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Author: Robert PALMER, M.A.



**A CONCISE HISTORY OF:**

# **XII CORPS (HISTORY & PERSONNEL)**

A concise history of XII Corps, a higher level formation of the British Army in existence from 1940 until 1945. It saw operational service in North West Europe in 1944 and 1945. In addition, known details of the key appointments held during that period are included.

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## **A Concise History of XII Corps (History & Personnel)**

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Author: Robert PALMER, M.A. (copyright held by author)  
Assisted by: Stephen HEAL  
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## XII Corps

The XII Corps was formed in the United Kingdom circa June 1940. The first commanding officer of the Corps was Lieutenant General Andrew THORNE. XII Corps was stationed in the south east of England in the counties of Kent and Sussex, and had its headquarters located at 10, Broadwater Down in Royal Tunbridge Wells, Kent. The first formations it had under command were:

- 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division,
- 1<sup>st</sup> London Infantry Division.

The 1<sup>st</sup> London Division was renamed as the 56<sup>th</sup> (1<sup>st</sup> London) Infantry Division on 18 November 1940. The Corps remained in the U.K. where it was designated to become part of the British Liberation Army for the invasion of France. On 4 June 1944, the Corps had under command the:

- 43<sup>rd</sup> (Wessex) Infantry Division;
- 53<sup>rd</sup> (Welsh) Infantry Division;
- 59<sup>th</sup> (Staffordshire) Infantry Division;
- 34<sup>th</sup> Army Tank Brigade.

The Corps H.Q. landed in Normandy in July 1944 and became operational on 16 July, under the command of 2<sup>nd</sup> Army. It was deployed covering the left flank of the Odon valley between VIII Corps and XXX Corps in 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, taking over ground and formations from VIII Corps. The 43<sup>rd</sup> (Wessex) Infantry Division had landed in Normandy on 24 June 1944, and initially came under command of VIII Corps. It transferred to XII Corps on 13 July 1944, which is probably the date that the Corps Headquarters became effective in Normandy. Likewise, the 53<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division had landed in Normandy on 27 June, and it also came under command of VIII Corps. It transferred back to XII Corps on 13 July. The 59<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division landed in Normandy on 27 June and came under command of I Corps before re-joining XII Corps on 11 July 1944. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Group Royal Artillery usually provided artillery support for XII Corps throughout the campaign in North-West Europe.

It played a subsidiary role in the fighting in Normandy, as operation 'Perch' the advance from the Caumont area to Villers Bocage was a XXX Corps operation, and the Odon offensive of 25 – 29 June was undertaken by VIII Corps before XII Corps landed in Normandy. Operation 'Epsom' was led by VIII Corps, Operation 'Charnwood' by I Corps, and Operation 'Goodwood' by VIII Corps, with XII Corps in a supporting role for this last operation. This is not to say that the Corps was not involved in some intense and fierce fighting in Normandy, as the histories of the divisions under command make clear. The 43<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division transferred to XXX Corps on 28 July, just prior to the successful operation to take Mont Pincon. The 59<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division passed to the command of 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group on 21 August 1944 in order to be disbanded.

For Operation Market Garden, which commenced on 17 September 1944, the Corps had under command the

- 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division;
- 15<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Infantry Division;
- 53<sup>rd</sup> (Welsh) Infantry Division.

