BILL McANDREW
DONALD E. GRAVES
MICHAEL WHITBY

NORMANDY 1944

THE CANADIAN SUMMER

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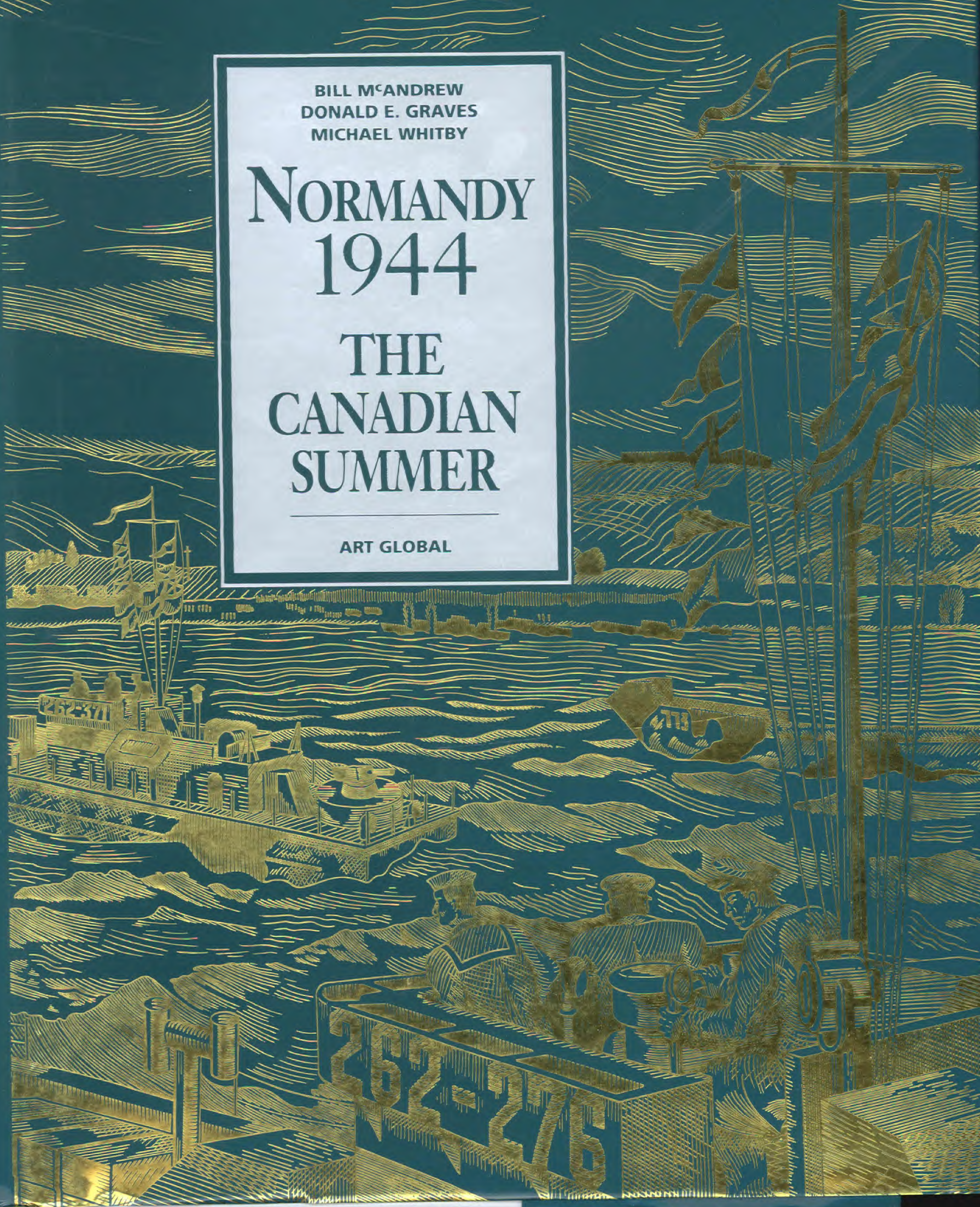

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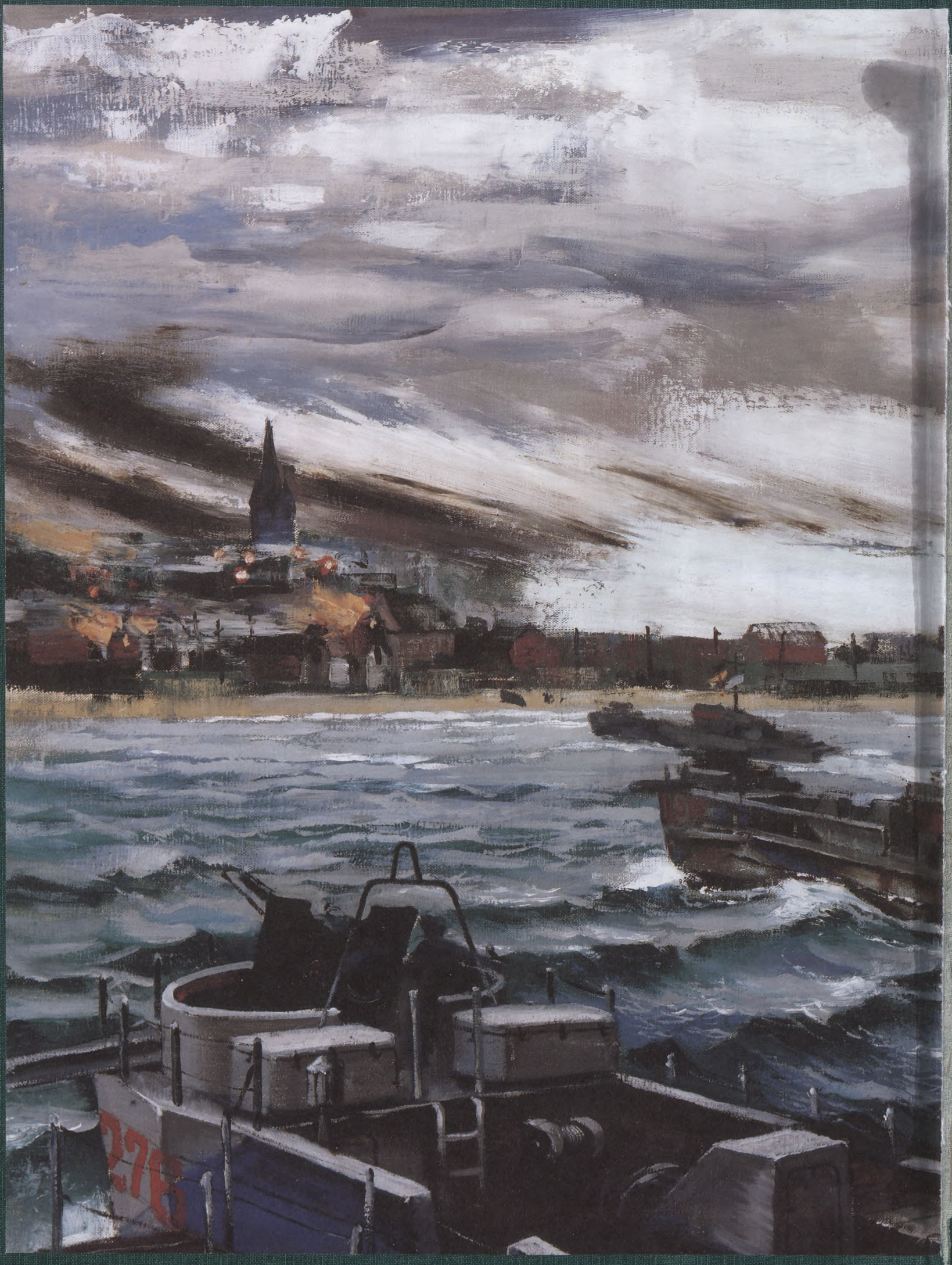
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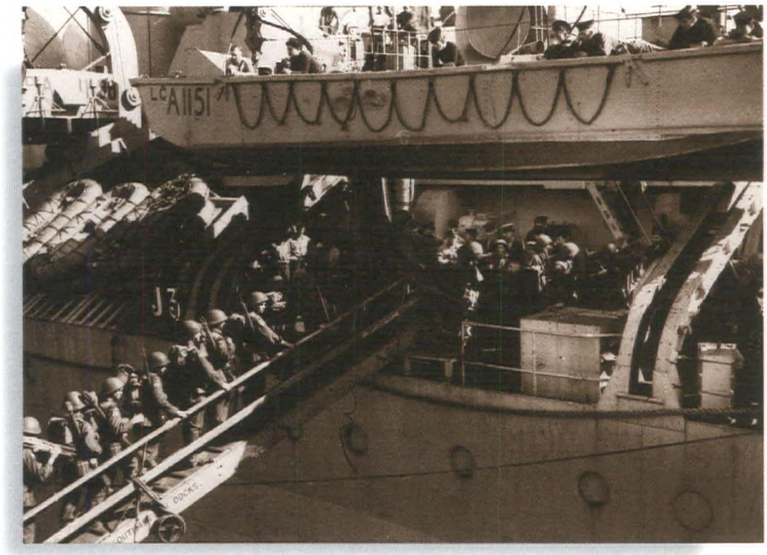
Wherever practicable, the words of actual participants in the events described, whether in memoirs or interviews, have been used — ***they are distinguished by italic type.***

PREFACE

This book commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of Canadian participation in Operation Overlord, the Allied assault on occupied France. This operation was one of the greatest Allied achievements of the Second World War. Canadians were involved in almost every aspect of this massive undertaking and played a significant part in its success. Royal Canadian Air Force crews flew bombers, fighters and reconnaissance aircraft, some in Canadian and others in British squadrons. Royal Canadian Navy sailors swept mines, manned landing craft, hunted submarines and surface vessels, and provided fire support. Canadian soldiers from all regions of Canada were among the first assault troops to land in Normandy, and they distinguished themselves in almost three months of bitter fighting in the fields of France, from Caen to beyond Falaise.

It was a remarkable accomplishment for a country with a population of barely eleven million to put a million of those people in uniform in the fight to preserve freedom. Their service laid the foundation for Canada's influence in the post-war world. Normandy veterans built on the achievements of the Canadian Corps in the Great War, and can feel justly proud that their successors, in operations from Korea to Croatia, have maintained their distinguished traditions. On behalf of Canadians, I salute and thank them all.

Jean Chrétien
Prime Minister



CHAPTER I

PREPARING FOR OVERLORD, 1939-1944

Sure now and it was an easy thing to be a hero there on the Newcastle station platform on a quiet October morning in the year of Our Lord Nineteen Hundred and Thirty-eight, while the only thing near to remind a fellow of the noise and smoke of battle was the old Chatham branch train that puffed and panted its way up to where we stood.

This was how Father Raymond Hickey described his unlikely introduction to the army in his memoir, *The Scarlet Dawn.* He had happened upon Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Leger who, unexpectedly, asked him to become chaplain of Leger's militia battalion, The North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment. Hickey accepted, so long as his Bishop approved, and it was a fateful decision that gave quite an unpredictable twist to his clerical and teaching career. Just a year later, on a Sunday morning after singing Mass in Chatham, Hickey walked back to his room, from where he could see *"the Miramichi, that Rhine of America, flowing as softly as a stream of molten silver."* He turned on his radio and, along with Canadians across the country, listened to news that came *"like an artillery barrage before an attack [when] from every angle of the dial came booming the awful words War! War! War!. . . . But impossible* [thought Hickey]! *Who could hate whom in a world so peaceful?"* Too many could hate, as it turned out, in a world falling apart.

The North Shore Regiment was a more or less typical Canadian rural militia unit. Headquartered in Newcastle, with companies scattered around the northeastern communities of Campbellton, Bathurst and Chatham, the North Shore's part-time soldiers were mobilized in May 1940, a time when other battalions, already in Britain, were anxiously observing the extraordinary spectacle of the British Expeditionary Force returning unceremoniously from Dunkirk. Within days, German armed forces were at the Channel coast, not far from Dover Castle, and the two untrained Canadian divisions that had been rushed overseas now formed the front line of Britain's defence.

Only a rare imagination at that time, or even two years later when Canadian survivors staggered back from Dieppe, could have foreseen how the Allies might return to the continent in force. With the significant exception of the Battle of Britain, the Germans had had a free run, storming through Poland and France, then the Balkans and Greece to secure their flank before invading the Soviet Union in June 1941. When the Japanese rapidly swept to New Guinea in the south and to the border of India in the west, the Axis pincers threatened to join somewhere in the Middle East.

