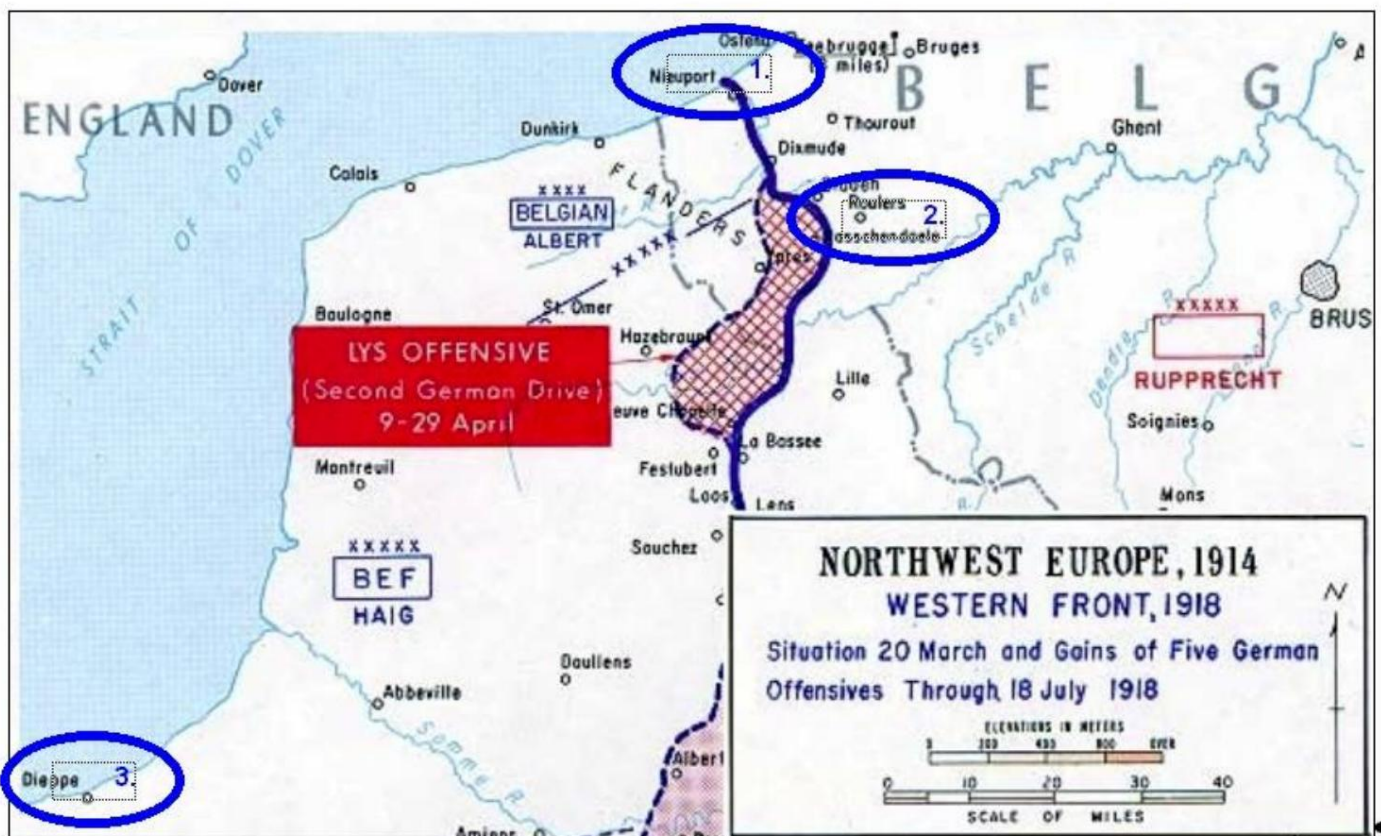
The article, which appears to be the manuscript of a lecture, was written by retired Captain *Christopher Paige*, Royal Navy and can be found at: [www.ijnhonline.org/volume1\\_number1\\_Apr02/article\\_page\\_landing\\_1917.doc.htm](http://www.ijnhonline.org/volume1_number1_Apr02/article_page_landing_1917.doc.htm).