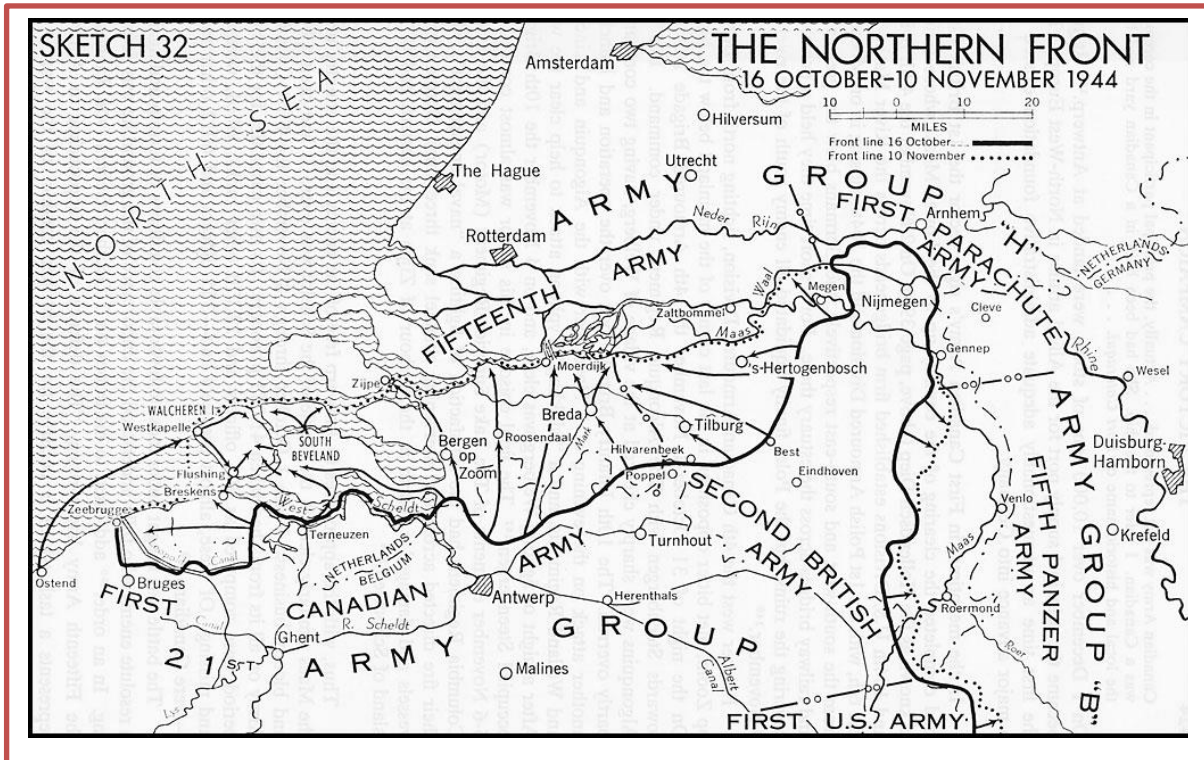
The 15<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division moved to XII Corps on 14 August 1944 from VIII Corps, and generally alternated between XII Corps and VIII Corps for the rest of the campaign. The 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division joined this Corps on 29 August 1944 from I Corps. XXX Corps was the main offensive corps in the 'Garden' element of this operation, with XII Corps acting in support on its left flank and VIII Corps on its right flank. Operation Market Garden failed in its main objective, leaving a salient projecting into the Netherlands. The focus of the 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group then changed to clearing the Scheldt estuary to reopen the port of Antwerp, which at the time was the third largest port in the world, and was desperately needed to bring in the supplies required by the Allied armies.

Following Operation Market Garden, the next task allocated to XII Corps was to clear the North Brabant province of the Netherlands in what was known as Operation 'Pheasant'. This operation commenced on 20 October 1944 and came to an end on 4 November 1944, and it arose following the failure of Operation Market Garden to achieve a decisive outcome. XII Corps had been deployed on the left flank of XXX Corps for Operation Garden, so it fell to XII Corps to reorientate itself to advance into the North Brabant Province. For this operation, XII Corps had under command:

- 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division,
- 15<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Infantry Division,
- 51<sup>st</sup> (Highland) Infantry Division,
- 53<sup>rd</sup> (Welsh) Infantry Division,
- 4<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade,
- 6<sup>th</sup> (Guards) Tank Brigade,
- 33<sup>rd</sup> Armoured Brigade,
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Group Royal Artillery.

The 51<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division transferred to XII Corps on 18 October from I Corps for this operation. The operation began with a thrust by the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division and 53<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division to reach the main objective of the city of s-Hertogenbosch. The 15<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was to liberate the city of Tilburg on the left flank of the advance. I Corps launched a supporting attack with the 1<sup>st</sup> Polish Armoured Division to take the city of Breda, while the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Division advanced to clear Bergen-op-Zoom. The 104<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry Division (the 'Timberwolves') was also under command of I Corps for this offensive.