Despite premature demands for a Second Front, arranging a successful return to the continent was a complex undertaking, not to be taken lightly. The Allies first had to win air supremacy, and forge the armed forces of a disparate coalition into an effective military force. Above all, winning the Battle of the Atlantic, the longest campaign of the war, was a prerequisite to successful invasion. Britain's survival depended first on a secure supply of goods and food, and then, when the Allies went over to the offensive, merchant ships had to carry massive quantities of men and war materiel across the North Atlantic. Convoys attracted U-boats, and that unrelenting struggle ebbed and flowed. During the winter of 1940-41 and the months following the United States' entry into the war, for example, German submariners celebrated their "happy times" by sinking enough merchant vessels to threaten Allied control of the sea. Within a few months, however, British cryptographers had solved the German ENIGMA code, allowing them to read enemy submarine signals and, for the first time, escorts were able to protect convoys right across the Atlantic. In September, the US Navy joined the fight and, in just over a year, American industry was producing merchant ships at a faster rate than the Germans could sink them. Air cover and improved anti-submarine tactics drove the U-boats into mid-ocean — the infamous black pit — where they were beyond the range of shore-based aircraft, but more cryptographic breakthroughs, roving support groups, and long-range patrol and carrier-borne aircraft squeezed them further. The turning point came in 1943. In the first three weeks of May, Allied ships and aircraft sank 31 U-boats, forcing their commander, Admiral Karl Dönitz, to withdraw the survivors of his underwater fleet from the North Atlantic. Dönitz's September counterattack failed, and between January and March 1944, 105 convoys of 3,360 merchant ships — most carrying much-needed invasion supplies — crossed the North Atlantic, losing just three vessels.

Canadian forces played a crucial role in the Atlantic victory. Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) patrol squadrons flying Cansos, Hudsons, Sunderlands, and very long-range Liberators from bases on both sides of the ocean helped close the air gap, while the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) provided nearly half the ships of the mid-ocean and western escort forces. For both services it was a particularly difficult campaign, as they rapidly expanded from tiny pre-war forces to fleets of hundreds of ships and aircraft. Both the RCN and RCAF had to overcome countless training and equipment shortfalls before becoming proficient but, by 1944, they were responsible for almost all the escort work on the North Atlantic.

Victory over the U-boats created the conditions that permitted the Allies to turn from a defensive to an offensive war. Even before then, Prime Minister Churchill had organized a Combined Operations service to explore the mechanics of transporting an invasion army across the English Channel. Combined Operations experimented by raiding enemy-held shores — at Vaagsö, Bruneval, St-Nazaire, and Dieppe — and in the process developed a variety of specialized ships and landing craft that could carry assault troops more or less safely to hostile beaches. Major operational trials — assault landings in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy — perfected techniques in reconnaissance, off-loading, fire-support, beach clearance, and command and control. By the spring of 1944 a remarkable array of imaginative devices was available: a fleet of specialized vessels to carry men, weapons, supplies, swimming tanks, trucks and AVREs (Armoured Vehicles, Royal Engineer) to clear beaches of mines, bunkers and other obstacles.

While Combined Operations was developing landing equipment and procedures, several joint planning staffs were devising schemes for a cross-Channel assault. In 1943 their work was consolidated in a joint headquarters under Lieutenant General Frederick Morgan, who was appointed COSSAC, Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander, who was yet to be appointed. Morgan's mandate was "to secure a lodgement on the Continent from which further offensive operations could be carried out."

His staff was guided by three planning assumptions. The first, that it would not be necessary to secure a working deep-water port immediately, was based on a ready alternative: the Allies would bring their own harbour, MULBERRY, as well as PLUTO, an oil pipeline, with them. Prime Minister Churchill's fertile mind had first considered the possibility of artificial harbours in 1917, and 25 years later he instructed his planners to *"let [him] have the best*

Father Raymond Hickey found that a chaplain, like an infantryman, "depended on a strong pair of shoulders, a sturdy pair of legs, a stomach that could digest shoe leather, and two feet that wouldn't blister." (Hickey collection)

Many of the Canadian soldiers who fought in Normandy joined the army at small-town recruiting centres like this one. (Department of National Defence, PMR93-393)

solution worked out," adding *"Don't argue the matter. The difficulties will argue for themselves."* Difficulties abounded, but imaginative engineering, derived from the construction of anti-aircraft platforms in the Thames estuary in 1940, overcame them to produce a most ingenious device. First breakwaters — cement-filled old ships and caissons — would be towed across the channel and sunk immediately offshore. Sheltering them, enormous floating steel structures similar to rubber rafts were to be anchored seaward. Inside both, floating piers, able to rise and fall with the tides, would be run from shore onto which supply vessels could unload their cargoes of men, vehicles and supplies. The Allies built two complete MULBERRIES, both comparable in capacity to the port of Dover. Each of the American and British-Canadian sectors of the landing area would have a complete MULBERRY, and each assault beach would be sheltered by a breakwater.

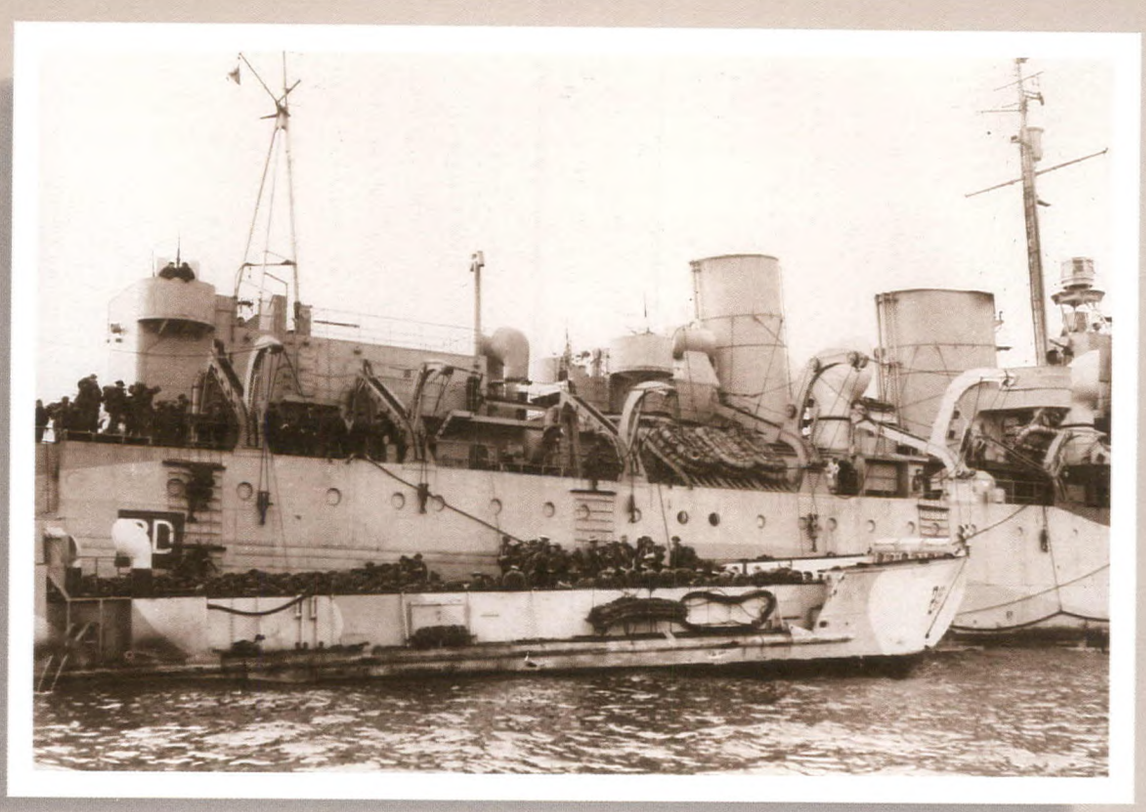
The second planning assumption, that the Allies would have gained air supremacy, was achieved in the spring of 1944 when new, long-range fighter aircraft of the United States Army Air Force (USAAF) became operational and defeated the Luftwaffe deep inside Germany. The third assumption, that German reserve divisions could be kept away from the bridgehead until it was secured, was achieved by a large-scale deception program. Thomas Hobbes's axiom that "Force and fraud are the cardinal virtues in war," provided a basis for Operation FORTITUDE, the deception scheme. FORTITUDE applied force through a shrewd bombing campaign that led the Germans to spread their reserves throughout France, while its fraud deceived the Germans into believing that the invasion would proceed along the shortest route across the Channel to the Pas-de-Calais. Like other successful deceptions, FORTITUDE fed strongly held preconceptions: the Germans, having appreciated that they themselves would choose the Pas-de-Calais, assumed other professional military minds would draw identical conclusions.

In preparing to meet the invasion, the German dilemma was that they had too few soldiers to cover the threatened coastlines. Having little choice but to keep most of their fighting troops in the massive campaign being conducted on the Eastern Front, they tried to protect the most vulnerable sectors with fixed fortifications manned by garrison units. Locating their mobile reserves, the key to successful defence, revealed a fundamental conceptual difference between the responsible German commanders. Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, whose role was akin to that of an Inspector General, had concluded from his experience of Allied aerial superiority in North Africa that tank units must be placed where they could defeat an invasion on the beaches, because they would be unable to move any distance without being destroyed by aircraft. But, asked the Commander in Chief in the West, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, which beaches? With the Fifteenth Army east of the Seine River in the Pas-de-Calais, and the Seventh between the Seine and the Loire, both threatened sectors, he wanted to keep his armoured formations centrally located where they could intervene anywhere along the coast. Yet another dissident voice was that of the Commander of Panzer Troops, General Geyr von Schweppenburg, who concluded that the Allies would precede their invasion by sea with airborne landings, and that he should keep his tanks back to eliminate them first before moving to counter the seaborne assault.

After considering a myriad of factors — distances, beach gradients and exits, German dispositions, and the possibility of surprise — Morgan's planners decided to land in Normandy rather than in the Pas-de-Calais. Early in 1944, General Dwight D. Eisenhower returned to Britain from the Mediterranean to take command of the joint and combined invasion forces. With him came General Bernard L. Montgomery to take command of the invasion armies. Both commanders accepted Morgan's basic assault plan, but insisted that the invasion frontage be enlarged and the initial assault force increased.

Landing craft shortages had confined Morgan to three assault divisions. Priorities in allocating these indispensable vessels between Europe and the Pacific had to be decided by Prime Minister Churchill, President Roosevelt and the Combined Chiefs of Staff when they met in Quebec City in 1943. Their military discussions were often acrimonious, as might be expected among strong-willed leaders with quite different national and service interests to protect. The Chiefs clarified their priorities and more landing craft materialized, enabling Eisenhower and Montgomery to increase the size of their assault

Toughening-up training as the invasion date approached. No matter how realistic, it could only approximate actual combat. (DND, PMR93-382)



As the invasion date drew near, assault units learned and relearned the techniques of boarding and leaving landing craft. (DND, PMR93-413)

force from three to five seaborne divisions, along with three airborne divisions.

Potentially contradictory factors affected the date and timing of the invasion: airborne divisions wanted some moonlight, and air forces a period free of fog, while naval vessels needed darkness to approach and daylight to provide observed supporting fire. Landing at low tide gave assaulting troops wider beaches to cross, but also exposed mined beach obstacles that, if not destroyed, would tear landing craft apart. The compromise was to approach in darkness and assault in daylight during the early stages of a rising tide. There were only three possible periods of favourable conditions when, after a full moon, there would be a low tide soon after dawn: in early May, from 2-6 June, and from 17-21 June. Eisenhower chose the middle period and selected 5 June as D-Day.

Under Eisenhower's direction, the naval, air and ground commanders finalized their plans for NEPTUNE — the assault phase of OVERLORD. In the hours of darkness before the sea landings, the 6th British Airborne Division, which included the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, was to take positions east of the Orne River where they would secure bridges over the river and adjoining canal to keep German reserves from interfering with the sea landings. On the western flank, the 82nd and 101st American Airborne Divisions had to secure routes through the marshy terrain at the base of the Cotentin peninsula. With their flanks protected, the main assault forces would land the following morning and link up with the airborne troops.

On the right of the 80-kilometre sea front was Lieutenant General Omar Bradley's First United States Army, and on the left, Lieutenant General Miles Dempsey's Second British Army. Bradley had two corps, VII Corps for UTAH beach, and V for OMAHA. Each was to land on a one-division front, 4th Division right and 1st left. Dempsey also had two corps. On the right, 50th Division in XXX Corps had GOLD beach. On the left, I Corps had 3rd Canadian Division on JUNO beach and 3rd British on SWORD.

Planners prepared a sophisticated supporting fire plan designed to drench the beach defences as the assault troops approached in the vulnerable landing craft. Royal Air Force and Royal Canadian Air Force bombers were to arrive first, at night, to neutralize fixed coastal gun batteries that could devastate ships of the invasion fleet, and bombers from the Eighth United States Air Force would follow to hit beach defences with high explosives at first light. Naval guns would then take on German artillery batteries and strongpoints and, after daylight, rockets and field artillery firing from converted landing craft were to fill in gaps. Finally, amphibious Sherman tanks and Centaurs (Churchill tanks mounting powerful short-range 95 mm guns) would shoot the infantry ashore with immediate close support.