I recommend the article as an exciting read - and in a wargame context a possible "what if..." scenario.

## Historical framework

The First World War, apart from the Allied landings at Gallipoli (1915) and the attack on Zeebrugge (1918), was not characterized by *Combined Operations* on a larger scale.

In the article, the author explains the English plans for an attack on the Belgian port city of Nieuport (1). The aim of the operation was to weaken the German front and thereby create the conditions for an Allied breakthrough at Passchendaele (2).



The sketch is an extract from map 18. Northwestern Europe, 20 March - 18 July 1918 from *West Point's* historical department's map collection - see [www.dean.usma.edu/history](http://www.dean.usma.edu/history) - and is to a small extent make up for the missing map in the article.

The plan, which was shrouded in great secrecy, was named Operation HUSH 1). It was a lot\_

advanced for its time and foresaw, among other things, the deployment of land-based tanks. However, due to the lack of success at Passchendaele, the plans were shelved and the idea only became a reality around 25 years later - including at Dieppe (3), which can be seen at the bottom left of the map.

## Landing of tanks

The plan included the deployment of at least 9 tanks of the Mark IV type, which were to be transported to the coast on 3 large barges specially constructed for the occasion. Each barge weighed 2,500 tons and was 167 m long. It was brought forward, attached to two heavy gunboats (*monitors*), which thus constituted both engine power, steering gear and firepower (12" guns).

In addition to the tanks, each barge was to carry an infantry brigade, a battery (4 field guns and 2 field howitzers) and a machine gun company (with motorcycles). There was also a large number of carts and wagons, as well as two ambulances and between 183 and 388 bicycles. (Doesn't sound like there hasn't been a lot of room left over on these barges!)

Once the tanks had arrived, they had to pass first the beach itself and then a high wall - all under enemy fire!



At the panzer troop school in Merlimont, they set about studying the task at hand and constructing the aids that would ensure the success of the operation. The tanks were to work together in groups of three - two cannon-armed tanks (type *Male*) and one machine gun-armed tank (type *Female*).

The tanks were equipped with special devices on the belts, which were supposed to ensure their *grip*. Furthermore, special wheeled ramps were constructed, which the tanks pushed in front of them - towards the wall. When the ramp bumped into the wall, the tank had to free itself from the ramp by reversing, and then drive forward up the ramp - and over the wall.

The picture shows a Mark IV (*Male*) in front of a replica of the actual wall which was built for practice purposes at Merlimont. (Source 1.)

The tanks of the type Mark IV (*Female*) were also equipped with a winch, mounted externally on the right side of the tank. With the help of these winches, the tank was subsequently to assist in transporting cannons, representations and wagons over the wall.

## Chance of success?

Did this part of the operation have a chance of success? It is possible that the technology of the time was not quite there

goals with the ambitions, but in any case, they were ready to throw themselves into implementation.

There were many factors that had to fit together - and, apart from a large number of exercises, there was no practical experience of bringing tanks forward over an enemy-occupied beach.

Finally, it also sounds very risky to transport an entire brigade on a "ship" - even with three brigades deployed, that's a lot of "eggs" to put in one basket!

It is therefore conceivable that the operation had rather become a foretaste of the landing at Dieppe (1942) rather than the landing in Normandy (1944).

## Sources

1. *Landships - British Tanks in the First World War* by David Fletcher, HMSO Books, London 1984, ISBN 0-11-290409-2.
2. *Vanguard of Victory - The 79th Armored Division* by David Fletcher, HMSO Books, London 1984, ISBN 0-11-290-422-X.

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## Notes:

1) It is not known whether the English term *hush-hush* (= hush-hush) originates here, or whether the name was simply the next on the list of code words.