The Headquarters of the German 15<sup>th</sup> Army was subjected to an air attack that killed over seventy staff officers and dislocated the German command arrangements. The Allied forces made steady progress through difficult countryside and against stiff resistance. The 51<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division liberated the only concentration camp built in the Netherlands, at Herzogenbusch.



The fighting around and in s-Hertogenbosch was fierce and bitter. A number of canals and waterways slowed the advance, but several bridges were captured intact which assisted the operation. The 53<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division managed to make minor ingresses into the city assisted by specialist armoured from the 79<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division on 25 October and then worked their way northwards towards the railway station. There was intense house-to-house fighting in the city, but the 53<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division ground the opposition down steadily. By the evening of 27 October, German opposition in s-Hertogenbosch had effectively ended, but the cost had been one-hundred and forty-five British soldiers and two-hundred and fifty-three Dutch civilians killed.

Meanwhile, the 15<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and 6<sup>th</sup> Tank Brigade had made good progress and liberated Oisterwijk on 26 October. The Royal Netherlands Motorised Infantry Brigade was brought up to participate in the liberation of parts of its homeland, assisting in the attack on Tilburg. The city was liberated on 27 October, but then the 15<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and 6<sup>th</sup> Tank Brigade were withdrawn and sent to reinforce VIII Corps as a result of a German counter-attack near Eindhoven.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Division reached Bergen-op-Zoom and liberated the city on 27 October, with the Germans finally being ejected on 30 October. The 1<sup>st</sup> Polish Armoured Division managed to cross the Mark River and Canal, which was a means of isolating Breda. They attacked the city on 29 October and forced the Germans to withdraw to the north. The 104<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry Division had five days of hard fighting as it advanced northwards and pushed the Germans back over the Maas River by 5 November. The 51<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division cleared a German pocket of resistance to the west of s--Hertogenbosch on 5 November and the Allied forces closed up to the Maas River. This in effect marked the end of this offensive. The Germans had lost a total of about eight-thousand troops, killed, wounded and taken prisoner-of-war. Most of the cities had been liberated without heavy damage, except for s--Hertogenbosch.

The German offensive in the Ardennes diverted Allied attention and it was not until January 1945 that XII Corps was next required to undertake offensive operations. This was intended to clear the remaining German forces south of the River Rhine around Limburg and was known as Operation 'Blackcock'. This took place between 14 and 26 January 1945. The 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division remained with XII Corps, but the 53<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division transferred to VIII Corps on 31 October 1944, and the 51<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division transferred to II Canadian Corps on 25 November 1944. The 52<sup>nd</sup> (Lowland) Infantry Division and 43<sup>rd</sup> (Wessex) Infantry Division both joined XII Corps on 13 December 1944 moving from XXX Corps