First, however, the army would have to cross the Channel and, according to the orders of Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay, the Allied Naval Commander, the comprehensive naval task was to ensure the *"safe and timely arrival of the assault forces at their beaches, the cover of their landings, and subsequently the support and maintenance and rapid build-up of our forces ashore."* With the Royal Navy already stretched to the limit, the Royal Canadian Navy contributed 126 vessels — about one-third of its fighting strength — to the common cause, and they participated in almost every phase of the invasion. Sixteen Bangor-class minesweepers were to help lead the way across the Channel, while two landing ships, HMCS *Prince David* and HMCS *Prince Henry*, would each carry 450 soldiers to the beaches. The destroyers, *Sioux* and *Algonquin*, were to escort assault groups from England to Normandy and provide close fire support. Other RCN ships were deployed to protect the invasion's seaward flanks.

Planners concluded there was just a slight chance that German heavy ships based in the Baltic might try to break out into the Atlantic, or possibly even attempt a dash through the Dover Strait into the Channel. That left, besides mines, two principal German threats to the invasion fleet. Northeast of the Baie de la Seine, in the English Channel, were light forces: four small destroyers at Le Havre, and three flotillas of E-boats — German Motor Torpedo Boats (MTBs) — between Le Havre and Ostend. *Sioux*, *Algonquin* and eight MTBs of the 29th MTB Flotilla were among the combined naval forces assigned to keep them at bay.

The western flank was more vulnerable. Thirty-six U-boats were located in Bay of Biscay ports, and 39 others were at sea or held in reserve in Norway. Further, four large destroyers were in Biscay ports and two E-boat flotillas in Cherbourg. The RCN deployed the 65th MTB

Painting Allied recognition stripes on a Spitfire of No 411 Squadron, RCAF. The squadron flew four sweeps over the assault beaches on D-Day, and pilots were "very disappointed" when no German aircraft challenged them. Later, one of the squadron's pilots, Flight Lieutenant R.J. Audet, destroyed five enemy planes in a two-minute combat. (DND, PL 30827)

Thirteen squadrons of heavy bombers in the RCAF's No 6 Group, including three with Lancasters, bombed targets in Germany and France in the months before D-Day. To avoid compromising the location of the invasion sector, bombing targets were not confined to Normandy. (DND, PL 44205)

Flotilla, two Tribal-class destroyers, and four anti-submarine support groups (two of frigates and two of destroyers) to help counter these surface and underwater menaces. Finally, 19 Canadian corvettes would escort convoys supplying the bridgehead.

Despite overwhelming numbers, the Allied naval forces left nothing to chance, and each ship trained comprehensively for its task. The corvettes' battle training, as described by an RCN historical officer, was perhaps typical:

> By day or night there might be unexpected 'enemy attacks' by aircraft. While the group was hunting a submarine a drogue target would pass within range for the A/A gunners, then to make life more difficult for the communications department a signal would be received to jam a suspected glider bomb frequency. By night M[otor] L[aunches] simulating E-boats would attack from various directions at once, and the corvettes would have to organize a starshell and H[igh] E[xplosive] fire at towed targets. While carrying out a mock hedgehog attack [throwing mortars at a submarine] with Mills bombs, a corvette might suddenly be attacked by aircraft splashing live ammunition around the ship and at the same time the training officer attached to the ship might let off one of his thunder flash fire crackers.

One captain remarked after this valuable, realistic training, *"No one could figure out what we were being prepared for, but it now appears that we were to expect anything and everything and may be sent anywhere."* They could only peer hazily through strict security to guess just where they might be going.

Allied air forces had equally varied tasks. Along with the RAF and USAAF, Royal Canadian Air Force bombers, fighters, and maritime patrol aircraft were actively engaged in operations while invasion plans matured. In the early days of the war, heavy bombers were the only available offensive weapons the British had and, by 1944, the bombing campaign had acquired a life of its own. Senior air force commanders optimistically concluded that, if given enough airplanes and bombs, they could defeat Nazi Germany without the need for a land offensive. However, the Combined Chiefs declined to accept the airmen's doctrinal certainty, and RAF Bomber Command, which included 13 bomber squadrons in the RCAF's 6 Group, made its direct contribution to OVERLORD in two ways. In the preparatory stage, the aircraft switched from bombing German cities to attacking the French transportation system in a gigantic interdiction program to slow the movement of German reserves from front to front. After the landings, they would bomb tactical targets to pave a high-explosives path for ground offensives.

Fighters, fighter-bombers and reconnaissance aircraft had special tasks. At the beginning of the war, fighters were designed and pilots trained to fight defensive battles against enemy bombers. After the Battle of Britain, RAF Fighter Command, exploring other roles for an increasing number of combat airplanes, devised a broad scheme of offensive operations over those parts of France that their short-range aircraft could reach. Canadian fighter pilots in both RCAF and RAF squadrons participated fully in the offensive operations, sharing equally in their very heavy casualties. If that costly scheme achieved anything beyond nuisance value, it was as an advanced operational training school. There were few other ways to learn air fighting and pilots learned to fly and fight in these rough and costly combat classes.

While air superiority remained Fighter Command's principal objective, it also assumed responsibility for providing close support for the army when it moved to France. The new role required it to reorganize from a static air force flying from developed British air bases to a mobile one able to operate from rough airfields. A trial Mobile Composite Group exercised in the field with the Canadian Army on Exercise SPARTAN in the spring of 1943, and over the next year Nos 83 and 84 (Composite) Groups were structured into the 2nd Tactical Air Force to support the Second British and First Canadian Armies in Normandy. Among them were Nos 126, 127 and 144 RCAF (Fighter) Wings, No 143 (Fighter Bomber) Wing, and No 39 (Reconnaissance) Wing.

Other RCAF squadrons had been flying maritime patrols since 1942. In the months leading up to OVERLORD these squadrons harried U-boats and attacked German shipping in European waters. All ran up impressive scores, including the sinking of an enemy destroyer.

The Canadian Army that prepared itself to cross the Channel in 1944 was hardly

Infantrymen file aboard their landing craft, while no doubt fielding barbs from the bemused sailors. Neither likely would have exchanged their wartime trades. (National Archives of Canada, PA 132811)

Shortages of landing craft had caused Prime Minister Churchill to complain that "The destinies of two great empires . . . seem to be tied up in some god-damned things called LST's." The shortages were overcome in time to assemble the largest collection of assorted vessels ever. (NAC, PA 132653)

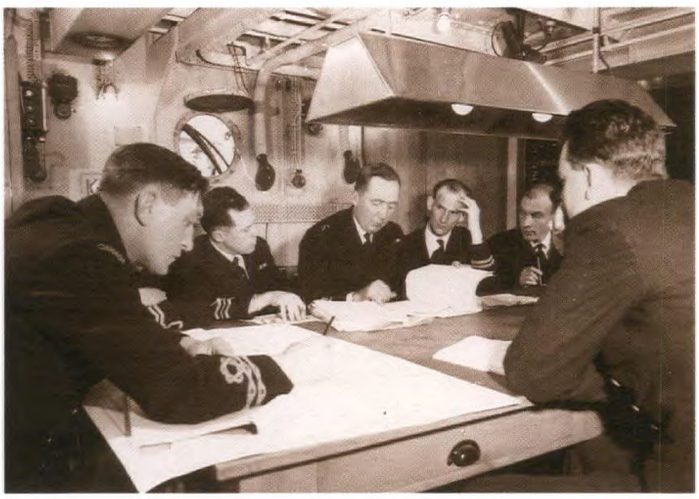
recognizable as the tiny force that began the war. In 1939 it had just 4,261 Permanent Force soldiers in uniform and 51,418 others in part-time militia units, like Father Hickey's North Shore Regiment, scattered across Canada with just four modern anti-aircraft guns and two light tanks among them. Five years later, on the eve of OVERLORD, the army had five fully equipped divisions — three infantry and two armoured — and two independent armoured brigades grouped in two corps. Two of them, 1st Infantry and 5th Armoured Divisions, were in Italy along with 1st Armoured Brigade; the others, 2nd and 3rd Infantry and 4th Armoured Divisions and 2nd Armoured Brigade, all under command of II Corps and First Canadian Army, were available for the invasion of France.

Transforming civilians into competently trained soldiers was a monumental undertaking. Unlike sailors and airmen, whose peacetime tasks — sailing and flying — incorporate many of their wartime jobs, combat soldiers function in a strange, hostile environment in wartime that can never be exactly simulated in peacetime. Moreover, in the early days the army lacked a comprehensive and realistic tactical doctrine within which the various combat and supporting arms could comfortably fit. Training was decentralized to units that had little idea of how to go about it, and less experience. Somehow instructors had to be found to train men, and it was soon evident as units arrived in Britain that significant numbers of officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs), many of them First World War veterans, were not up to the demands of modern combat. When General Montgomery introduced the Canadians to his legendary abrupt inspections, they found that he wielded not a broom but a chainsaw. *"Not fit to command"; "unfit to command a battalion"; "a gallant soldier without doubt, but he has no brains";* and *"the worst and most ignorant C.O. [Commanding Officer] I have met in my service"* were among his brutally frank assessments.

Finding replacements for the elderly and unfit, as well as filling increasing numbers of combat, technical and staff positions, took time. War Staff College courses turned out staff officers and potential senior commanders. Units conducted more realistic field training, and infantry, tank and artillery began exercising together to coordinate their separate battlefield functions. Commanders and their headquarters staffs learned how to move and control large bodies of vehicles and men. Initially, training was hampered by the need to defend Britain against an expected German invasion and then, when that threat receded, the army had to learn how to fight an offensive war. If the adage holds that people learn best from their mistakes, the army learned a lot about soldiering while in Britain. Just how well they learned, and whether they were the right things, remained to be tested on the battlefield.

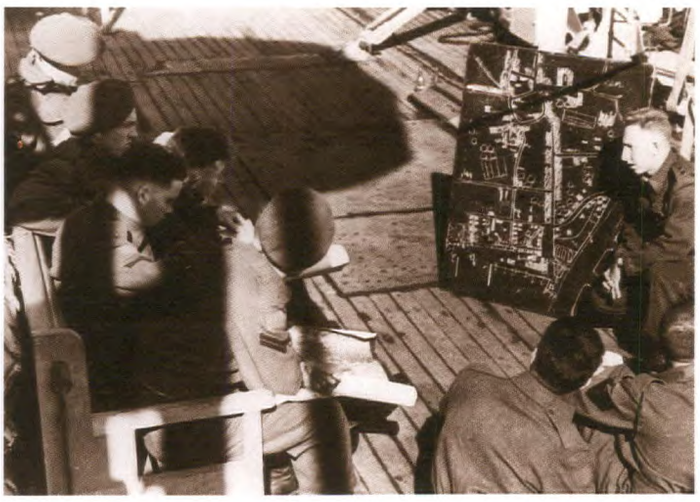
Planners initially designated First Canadian Army to conduct the invasion in the British sector but, after I Corps was sent to Italy, the assault task fell to Second British Army. The Canadian commander, Lieutenant General H.D.G. Crerar, then had a follow-up role: to take over the eastern sector of the bridgehead once it had been secured, and then participate in the breakout from it. However, 3rd Canadian Infantry Division and 2 Armoured Brigade were allocated to the assault under the operational command of Lieutenant General J.T. Crocker's I British Corps.

Major General R.F.L. Keller, a 44-year-old Permanent Force soldier with The Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, commanded 3rd Division. Keller cultivated the appearance of a two-fisted commander who brooked no nonsense, but he lacked operational experience. The division's three brigades were regionally based. Seven Brigade, commanded by Brigadier H.W. Foster, a Permanent Force cavalryman, had three western battalions: The Canadian Scottish Regiment from Victoria, The Regina Rifle Regiment, and The Royal Winnipeg Rifles. Brigadier K.G. Blackader, a decorated First War veteran, commanded 8 Brigade, composed of battalions from central and eastern Canada: The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada from Ontario, Le Régiment de la Chaudière from Quebec, and The North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment. Brigadier D.G. Cunningham, a lawyer and militia officer from Kingston, commanded the Highland Brigade: The North Nova Scotia Highlanders; The Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders from eastern Ontario; and The Highland Light Infantry of Canada from western Ontario. Commanding the tanks supporting 3rd Division was Brigadier R.A. Wyman, a militiaman and Italian campaign veteran. His 2 Armoured Brigade had three regiments: 6th Armoured Regiment (1st Hussars), 10th Armoured



*A council of war in the chart room of HMCS **Prince David** on the way to Normandy. The rank stripes, from left to right, designate the Royal Canadian Navy Reserve, Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve, and Royal Canadian Navy. (DND, PMR93-414)*

*As HMCS **Algonquin** heads out of Portsmouth for Normandy, Lieutenant Commander D.W. Piers, after months of rumours, tells his sailors where they are bound. (DND, PMR92-563)*



On 4 June, Lieutenant R.R. Smith briefed his Regina Rifles NCOs with a sketch of their objective, Courseulles-sur-Mer. His listeners were properly sceptical: five of them were killed in action. (DND, PMR93-386)

Regiment (The Fort Garry Horse), and 27th Armoured Regiment (The Sherbrooke Fusilier Regiment).