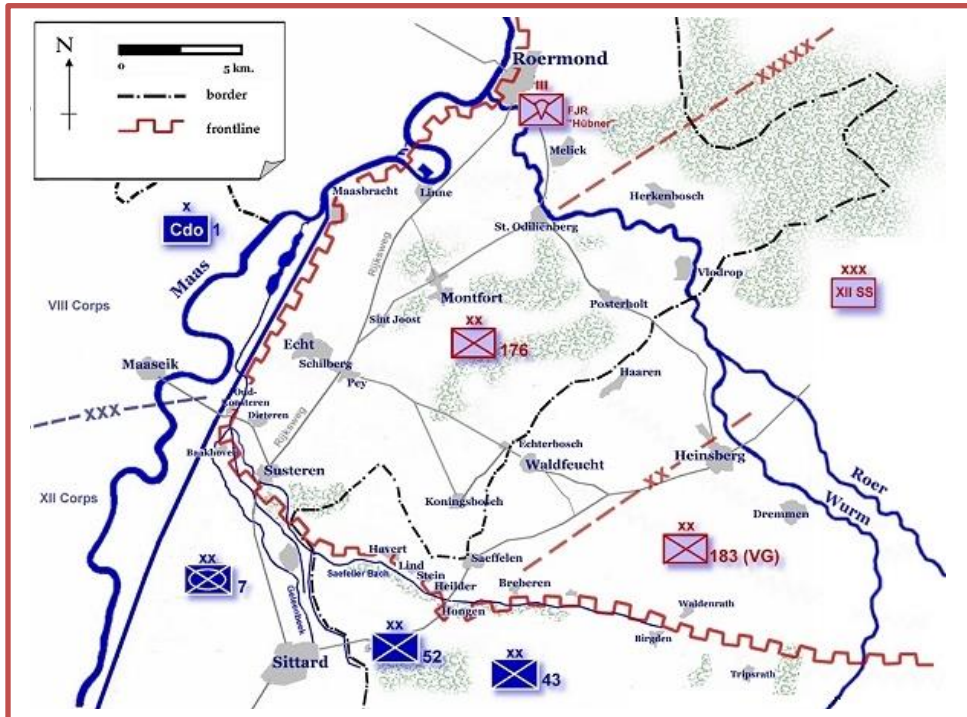
This meant that the order of battle of XII Corps for Operation Blackcock was:

- 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division,
- 43<sup>rd</sup> (Wessex) Infantry Division,
- 52<sup>nd</sup> (Lowland) Infantry Division,
- Elements of 79<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division (Specialist Armour),
- 8<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade,
- 6<sup>th</sup> (Guards) Tank Brigade,
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Group Royal Artillery,
- 9<sup>th</sup> Army Group Royal Artillery.

XII Corps had moved from its former position in the Netherlands to relieve U.S. Army formations in the Roermond area so that they could stabilise the position following the Ardennes offensive. Here they were facing two German Volksgrenadier formations under XII S.S. Corps. All three divisions of the corps were involved, each driving into the German held territory from their current positions. The key action took place on 20 January, when after four attempts, the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division drove units from Fallschirmjager Regiment Hubner out of the village of Sint Joost.



During Operation Blackcock, the Air Force bombed the town on Montfort as a tactical target. What was not known at the time was that the Germans were anticipating this and had withdrawn into the woods outside the town, so when the town was liberated on 24 January, it was found that the bombing raid had killed one-hundred and eighty-six civilians, mostly buried in their own houses.