In the summer of 1943, these units began training for their assault role and went to Scotland that autumn to practise actual landings. More elaborate exercises followed over the winter when brigades put their new skills to the test over beaches in southern England. Two armoured regiments, the 1st Hussars and The Fort Garry Horse, had to reorganize for their task of leading infantry battalions ashore when two squadrons of each received new DD (Duplex Drive) Sherman tanks. The DD, or swimming Sherman was one of many specially designed armoured vehicles developed for the invasion. It swam by means of a collapsible canvas screen, and was driven through the water by propellers. The screen, supported by rubber air pillars and steel struts and inflated with compressed air, floated the tank, leaving the top of the turret at surface level where the crew stood and steered by a tiller. On reaching shore the crew broke the struts, released the air supports and dropped the screen, assuming that it had not torn and sunk the tank. Needless to say, crews had to be wary and train diligently, especially if they could not swim themselves.

All training had to be closely coordinated with actual invasion planning, and without compromising security. Third Division's staff spent February in London preparing for their role, and brigade staffs did the same on the Isle of Wight through March. The division's mission was to assault over its assigned JUNO beach and secure a position 14 kilometres inland on the western outskirts of Caen along the Bayeux-Caen rail line. The general plan deployed 7 Brigade on the right and 8 Brigade on the left. Each would assault with two battalions and an armoured regiment to form an immediate bridgehead. Their reserve battalions would follow and secure an assembly area three to four kilometres inland, and 9 Brigade would then advance with supporting tanks to the divisional objective. Logistics staff officers had to arrange provisions for an estimated 21,382 men landing on D-Day with 2,374 vehicles and 858 motorcycles.

Manning the German defences in the Canadian sector was the 716th Infantry Division, whose responsibility included the entire 30-kilometre front of Second British Army. Directly facing the Canadians was a battalion of the 736th Infantry Regiment supported by 16 artillery batteries, in addition to the beach strongpoints and the equivalent of two anti-tank companies. Allied intelligence rated the division's battle-worthiness between average and poor but, ominously, a few weeks before the invasion, reports located the more dangerous 21st Panzer Division around Caen.

As June approached, training was interrupted by an interminable stream of highest-level visitors for whom time-consuming ceremonial parades were arranged. *"We are starting to feel like birds in a cage,"* one war diarist commented sardonically, *"Everyone seems to want to look at us."* By the beginning of May the division and armoured brigade were located near Portsmouth where, in mid-month, General Keller and his brigadiers briefed their unit commanding officers. Men were issued with impregnated battledress uniforms intended to counter enemy gas and, one unit historian noted, "personal kit had to be ruthlessly stripped; vehicles were waterproofed; and endless items of new equipment — assault helmets, battle jerkins, light motorcycles — were adopted."

In March, Father Hickey and his fellow chaplains had been ordered to 3rd Division Headquarters to meet with General Keller. Hickey wrote that Keller was brief: *"'Gentlemen' said he, 'I know when anything serious is about to happen, you want time to get the men ready; all I can say is, get ready; good afternoon gentlemen.'"* Hickey just thought, *"That's the way generals talk when they have anything to say to you,"* and he and his clerical colleagues in the *"waterproofing gang"* began a round of visits to the troops, telling them, *"Yes, we've come to waterproof you spiritually."*

Days before embarking, camps, ships and airfields were sealed, outside communications stopped, and soldiers detailed to boat loads: *"all troops received French currency, and were presented with more of the paraphernalia of assault — lifebelts, sea-sickness tablets and even vomit bags."* They began loading on 1 June and most were aboard their assigned vessels, if not too comfortably, two days later, awaiting word to go. Morale was high. Father Hickey later wrote, *"I think I am expressing what most men felt the morning of the Invasion, when I say that I wish I could always be as ready for death as I was that morning."*

"We are starting to feel like birds in a cage," was one sardonic comment on the many high-level visits as troops prepared for the invasion. This one, by the Queen and Princess Elizabeth, to the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion just before they led the way into Normandy, was probably welcomed. (NAC, PA 129047)

On Saturday evening, 3 June 1944, General Eisenhower met with his senior commanders at his advanced headquarters near Portsmouth for their regular weather briefing. Reports coming in from several meteorological stations were not hopeful. Portsmouth was clear but wind and rain were on their way. Eisenhower postponed the assault for a day. It was a fortunate decision, for the storm that hit the Normandy coast on Monday morning would have dangerously upset any landings. On Sunday evening the chief forecaster, RAF Group Captain James Stagg, was more optimistic, reporting that the weather pattern over the North Atlantic had unexpectedly changed. It appeared that a cold front passing through would leave behind a favourable weather window on Tuesday, the 6th, but he couldn't say how long it might last. They met again at 0330 next morning, 5 June. Stagg was slightly more optimistic, thinking that until Tuesday afternoon, at least, winds would be moderate and visibility good.

Eisenhower now had a staggering decision to make. Postponing D-Day meant a two-week delay during which security would be threatened and isolated troops would go stale. He asked his commanders in turn for their views. Admiral Ramsay said yes, but that he would have to issue appropriate orders within half an hour. Senior air officers were more doubtful, thinking that the weather conditions might hamper their air support. Montgomery said go. Eisenhower calculated the odds and quietly said, "O.K., lets go."

On 5 June, he visited American airborne units that were to jump behind OMAHA and UTAH beaches that night. Soldiers of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, in 6th British Airborne Division, were also making their last equipment checks. Their parent 6th Division had several tasks: to seize intact bridges over the Orne River and canal between Caen and the sea; to destroy German coastal guns east of the Orne that threatened the invasion fleet; and to establish a firm bridgehead on the high ground between the Orne and the Dives rivers. The Canadians' specific missions were to secure the drop zone for its own 3 Brigade, destroy bridges over the Dives and several German positions in their sector, and then occupy a key defensive position in the bridgehead.

The 1st Parachute Battalion was a tough, highly trained unit. Because their peculiar manner of reaching the battlefield almost ensured that they would be widely scattered on landing, there was a premium on personal initiative. Each man had to know his own task and role, and they participated in carefully detailed briefings. One paratrooper recalled to his unit historian how, together, they calculated the amount of explosive they required to blow up a bridge by studying aerial photographs. One particular photo showed a Frenchman holding a cigarette in his hand as he crossed the bridge. Knowing the length of the cigarette, they determined the size of the bridge girders, and hence the explosive force needed to break them.

It was well that each man knew his job because navigation problems and German flak caused pilots to drop their loads of paratroopers over a wide area. One platoon commander, Lieutenant R.C. Hanson, described his experience:

> *After wandering about a bit I picked up 3 others of my stick. It took us 3 hours and the assistance of a local French farmer to find out where we were. Actually I landed a mile and a half northwest of the DZ [drop zone]. Because the country was full of hedges and orchards I didn't have the slightest idea where the DZ was. . . . It was the better part of the day before we got ourselves altogether.*

Despite being scattered about, small groups of men, knowing their tasks, found their objectives, took them, and secured the eastern flank of the bridgehead. More immediately, they diverted German attention away from the vast armada approaching the Normandy beaches as, in Father Hickey's words, *"slowly, slowly, half a million men sailed out to meet a scarlet dawn."*

CHAPTER II

D-DAY

There was an air of unreality during the passage of the assault forces across the Channel curiously similar to that on D-1 in Husky as our forces approached Sicily. The achievement of strategical surprise was always hoped for in Neptune but was by no means certain, whereas that of tactical surprise had always seemed extremely unlikely. As our forces approached the French coast without a murmur from the enemy or from their own radio, the realisation that once again almost complete tactical surprise had been achieved slowly dawned. . . .
(Admiral Sir B.H. Ramsay, *Report*)

As the largest naval force ever assembled left darkened ports in southern England, the most vulnerable vessels were the minesweepers leading the way. Certainly, NEPTUNE planners thought they would be detected, and suffer heavily for it, predicting 30 to 50 percent casualties among the lead flotillas. Those manning the sweepers were well aware of their dismal chances. One young Canadian officer recalls that his final duty before casting off was to deposit an up-to-date crew list in a green box at the end of the jetty. But, the same officer noted, *"we were to hold our course, no matter what was ahead — there must be no holes in our sweeping as ships loaded with troops would be following us, and would be depending on us."*

Allied naval commanders feared the mine threat above all others. If unswept, these destructive underwater weapons would not only sink ships but also seriously upset the intricate timing of the assault. They knew from intelligence sources that the Germans had erected a moored mine barrier off Normandy from approximately mid-Channel to within 10 to 15 kilometres of the coast, and that other fields had been laid closer inshore. In the largest operation of its type ever undertaken, 247 minesweepers were deployed to sweep ten approach channels to the assault area, clear the

bombardment and disembarkation areas, and then sweep the final paths to the beaches themselves. Among them were 16 Canadian Bangor-class minesweepers in the Western Task Force. Only one of the crews had previous minesweeping experience, so all of them undertook an extensive training program, during which a few grounded ships and lost sweeps caused some concern. Their senior officer, Commander A.H.G. Storrs, a naval reservist who before the war worked merchant ships on the China run, recalls British officers *"sucking their teeth [saying] 'I wonder if these bloody Canadians are really up to it.'"* They were, as the example of Storrs's ten ships in the 31st Minesweeping Flotilla demonstrates.

After a false start when foul weather delayed D-Day, the 31st Flotilla weighed anchor at Portland in the early morning of 5 June and headed east towards Z-Buoy — the junction point for the assault convoys which became famous as "Piccadilly Circus" — the starting point of their 130-kilometre sweep towards the French coast. Getting there took most of the day and it was not until evening that the flotilla and its attendant vessels formed up to clear and mark their path to the beaches.

Their formation was not unlike that used by snowplows clearing an airport runway. Two Fairmile motor launches led, sweeping ahead of the leading Bangor, Commander Storrs's HMCS *Caraquet*. Astern were *Fort William*, *Wasaga*, *Cowichan*, *Minas* and *Malpeque* spread out 800 metres from each other, their long serrated sweeps overlapping by about one hundred metres. Two vessels followed, ready to replace any falling out of formation, then two others sailing just inside the starboard and port extremes of the formation laid lighted buoys to mark the swept channel. More spares brought up the rear. Vessels were to maintain course even if engaged and, for fear of alerting the enemy, cut mines were not to be exploded unless they imperilled other ships. The formation advanced at a speed of 7.5 knots and swept a marked channel just over a thousand metres wide.

This operation required precise navigation and superb seamanship. Radio navigation aids mounted in the ships provided accurate positioning but very demanding sea conditions created problems. Quite apart from the poor weather, tidal currents ran up to seven knots across the heading of the formation. With what *Blairmore*'s captain called *"a great deal of skill and knowledge of the tides,"* Storrs had to calculate the offsets in course required to counteract the current and decide the correct direction of the sweeps so that they lay with the tidal current. Complicating matters, the swept channel was not perfectly straight, but followed a series of gentle doglegs which required minor course changes. Further, when the tidal current reversed itself in the middle of the passage, the entire formation had to recover sweeps, reverse course, head up their swept channel, reverse course again, put out their sweeps and resume where they had left off. Except for one marker buoy being cut, the Canadians completed this difficult, time-consuming manoeuvring without a hitch. It was a remarkable display of ship-handling skill.

Off-duty sailors spent the passage on the upper deck because their quarters in the sealed forward part of the ships were too vulnerable. Gathered around the funnels for warmth, they expected the night to erupt momentarily with gun flashes and tracer fire. But it did not and they saw little: no mines exploded and the only outward sign of enemy activity was an active anti-aircraft barrage in the distance. It might have been just another routine training session off Plymouth.

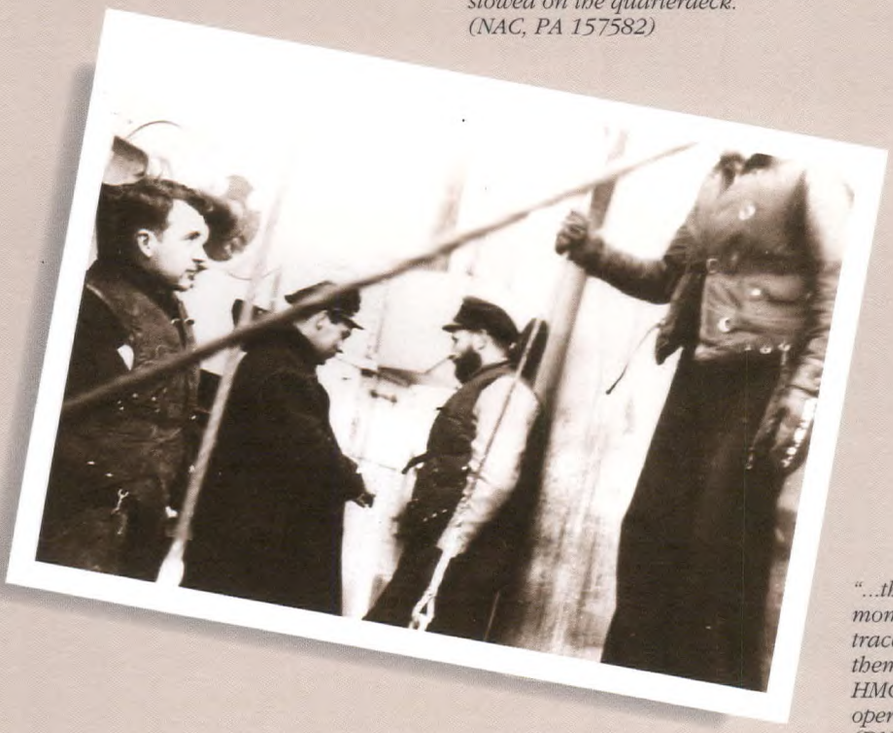
Twenty minutes past midnight on 6 June, the 31st Flotilla reached the terminal point of the assault channel about 15 kilometres off the French coast. They now began the tedious task of clearing the transport area and the channel leading to the fire support area off OMAHA beach. This entailed sweeping parallel to the shoreline, under the barrels of enemy guns. At one vulnerable moment, when making a turn near shore, the moon emerged from behind the clouds to expose the ships in its pale glow but, after 30 excruciating seconds, the moon retreated behind cover and the sailors resumed breathing.

That job completed, the minesweepers headed towards the transport area to begin their final task. As they steamed slowly north, Lieutenant J.P. Marston, captain of HMCS *Blairmore*, recalled that:

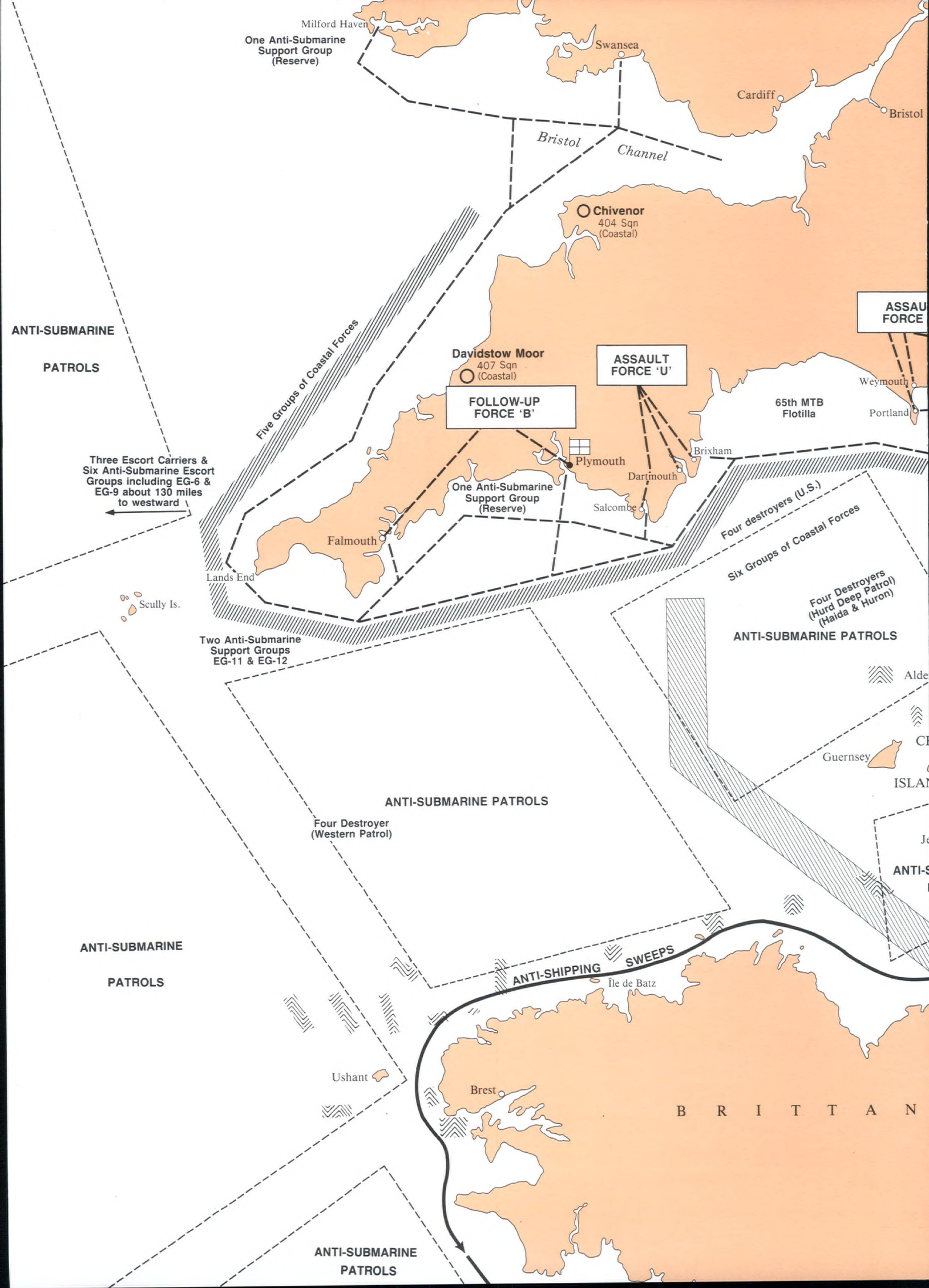
> *. . . the dark of the night began to give way to twilight [and] one could begin to appreciate the immensity of the operation. As light increased more and more dark shapes began*

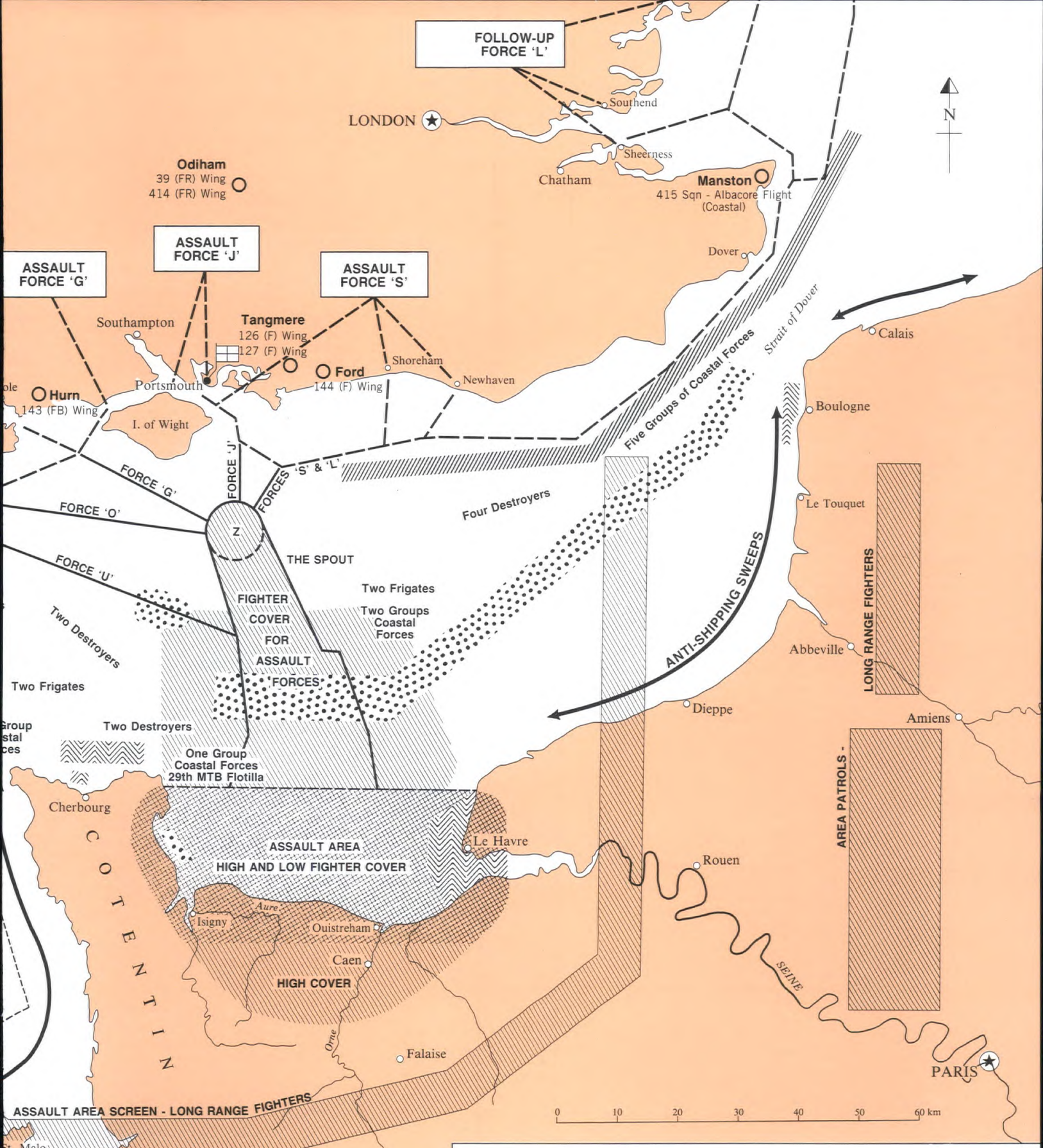
"It was a remarkable display of ship-handling skill". Commander Tony Storrs, leader of the 31st Minesweeping Flotilla that swept the way into OMAHA beach. (DND, PMR 93-396)

One of the RCN minesweepers that was at the spearhead of the invasion in a rather dramatic pose. Its complex sweeping gear is stowed on the quarterdeck. (NAC, PA 157582)



*"...they expected the night to erupt momentarily with gun flashes and tracer fire." Sailors warm themselves around the funnel of HMCS **Caraquet** during clearing operations off Normandy. (DND, PMR93-422)*


Milford Haven
One Anti-Submarine Support Group (Reserve)
Swansea
Cardiff
Bristol
Bristol Channel
Chivenor
404 Sqn (Coastal)
ANTI-SUBMARINE PATROLS
Five Groups of Coastal Forces
Davidstow Moor
407 Sqn (Coastal)
ASSAULT FORCE 'U'
FOLLOW-UP FORCE 'B'
ASSAU
FORCE
Weymouth
Portland
65th MTB Flotilla
Plymouth
Brixham
Dartmouth
Salcombe
Three Escort Carriers & Six Anti-Submarine Escort Groups including EG-6 & EG-9 about 130 miles to westward
One Anti-Submarine Support Group (Reserve)
Falmouth
Lands End
Scully Is.
Four destroyers (U.S.)
Six Groups of Coastal Forces
Four Destroyers (Hurd Deep Patrol) (Haida & Huron)
ANTI-SUBMARINE PATROLS
Two Anti-Submarine Support Groups EG-11 & EG-12
Alde
Guernsey
ISLAN
ANTI-SUBMARINE PATROLS
Four Destroyer (Western Patrol)
ANTI-SUBMARINE PATROLS
ANTI-SHIPPING SWEEPS
Île de Batz
Ushant
Brest
B R I T T A N
ANTI-SUBMARINE PATROLS



THE ASSAULT ON NORMANDY OPERATION "NEPTUNE"

CONVOY ROUTES WITH AIR AND NAVAL COVERAGE

Naval Command HQs
Canadian air bases
Allied minefields
German minefields
Convoy routes
Neptune channels

AREA PATROLS - LONG RANGE FIGHTERS

to take distinctive forms, and what had appeared to be just a few ships in close proximity, now became a whole panorama of sea power stretching as far as the eye [could see] to seaward, all the way back to England.

Amid this awesome sight, the 31st formed into line abreast and turned south. Sweeping into the ten-fathom line off the Americans' OMAHA beach, they cleared the way for the assault craft about to head for shore. Only at this time did German shells begin to plunge into the sea nearby.