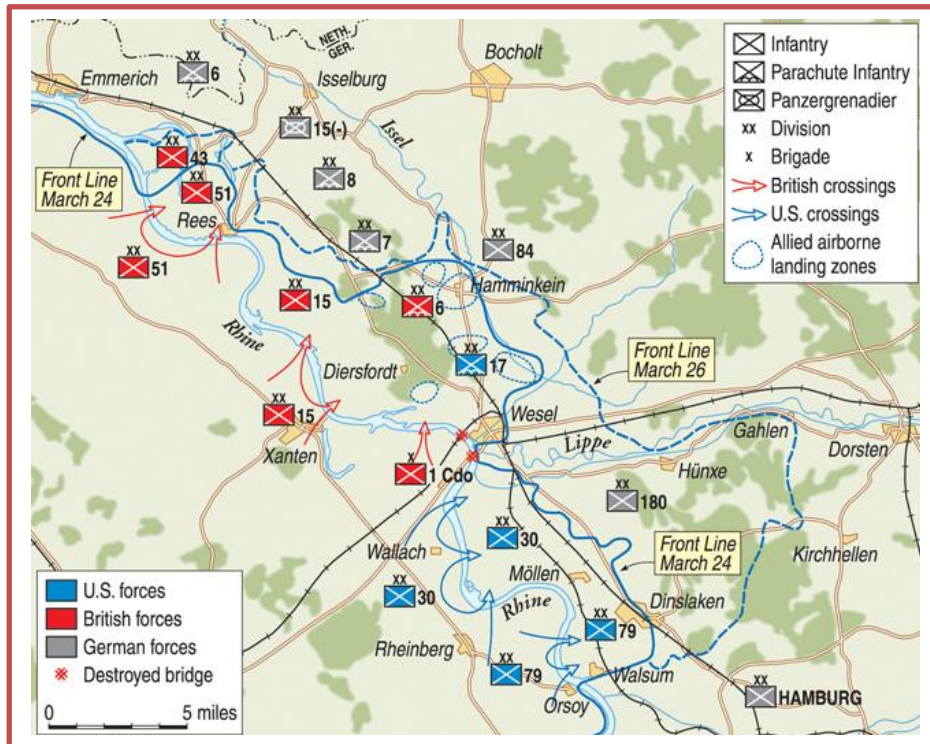


The 52<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division suffered seven-hundred and fifty-two casualties, with one-hundred and one killed and two-hundred and fifty-eight evacuated through sickness in the harsh winter conditions. The 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division lost about forty tanks, but the majority were repairable, and most were breakdowns. The German casualties numbered about two-thousand men, most of them taken as prisoners-of-war.

XII Corps was chosen to be one of the two British corps formations to undertake the crossing of the River Rhine in Operation 'Plunder'. This meant that the order of battle of XII Corps for this operation was:

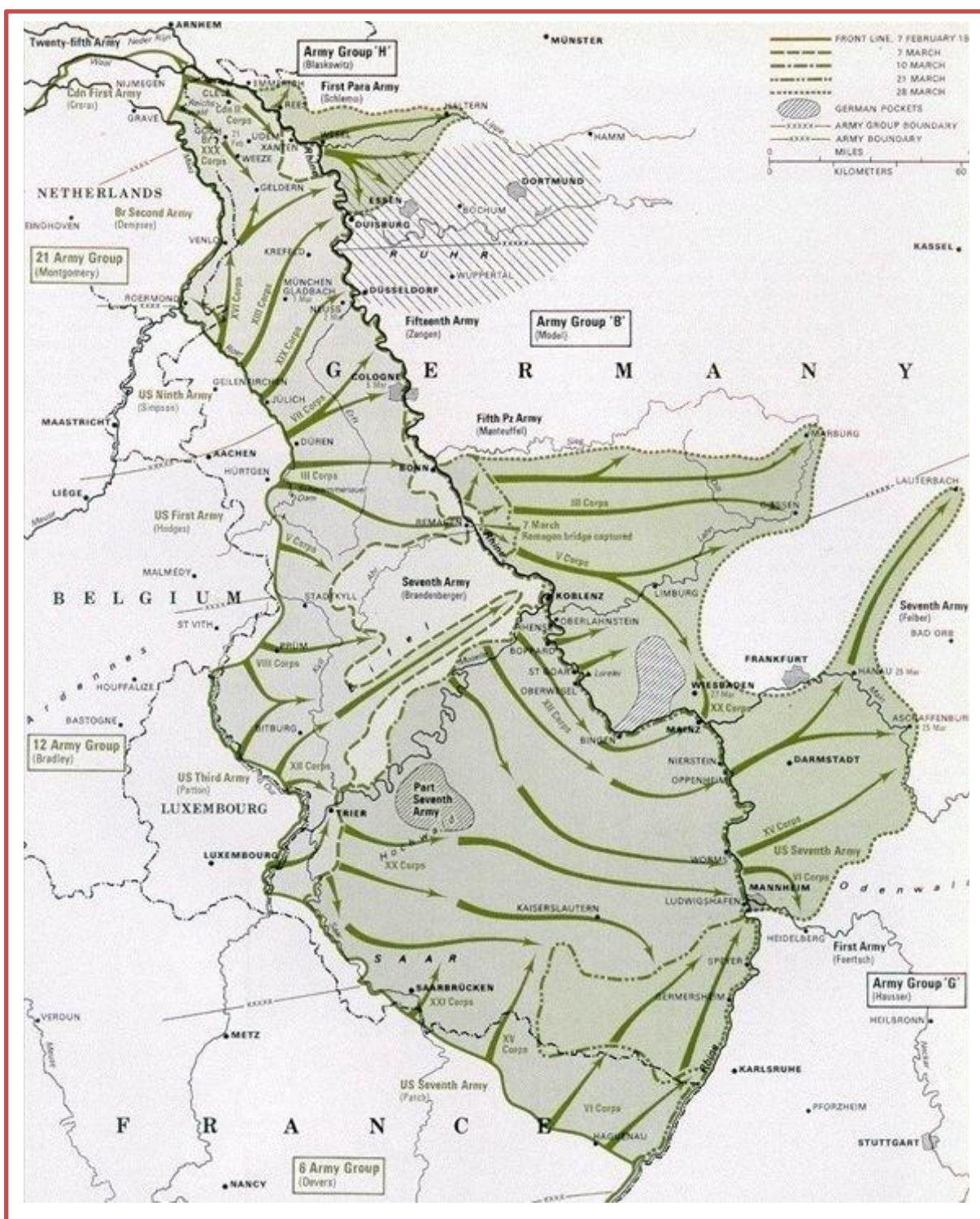
- 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division,
- 15<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Infantry Division,
- 52<sup>nd</sup> (Lowland) Infantry Division,
- 53<sup>rd</sup> (Welsh) Infantry Division,
- Elements of 79<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division,
- 4<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade,
- 1<sup>st</sup> Commando Brigade,
- 115<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade,
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Group Royal Artillery.

The 53<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division had rejoined XII Corps on 18 February, and the 15<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division joined on 7 March 1945. The 43<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division left XII Corps on 21 February 1945 and was to serve under XXX Corps for this operation. XII Corps was on the right of the offensive north of Wesel to follow up the airborne landings by the U.S. XVIII Airborne Corps.



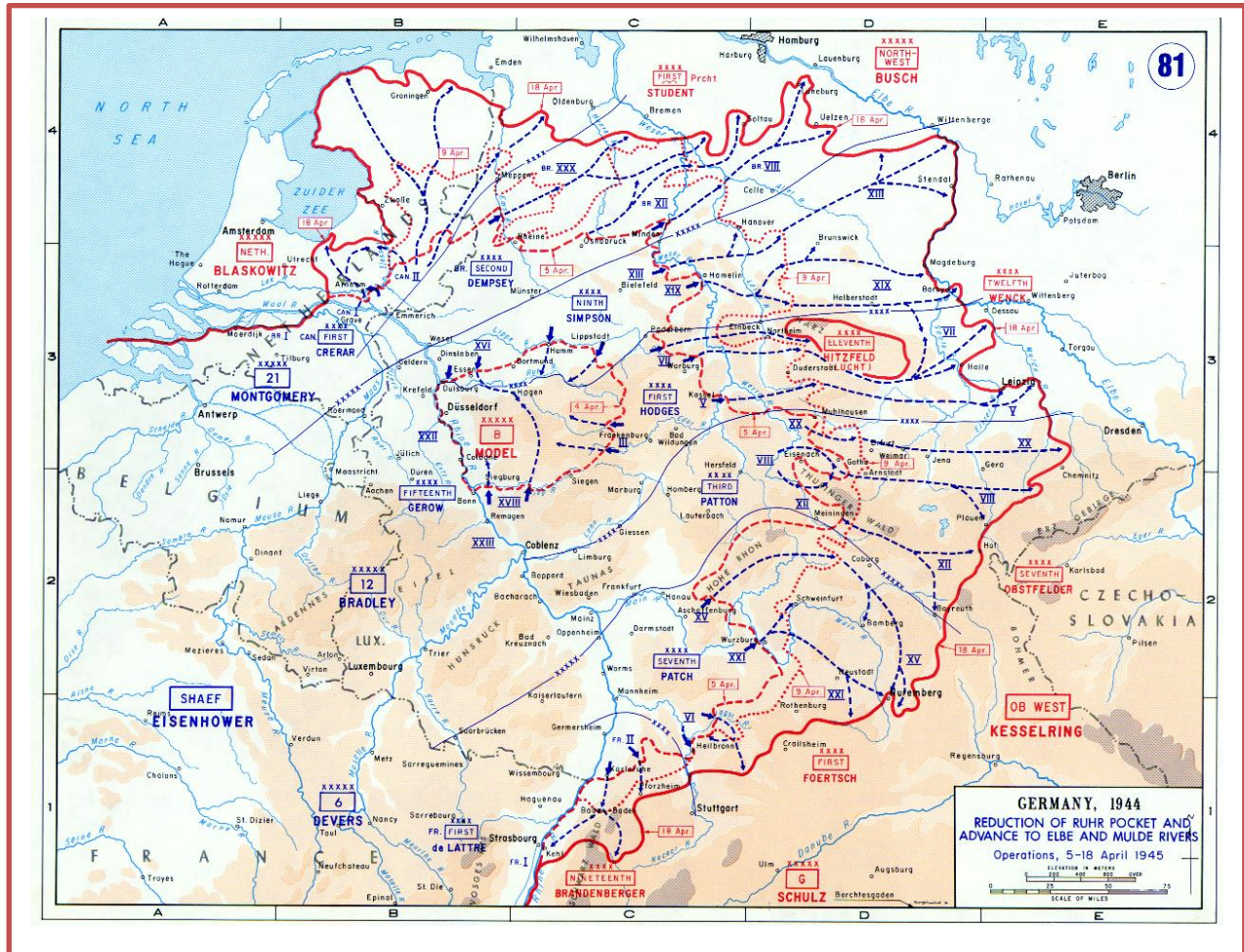
At 22.00 hours on 22 March 1945, 1 Commando Brigade crossed the River Rhine, just after XXX Corps had commenced the offensive one hour earlier. XII Corps began its assault at 02.00 hours on 23 March, and the airborne troops were landed from 09.50 hours onwards. This offensive coincided with U.S. operations elsewhere across the River Rhine, and XII Corps made good progress against generally light opposition, although there were some pockets of resistance. By the close of the day, the bridgehead was secure with the only significant opposition at Rees on XXX Corps front. By 27 March, the German front line was effectively broken, with Allied units making significant advances into Germany. XII Corps, in particular, made significant advances into Germany.