While recovering her sweeps — *Caraquet* and *Fort William* were forced to release theirs when they became entangled in wrecks — *Blairmore* found herself close under the guns of the bombardment force. *"Forty minutes before H Hour,"* Marston remembered,

. . . the big guns of [the US battleship] Arkansas spoke for the first time, and right on schedule. We were in a position a few hundred yards from her and in her line of fire. The resultant blast, concussion, and general commotion shivered one's timbers more than a little, and the sweeping party on the quarter deck were prodded into such frenzy of work and efficiency, that we were soon all clear to get the hell out of it, which we did by drawing off seaward, there to mosey around keeping clear of the vast numbers of ships all seemingly being drawn into the maw of the invasion beaches.

During this time scores of landing craft surged by the sweepers. Some sought directions (*"Which way to Dog Red?"*); others simply wanted information (*"What's it like in there?"*). Despite dire predictions, the assault groups lost only one ship to mines during their passage. The sweepers had done their job, and they could be justifiably proud that hundreds of vessels safely crossed behind them.

It was a vast, strange assortment of ships and specialized craft that crowded the cleared channels into the transport areas behind the sweepers. As the historian Corelli Barnett describes in his book, *Engage the Enemy More Closely*, they had an astonishing variety of form, function and size:

The sea-going vessels comprised six headquarters ships of 7,000 to 8,000 tons, each of them draped with radar aerials; 55 landing ships (infantry) (converted passenger ships) of 3,000 to 14,000 tons; six specialised landing ships (dock) and (repair); 236 landing ships (tank), ugly, utilitarian 4,000-tonners with bow ramps, and carrying up to 60 tanks and 300 soldiers; 248 landing ships (infantry), up to 160 feet long and taking some 200 soldiers, and in some cases converted to serve as tactical headquarters craft off the beaches; and 837 landing craft (tank) carrying up to eleven vehicles and 55 soldiers, plus others adapted for special purposes such as the 29 landing craft (flak) and the 36 landing craft (rocket). And now there were all the small craft carried in the ships and now lowered by davit into the water for the run-in — 502 landing craft (assault), carrying 30 soldiers and their kit, some equipped to clear beach obstacles; 464 landing craft (mechanised), to supply a ship-to-shore ferry service for armoured vehicles and motor transport; 189 landing craft (personnel) carrying 22 soldiers, but also sometimes converted for special roles, in this case smoke-laying or survey work; 121 landing craft (support), equipped with machine-guns and smoke-projectors; and the invaluable 'Duck' (DUKW), the 2.5 ton, six wheeled amphibious truck carrying 25 fully equipped soldiers, and capable of 6.4 mph in water and up to 50 mph on land.

In the midst of the armada were two RCN LSI (Landing Ships Infantry), *Prince Henry* and *Prince David*, each carrying eight smaller landing craft capable of transporting 40 soldiers. Eleven of them landed soldiers of the British Army's 50th Divison at GOLD beach, and others carried 3rd Canadian Division's reserve battalions to JUNO. Looking around him in awe, one of those infantryman exclaimed, *"Every boat, craft, ship in the world save the Prince Edward Island ferry and the Maggie Miller is here loaded from hell to breakfast with troops and stores."*

Overhead, hundreds of Canadian, British and American fighter aircraft flew a tight protective cover. Anticipating up to a thousand Luftwaffe sorties a day, planners arranged an aerial screen that extended eight kilometres inland and ten to sea over all five invasion beaches. Aircraft rotated continuously to provide unbroken cover. Fifteen fighter squadrons protected the cross-channel shipping lanes, while P-47 Thunderbolts flew high and Spitfires low over the troops ashore. Mitchell and Mosquito light bombers

interdicted land routes into the bridgehead, and other machines took photographs. Eighteen Typhoon squadrons — eleven equipped with rocket projectiles, the others with bombs — flew close support missions either against pre-selected targets or as directed by control ships. More than one hundred Mustangs and navy Seafires spotted targets for naval gun crews.

General Rod Keller watched all this activity from his headquarters ship, HMS *Hilary*. As dawn broke he could see the outlines of his immediate objectives — Courseulles on the right, Bernières-sur-Mer in the centre, St-Aubin-sur-Mer on the left — marked by flames in the aftermath of bombing. Around this time he also met Murphy, whose ubiquitous law formed the first principle of war. Heavy seas had delayed the landing craft carrying 7 Brigade's engineers by forcing it into the wrong swept channel. H-hour went back ten minutes and the delay cut into scarce time available to neutralize beach obstacles: but there was no going back. At 0634 the divisional operations room broke the radio silence, landing craft headed for JUNO beach and, overhead, Typhoons from Nos 438, 439 and 440 RCAF Squadrons dove to drop their bombs on beach strongpoints firing at the incoming assault troops.

In 7 Brigade's sector on the western Canadian beach, Brigadier Harry Foster's immediate concern was the weather which, he thought, *"was most unkind and very nearly disastrous to the mounting of the assault."* Nonetheless, about ten kilometres offshore, tank-carrying ships got into stream, while infantry companies climbed aboard their assault craft and lowered into the choppy sea. Closing in behind were two gunner units, the 12th and 13th Field Regiments, preparing their self-propelled howitzers to fire from the pitching landing craft. They had a demanding technical task, as the latter's unit history recounts:

> Major Baird, feeling that it was inadvisable to wait any longer [gave] the order to fire the first ranging rounds at 0705 hours (H-30) at an elevation of 11,400 yards. The rounds were observed and line and elevation checked with the control craft of the other regiment. After the initial orders, each craft acted independently, taking their elevations from their Vickers clock, dropping the range 200 yards at a time as the craft approached the shore. At 11,000 yards the guns of the regiment went into fire for effect. The line of the guns, once corrected, was held by the Captain of the LCT Landing Craft, Tank who steered his craft by compass toward the target. The elevation was set on the sights of the guns which were fired as the sight clinometer bubbles levelled themselves from the roll of the craft. The rate of fire was controlled and changed from time to time by the fire control officer.

When the LCTs carrying the 1st Hussar DD tanks were 7,000 metres offshore, the naval commander signalled his other vessels that the sea was too rough to launch and ordered them to go straight in to the beach for a dry landing. Halfway there, tank crews were surprised when the down-doors bell rang and they were ordered off into the water. They had a hair-raising swim in these most peculiar boats. The 1st Hussars' history describes how:

> The sea-sick crews climbed into the tanks and started off in first gear, moving from the rolling, pitching LCT's into the choppy, white-capped sea. The initial impetus carried them away from the LCT's and gave the necessary time to lower propellers and change gears; then the DD tanks headed off for the beaches with each crew commander standing on the back deck steering towards those memorized landmarks.

A Squadron, supporting The Winnipeg Rifles, could launch just ten tanks and, of those, one was accidently hit by a supporting rocket and two others were swamped near the beaches. The other crews stood on their tank decks, fought the tide and high waves as the seven floating tanks shipped water and, "moved through the surf carefully avoiding underwater obstacles and the mines which the Germans had thoughtfully attached to all posts. When they were in sufficiently shallow water and not likely to be swamped by huge waves the DD's quickly deflated and began to engage pill-boxes."

The three assault companies of The Winnipeg Rifles, or "Little Black Devils" as they preferred to be called, landed about 20 minutes before the tanks. Attached to the battalion for the landing, C Company of the Canadian Scottish speedily captured a strongpoint that threatened the right flank of the main beach. Of the riflemen, Major Lockie Fulton's D Company in the centre was fortunate to land clear of a heavily defended post. They took casualties on the beach but

quickly breached a minefield behind the dunes and moved inland across flooded fields. To Fulton's left, Captain Philip Gower's B Company came under fire while still 700 metres offshore and landed in the midst of a formidable strongpoint of three concrete casements and 12 machine-gun emplacements that the preparatory bombardment had missed. Men were hit as they leapt from their landing craft, but the survivors knocked out several posts on the beach and got in behind the defensive crust, paying a fearsome price; only its commander and 26 men survived the first few hours alive and unwounded.

The beach was chaotic, incoming units piling up as they searched out exits and routes through the flooded, mine-strewn ground behind the dunes. Heavy mortar and machine-gun fire continued to rake the killing ground as the reconnaissance parties of 12th Field Regiment came ashore with the Winnipeg's reserve companies. Shortly thereafter, the gunners' history recounts, "The Regiment landed and took up a gun position on the beach, in many cases engaging the enemy over open sights. Snipers, mortars and 75's were taking a heavy toll of men on the beach."

The 1st Hussars' B Squadron, on the left with The Regina Rifles, had their own problems on the approach when several tanks had engine trouble, while the screens on others collapsed. One tank commander described his swim for the beach:

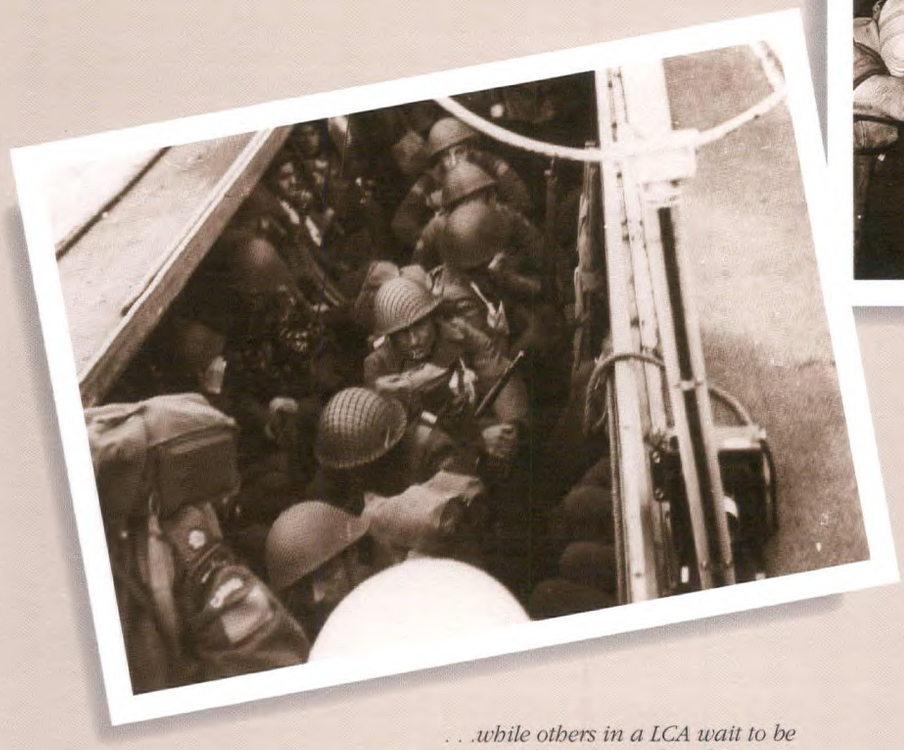
After launching we found it impossible to maintain correct formation in the rough sea... The port aft strut broke and the crew had to wedge a fire extinguisher between the screen and the hull. We had been showered with small arms fire but suddenly I saw two pillars [of water] to the right near Major Duncan's tank, the first shell fire we had received on the way in. I looked ahead again and when I turned around once more the major's tank had disappeared. There were four heads in the water. I looked quickly about and saw the other DD's about 200 yards behind me. Then I made for the beach. As soon as we touched down, I crawled inside the tank since the bullets were clipping the water all around. I closed one half of the hatch and kept my head out of the open half looking for mines and underwater obstacles. When I felt safe I deflated and engaged a pill-box on my immediate front. I fired five rounds of HE [high explosive] then advanced 50 yards through the water and fired five more of AP [armour piercing] at a distance of perhaps 150 yards from the target. Except for small arms there was no other fire. I began to engage the MG [machine-gun] nests dotting the dunes back of the beach, which were playing merry hell along the water line. Finally I got my tank in hull down position by the pill-box and looked around for the squadron. At this time the AVRE's were rumbling up to begin filling in anti-tank ditches immediately in front.

It was fortunate that all but five of 19 B Squadron tanks got ashore and knocked out several gun positions before the Regina assault companies arrived. The battalion's task was to clear the village of Courseulles. On the right, A Company first had to eliminate a strongly fortified position at the mouth of the river Seulles which, although well hit by bombs and naval guns, was still very much alive. Pinned down for a time, the company gradually worked its way around the flank of the position to put it out of action. Greatly helped by tanks shooting up the beach, B Company on the left had less trouble. Accurate air photos helped them locate their objectives in Courseulles, which they cleared methodically before pushing several kilometres inland where the battalion consolidated and gathered its reserve companies. One of them, D Company, had lost half its men when several landing craft blew up on mined obstacles in the water.