With the cessation of hostilities in Europe on 9 May 1945, the Corps was disbanded, possibly as early as 29 May 1945 as that is the date that the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division transferred to VIII Corps. This was because XII Corps was not to be retained as part of the British Army of the Rhine (B.A.O.R.) to occupy Germany post-war. Lieutenant General RITCHIE was posted to General Officer Commanding-in-Chief Scottish Command on 16 June 1945.



In conclusion, the role of XII Corps tended to be subsidiary to other British Corps, except for the final crossing of the River Rhine. This can be evidenced by the fact that in the book *Struggle for Europe*, written by the journalist Chester WILMOT, XII Corps is only mentioned six times. I Corps is referred to on twenty-three occasions, VIII Corps on twenty-six, and XXX Corps on forty-five. Even I Airborne Corps is mentioned thirty-eight times due to its single operation in September 1944. The key operation for the corps throughout the entire campaign was Operation Plunder, which the corps carried out effectively with minimal casualties.

It can be assessed that Lieutenant General RITCHIE proved to be an able corps commander. He clearly retained the confidence of Field Marshal MONTGOMERY and General DEMPSEY as no change in command of the corps took place during the campaign, whereas both VIII and XXX Corps both had commanders replaced. For RITCHIE, this was a return to favour after being dismissed from command of 8<sup>th</sup> Army in 1942. MONTGOMERY's own assessment at the time was: *'Gross mismanagement, faulty command, and bad staff work had been the cause of the whole thing'* (the retreat of 8<sup>th</sup> Army back to the El Alamein line). He continued, *'But the final blame must rest on General AUCKINLECK for allowing an inexperienced General like RITCHIE to mishandle grossly a fine fighting Army, and for allowing a policy of dispersion to rule.'*

In a letter to Brigadier SIMPSON (then Deputy Director of Military Operations and a personal friend) on 12 October 1942, MONTGOMERY stated: *'I would never let RITCHIE hold another command in the field: just at present (later on possibly)*. MONTGOMERY is known for his acerbic commentary on fellow officers, and his intense dislike of AUCHINLECK went back several years, however, for RITCHIE his resurrection as a higher formation commander is noteworthy, and to his credit. This rehabilitation was probably due, at least in part, to Field Marshal Sir Alan BROOKE, for whom RITCHIE had been Brigadier General Staff in II Corps during the 1940 campaign in France and Belgium and was highly thought of by BROOKE. RITCHIE was created a Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire on 5 July 1945 and retired as a full General in 1951.

**Corps Commander**

8 June 1940 – 15 April 1941

Lieutenant General (Acting) Augustus Francis Nichol Andrew THORNE, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O.\*\*, *i.d.c.*, *p.s.c.*

16 April 1941 – 20 November 1941

Lieutenant General (Acting) Bernard Law MONTGOMERY, C.B., D.S.O., *p.s.c.*

20 November 1941 – 1942

Lieutenant General James Andrew Harcourt GAMMELL, C.B., D.S.O., M.C.

11 November 1942 – 22 November 1943

Lieutenant General (Acting) Montagu George North STOPFORD, D.S.O., M.C., *p.s.c.*<sup>1</sup>

19 November 1943 – 15 June 1945

Lieutenant General (Acting) Neil Methuen RITCHIE, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C., *p.s.c.*<sup>2</sup>

**Brigadier General Staff – (B.G.S.)**

1940 – 14 September 1944

*Not currently known.*

15 September 1944 – 2 September 1945

Brigadier (Temporary) Gilbert Minto ELLIOT, D.S.O., M.C., *p.s.c.*

**Deputy Adjutant and Quarter-Master-General – (D.A. & Q.M.G.)**

24 June 1943 – September 1945

Brigadier (Temporary) Harold Phelps GARDHAM, C.B.E., *p.s.c.*

**Corps Commander, Royal Artillery – (C.C.R.A.)**

June 1940 – 1942

1 June 1942 – 5 September 1942

Brigadier (Temporary) Sidney Chevalier KIRKMAN, O.B.E., M.C., *p.s.c.*

1 February 1943 – 14 January 1944

Brigadier (Temporary) Stuart Blundell RAWLINS, M.C.\*

15 January 1944 – 14 September 1944

Brigadier (Temporary) Gilbert Minto ELLIOT, D.S.O., M.C., *p.s.c.*

15 September 1944 – 5 June 1945

Brigadier (Temporary) Gerard William Egerton HEATH, M.C., *p.s.c.*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Awarded the C.B. on 2 June 1943.

<sup>2</sup> RITCHIE was awarded the C.B. on 1 January 1944 and promoted Temporary Lieutenant General on 3 April 1944.

<sup>3</sup> Awarded the C.B.E. on 1 February 1945 and D.S.O. on 11 October 1945.

**Chief Engineer – (C.Eng.)**

22 March 1943 – 8 August 1945

Brigadier (Acting) Frederick William Leopold McClintock PARKER, *p.s.c.*

**Chief Signal Officer – (C.S.O.)**

27<sup>th</sup> March 1942 – 14<sup>th</sup> December 1942

Colonel (Temporary) James Ronald PATTEN, M.C., R.Sigs.

15 December 1942 – April 1946

Colonel (Temporary) Brian Bishop KENNETT, R.Sigs<sup>4</sup>

**Deputy Director of Supplies and Transport – (D.D.S.T.)****Deputy Director of Medical Services – (D.D.M.S.)****Deputy Director of Ordnance Services – (D.D.O.S.)**

21 June 1943 – June 1945

Colonel (Temporary) Hugh Fraser MacKENZIE, R.A.O.C., o.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Promoted Acting Brigadier in post on 7 September 1943 and awarded the C.B.E. on 21 June 1945.

<sup>5</sup> Awarded the C.B.E. on 11 October 1945.



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**Orders of Battle Second World War 1939-1945**

Prepared by Lieut-Col H. F. JOSLEN

First Published by the H.M.S.O. in 1960      Reprinted 1990 The London Stamp Exchange Ltd

[ISBN 0 948130 03 2]

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Author: T. F. MILLS

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