Both the Winnipegs and Reginas were impressed that the massive preparatory bombardment not only failed to destroy the German strongpoints, but left some of them virtually intact. An operational research team that followed them ashore to assess the bombardment's effectiveness confirmed their observations. The German fortifications, strung out in a thin crust, were practically invulnerable to frontal fire. Constructed of reinforced concrete one to two metres thick, and connected by deep communication trenches, the strongpoints were situated to fire sideways, in enfilade; "mutually supporting with comparatively narrow arcs of fire, sited to bring fire on the beach. Relatively few guns were capable of firing directly seaward because of massive concrete protection against frontal fire." The team found, as a result, that "the defences were substantially intact when the infantry touched down and the enemy were able

Early on D-Day, relaxed – at least outwardly – soldiers of Le Regiment de la Chaudière board their landing craft. (DND, PMR93-417)

Private J. Roy of the Chaudières, weighed down with bulky portable communications gear, awaits his turn to load . . . (DND, PMR93-418)



. . .while others in a LCA wait to be lowered from the mother ship. (DND, PMR93-405)

to deliver lethal fire." As well, "Aerial bombing was ineffective. . . naval bombardment achieved little success . . . rockets and S.P. [self-propelled] artillery landed [beyond] the target." But it was also clear from abandoned positions and unused stocks of ammunition that the defenders' morale had been severely shaken. While the researchers could not say which part of the fire plan had caused most disruption, its sheer cumulative weight likely persuaded many to give up the fight.

On 3rd Division's left, as 8 Brigade approached shore, the landmarks that Brigadier K.G. Blackader had memorized came into sight as he swung his binoculars from west to east. There was the jetty at Courseulles harbour, then an expanse of flat marsh, then the prominent Bernières-sur-Mer church steeple surrounded by tall trees, then a cluster of beach houses at St-Aubin-sur-Mer. As they closed, the wind increased, forcing Blackader and his naval counterpart to decide whether and when to launch their unwieldy DD tanks. Reckoning the sea too rough they ordered them not to risk it and, with his H-hour now delayed, Blackader modified the timing of his close-in fire plan to cover the assault troops as they hit the beach. As at Courseulles, much of the supporting fire was high, landing inland rather than on the immediate beach defences.

Lieutenant Colonel J.C. Spragge, commanding The Queen's Own Rifles on 8 Brigade's right, received a message at 0720 telling him that his H-hour was delayed for half an hour because the DD tanks and AVREs were running late. Until then the beach had been quiet, but now some of the circling landing craft came under fire. "Unfortunately," the battalion's war diarist recorded, "the postponement has definitely messed up the supporting fire and all that is firing now is an LCF (Landing Craft, Flak) which cruised right in close to shore and let loose with a lot of tracers." At 0805 when the leading companies got word to go ashore he added, "As yet no DD tanks or AVRE's can be seen which looks rather ominous."

In one of the five boats carrying Major Elliot Dalton's A Company on its eight-kilometre run in, Sergeant Major Charles Martin was startled to find just how isolated they were in the midst of the vast invasion force when, in his words, *"the assault fleet just behind us had completely disappeared from view."* Many years later, he recalled in his memoir*:

> *I realized that wartime artists and Hollywood typically showed D-Day with planes overhead, the channel crowded with destroyers and battleships, and the shore full of assault boats, beach masters and all that kind of thing. Not so with us. All that remained within sight were ten isolated assault craft, moving abreast in the early morning silence in a gradually extending line facing the shore, with our A Company boats on the right and the B Company boats on the left, and an unwelcome daylight arriving. . . . Fifteen hundred yards of beach stretched from the far left to the far right. Everything was dead quiet. It could have been a picture postcard — not the real thing — of a hundred tiny French beaches and villages, except that any second we were expecting the shelling to start. And it did.*

Boats drifted apart — Martin's to the right — while his sense of isolation grew.

> *The boats began to look even tinier as the gaps widened, with more than the length of a football field between each. Our initial concepts of a brave attack now began to look pretty modest as we came closer. We could see the houses and buildings of the village. In between the village and the shore were the expected embedded obstacles and barbed wire with mines attached. In the centre there was a formidable fifteen-foot wall with three large heavy cement pill boxes. The entire beach was open to murderous fire with machine-guns positioned for a full 180-degree sweep.*

The boats drove straight in, some getting right to shore, others dumping their men in waist-deep water. Now they were even more alone. *"None of us really grasped at this point, spread across a very large beach front, just how thin on the ground we were,"* Martin recalled. While in training exercises it had been relatively easy for section and platoon commanders to take control of their men, in combat, where no plan survives first contact with the enemy, it was much different. Success all along the beach now depended on training and individual initiative because, as Martin saw it, *"Each of the ten boats had become an independent fighting unit; none*

* Martin, Charles M. *Battle Diary: One Sergeant Major's Story from D-Day. to VE Day* Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1994.

"All that remained within sight were ten isolated assault craft." Although surrounded by scores of other vessels, many soldiers felt quite alone on the long run in. (DND, PMR 93-403)

For others packed in fragile landing craft, "the illusion persisted that this was just another exercise." (DND, PMR93-399)

had communication with the other; we were on our own and in our first action and every single one of us from commanders to privates was a rifleman, on the run at top speed."

Riflemen made their own way across the beach, over the sea wall and into the sand dunes to the railway line beyond where carefully placed barbed wire and minefields squeezed them into gaps which the Germans covered with machine-gun and mortar fire. Cutting a hole in the wire, Martin got about ten paces into the minefield and stepped on a jumping mine. He described what happened next:

When this goes into the air it spreads old nails and buckshot and anything else they can find to put into it over a large area — maybe 150-200 feet. But if you keep your foot on it, it won't go off. So I held my foot in place and got everyone to the far side, over the fence and into the gardens by the houses. To avoid the spray effect you drop to the ground quickly right down beside the mine.

It worked. Martin got his men to their objective and, one by one, men from other boats got through to join them. Luck played a large part in boat landings. To Martin's left most of B Company, commanded by Elliot's brother Charles Dalton, came in amidst the three pillboxes whose enfilading fire from both flanks hit half of the men before they could reach the sea wall. Three brave men silenced one with grenades and, luckily, two boats had drifted leftwards to land a platoon, commanded by Lieutenant H.C.F. Elliott, in a relatively quiet spot. It worked its way behind the strongpoints while a radio operator contacted a flak ship that almost grounded as it came in to give point-blank fire support. The Germans manning the strongpoint then gave up.

War is full of incongruities. When battalion headquarters arrived in the midst of the battle, the war diarist noted, "A cafe just a hundred yards off the beach is opened up and selling wine to all and sundry." He added, perhaps with a touch of irony, "There is considerable delay at this point while the companies assemble." Several hours later Ralph Allen, the war correspondent for the Toronto Globe and Mail, arrived to find a scene of organized chaos:

The thick concrete wall on which the Germans had made their initial stand was now bare of men, but in front of it were scores of great-coated German prisoners. Behind it, lying under blankets, were our casualties, most of whom received their wounds on the brown sands which now lay at low tide, disclosing hundreds of twisted metal hedgerows and leaving their catch of damaged invasion craft high and dry in the mounting sun. The hunched shoulders of pill boxes stood on top of the wall and tangles of wire hung over its dished seaward face. There were deep trenches behind, a German anti-tank gun stuck its snout out a narrow aperture and a heavy machine-gun now lay dismantled to the left. At the wall's softest point it was a good eight feet high and eight feet thick. Experience would have been of little help against this grey-black bastion. The Dalton brothers and their green troops used the only commodity that could have paid off here — old-fashioned Canadian guts.

Guts and grief go easily together. Sergeant Major Martin counted off the friends he had lost and, to that strong man,

. . . tears came. I went behind a wall. So many had been taken. I had some idiotic thought that why was it done this way? Four years of training and living together, a common purpose, friends who became brothers, only to lose more than half of us. Why didn't they just round up any collection of men in uniform and throw them into this killing machine? Why these, when anyone — somebody else, but not these — could have paid this price in human life?

He answered himself: *"In grief there is not always good sense. It was one of those times. What could we do? Carry on and do the best we could, that's what."* Along with supporting Fort Garry tanks, the survivors struck out inland, taking out scattered pockets of Germans along the way, to their D-Day objectives, at Anguerny and Anisy, which they reached late that afternoon.

The North Shore Regiment landed left of the Queen's Own on the easternmost Canadian beach fronting the resort town of St-Aubin-sur-Mer. On their left were troops of the 48th Royal Marine Commando who had to clear the built-up area between the North Shores and 3rd British Division. The foreshore at St-Aubin is much more restricted than the others, the beach being less than 100 metres deep at high tide, and due to the heavy seas the DD tanks were told not to launch but rather to go directly onto the beach

Royal Marines that landed on the left flank of JUNO, file onboard their landing craft alongside HMCS ***Prince David.*** *(DND, PMR93-412)*

An RCN LCI carrying soldiers of The Highland Light Infantry – complete with bicycles – beaches at Bernières. Throughout OVERLORD, Canadian LCIs and LSIs transported over 35,000 soldiers to Normandy. (DND, PMR93-404)

in their LCTs behind the infantry. It was cramped and, as a Fort Garry tanker remarked, they had *"a wet wade."* It was just as well. One Troop Leader reported later that his crews were so seasick that he had to drive all his tanks ashore himself.

As the LCAs (Landing Craft, Assault) carrying the North Shores circled into their stations, a platoon commander remembered that his soldiers at first *"seemed to take it as just another scheme. In fact the morale was never higher and the platoon was merrily singing, 'Roll Me Over, Lay Me Down' as we approached the shore."* The Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Donald Buell, also recalled that *"The illusion persisted that this was just another exercise. This feeling was also fed by the lack of any visible evidence of enemy resistance."* He went on to tell how reality intervened:

> *As we were impatiently waiting an incident occurred that instantly dispelled any illusions. The L.C.T. (Rocket) supporting our assault flight commenced firing salvoes of 25 when out of the low cloud sped an R.A.F. Mustang fighter travelling from east to west parallel with the beach. Within seconds he flashed right into the flight of the rockets. There was a large explosion. The aircraft disintegrated, only the engine travelling on in a flaming arc of wreckage and plunging into the sea.*

Buell, his men and the crews of the LCAs also had to contend with a patch of "Rommel's asparagus." This in-depth defence system extended from the half-tide mark to the level of about three-quarters flood, and consisted of layers of wooden or iron stakes, "hedgehogs" (tripods of angle iron welded together) and "tetrahydras" (welded angle-iron pyramids). Many were mined with old shells or Teller mines, but even those without explosives could rip the bottom out of landing craft. Engineering parties who went ashore with the first wave were supposed to clear a path through these obstacles but in many places they were unable to do so.

The experiences of the crews of LCIs (Landing Craft, Infantry) 298 and 121 of the RCN's 260th LCI Flotilla are a good example of a typical run into shore. As they approached the St-Aubin beach in line abreast, skippers could plainly see the rows of obstacles stretched before them. Rather than pick their way through, they were under orders to penetrate the barrier at their top speed of 16 knots. Even if damaged, they should then still have had enough momentum to land their soldiers on the flat shallow beach. *LCI 298* was successful, glancing off a couple of barriers but luckily avoiding mines. Her 51 men disembarked in ten minutes without any casualties. *LCI 121* was not so fortunate. The first lieutenant was tossed overboard by a wave, and then the vessel struck a mined obstacle. Six soldiers were killed and three others wounded, but speed carried her aground and the others leapt out into four feet of water. This experience was repeated all along the beaches. Of the 26 RCN LCIs that landed on D-Day, 12 were abandoned, too severely damaged to return to England. But, as their skippers had been told before the landings, the survival of their vessels was not important; landing their troops was, and that they accomplished.

The North Shore assault companies, B on the left and A on the right, had been well briefed with air photographs of St-Aubin's formidable defences — pillboxes, roadblocks, wire and mines — which linked the high sea wall behind the beach with the congested village. B Company's immediate objective was a well-manned strongpoint, which it outflanked and assaulted from behind. Then, using bangalore torpedoes — lengths of pipe packed with explosives — to blow gaps in the wire, the platoons got into town, but Germans in well-sited positions pinned them down until tanks, AVREs and anti-tank guns got ashore to help. Captain J.C. Stewart, a FOO (Forward Observation Officer) from 19th Army Field Regiment, lacking communications with his own battery when his seasick signaller fell into the sea, did yeoman work directing the 95 mm guns of supporting Centaur tanks to reduce several strongpoints holding up the North Shores and the Commandos, until his own unit's guns got ashore. One *"position turned out to be far more impregnable than anyone ever imagined and the underground [bunker] was an engineer's nightmare,"* a platoon commander remembered. It took *"two hours just to thoroughly inspect the main gun positions and their underground connections. . . Four officers and 75 other ranks were taken prisoner, and another fifty were killed or wounded."*

Father Hickey came in with the reserve companies and anointed his first dead soldier, who was killed beside him as they left the

This assault trooper's view of a fire-swept beach shows the varieties of "Rommel's asparagus." (DND, PMR93-408)

Behind the shelter of the sea wall at Courseulles, medical personnel care for the wounded. (DND, PMR93-388)

landing craft, on the beach. It was being *"sprayed from all angles by the enemy machine-guns and now their mortars and heavy guns began hitting [them]."*

Crawling along in the sand, [he continued] I just reached a group of three badly wounded men when a shell landed among us killing the others outright. . . . The noise was deafening; you couldn't even hear our huge tanks that had already landed and were crunching their way through the sand; some men, unable to hear them, were run over and crushed to death. A blast shook the earth like an earthquake, it was the engineers blowing the wall. All the while enemy shells came screaming in faster and faster; as we crawled along, we could hear the bullets and shrapnel cutting into the sand around us; when a shell came screaming over, you dug into the sand and held your breath, waited for the blast and the shower of stones and debris that followed; then when it cleared a little, right next to you, perhaps someone you had been talking to half an hour before, lay dead. Others dying, might open their eyes as you reached them.

At the western outskirts of St-Aubin, A Company got smartly through the beach obstacles and minefields to link up with the Queen's Own. The reserve companies followed through town quickly to their objective, the village of Tailleville, where the battalion consolidated. After setting up his headquarters in a garden behind a burning house near Tailleville, Lieutenant Colonel Buell noticed that *"piled against the rear were about twenty rabbit hutches. Some were burning and the rabbits squealing."* He continued:

I had my batman and a couple of signallers tear down the hutches and release the animals. Having got my headquarters fairly well organized, I set the FOB [Forward Officer Bombardment] busy shooting up the Chateau at Tailleville. He had call on the 4-inch guns of two Royal Navy destroyers moving slowly offshore.

On the way, Buell and the others had encountered French civilians unhappily caught up in the turmoil; being liberated, but with fire and at dreadful cost. He described one such incident to his unit historian:

In moving to my planned headquarters location, I had noticed three little girls standing on the front verandah of their home. The house was on the coast road facing north and about opposite to our beach. The girls were all dressed the same in a gray school smock with white collars and cuffs and long black stockings. They stood there almost motionless watching the fighting raging about them as though it was an extraordinary show put on for their benefit. Why they were not hit or frightened by the shell explosions, we will never know. I remembered those kids and sent my batman, who was bilingual, to get them down to the beach near the town esplanade. . . . In due course, Louis Ross, my batman, reported back to me. The three little girls had been delivered to civilians on the beach safe and unharmed to the great relief of relatives already there.

Even before the assault battalions reached shore, *Prince Henry* and *Prince David*, carrying Le Régiment de la Chaudière, 8 Brigade's reserve battalion, had dropped anchor in the JUNO transport area. Because of the ships crammed into each anchorage even this routine evolution had been carefully rehearsed, and they executed it perfectly as each vessel swung 300 metres apart. The LSIs (Landing Ships, Infantry) immediately prepared their landing craft, and the first, a LCS(M) (Landing Craft, Support, Medium) full of Royal Marines, jammed while being lowered from *Prince David* and was holed. But, once freed, it circled and, although down by the bows, it was judged seaworthy enough to head for the beach. Over the next 25 minutes, seven of the 529th Flotilla's LCAs, packed with the Chaudières' A Company, were lowered without incident. When all were safely in the water shortly before 0700, they followed their motor-gunboat guide towards shore at five knots.

It was a difficult hundred-minute run into the beach for the soldiers huddled in the bottom of the landing craft. Seaman Fred Turnbull, an experienced sailor in LCA 1151, thought the sea *"extremely rough,"* and, not surprisingly, *"the soldiers were very sick."* As they closed in on the beach, Lieutenant R.G. Buckingham, the flotilla commander, noticed that:

The tide was considerably higher than had been anticipated and the beach obstacles were partly covered with water. There were six rows of obstructions but we were able to weave our way through them. At 0840 all craft of the 529th Flotilla were beached. There was quite a heavy swell and a strong current on our

starboard quarter . . . on the beaches there was considerable enemy fire, mostly from mortars.

Turnbull recalled that the swell kept swinging the stern of his craft close to mined obstacles, and it was soon clear that he was not the only one having these problems. In his report, Buckingham described the sight of his command disintegrating:

About three-quarters of the troops had been disembarked from L.C.A. 1150 when an explosion caused either by a mine or by a mortar bomb blew in the port side. One soldier was wounded. The port side of L.C.A. 1059 was blown in by the explosion of one of the mine obstructions after about one-third of the soldiers had been disembarked. Casualties in this craft were two soldiers killed.

Another explosion holed L.C.A. 1137 aft and stove in the starboard bow. All troops were cleared from this craft without casualties. All troops had been disembarked from L.C.A. 1138 and the craft was about to leave the beach when a wave lifted it on to an obstruction. The explosion which followed ripped the bottom out of the craft. Lieutenant J.C. Beveridge RCNVR, the boat officer in the craft, suffered several shrapnel wounds in his legs, a fracture of the right fibula and slight head injuries.

With all but one of his flotilla destroyed, the only way for Buckingham to get his men off the deadly beach and back to *Prince David* was to load them into the surviving 1151. Turnbull described the scene:

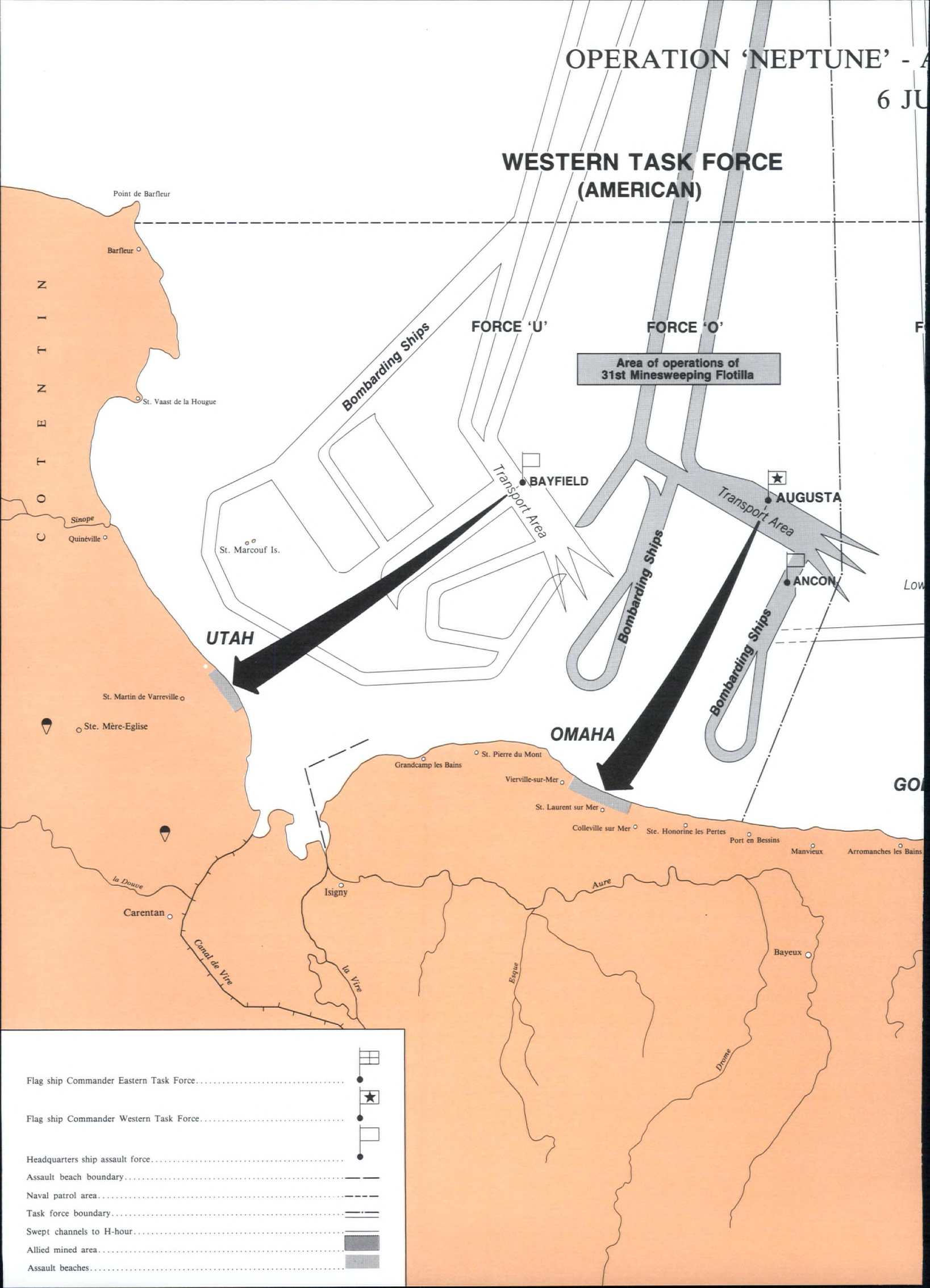
. . . we crowded into our one and only craft but another obstacle arose as LCT's came roaring in on the beach and we were directly in their path. With more luck than anything, we kept from being run down but as we swung around to starboard and seemed to be headed out of trouble, we ran across a steel spike, a secondary defence measure of the enemy, and a huge hole was ripped in our bottom, and try as we might to stop the flow of water, we had to abandon our craft having time only to grab our firearms and a few rations. Luckily, we were alongside an LCT and we managed to get aboard her safely.

After another perilous passage through the mines and obstacles, the survivors were safe on board *Prince David*. Turnbull and his messmates were shaken by their harrowing experiences. He remembered: *"Never before had I seen so much strain on men's faces. My best chums were ready to chew anyone's head off who passed any remark. I was in the same state."* The next day when *Prince David* was anchored safely off the Isle of Wight, *"the boys of the flotilla refused to talk about the invasion. We wished to forget for awhile."*

The flotilla's job was completed, but that of the Chaudières was just beginning. The battalion's task was to secure Beny-sur-Mer, a few kilometres inland where 3rd Division's reserve brigade was to assemble before advancing south to its D-Day objectives near Caen. Getting out of Bernières, however, was not easy. When the 105 mm self-propelled howitzers of 14th Field Regiment reached an open field on the town's southern outskirts, a German gunner knocked out their first three guns and blew up their ammunition. The explosions lasted an hour, making any movement extremely hazardous, and the Chaudières were driven to ground when they left cover.

The Chaudières turned to Captain Michael Kroyer, a British FOB [Forward Officer Bombardment] who had a radio link to the guns of supporting destroyers. Earlier that morning Kroyer had already established communications with HMCS *Algonquin* lying some four kilometres offshore, and he now gave the Canadians the target. On *Algonquin*'s bridge beside the captain, Lieutenant Commander D.W. Piers, was another Royal Artillery officer, Captain G. Blunt, the ship's BLO (Bombardment Liaison Officer). Blunt had been with *Algonquin* since early May and completed gunnery training with the crews at Scapa Flow, so he knew them, and they him, a matter of prime importance when working so closely together. When he received Kroyer's fire request, Blunt checked the initial range and bearing of the target on a standard gridded map and passed them to the Gunnery Officer, Lieutenant V.M. Knight.

Knight set his well-drilled crew into action, entering the target information into a gunnery control clock, a primitive computer that transmitted ranges to the fire-control systems. These set pointers which gun crews followed in each turret and, one minute after Kroyer's request, *Algonquin* fired her first ranging salvo. As it was an indirect shoot, Kroyer reported the fall-of-shot and radioed corrections — "add 200, left 300." When they were on target with the


OPERATION 'NEPTUNE' - A
6 JU
WESTERN TASK FORCE
(AMERICAN)
Point de Barfleur
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C O T E N T I N
St. Vaast de la Hougue
Sinope
Quinéville
St. Marcouf Is.
Bombarding Ships
FORCE 'U'
FORCE 'O'
Area of operations of
31st Minesweeping Flotilla
BAYFIELD
Transport Area
AUGUSTA
Transport Area
ANCON
Bombarding Ships
Bombarding Ships
UTAH
St. Martin de Varreville
Ste. Mère-Eglise
OMAHA
St. Pierre du Mont
Grandcamp les Bains
Vierville-sur-Mer
St. Laurent sur Mer
Colleville sur Mer
Ste. Honorine les Pertes
Port en Bessins
Manvieux
Arromanches les Bains
la Douve
Carentan
Canal de Vire
Isigny
la Vire
Aure
Esque
Bayeux
Drome
Flag ship Commander Eastern Task Force
Flag ship Commander Western Task Force
Headquarters ship assault force
Assault beach boundary
Naval patrol area
Task force boundary
Swept channels to H-hour
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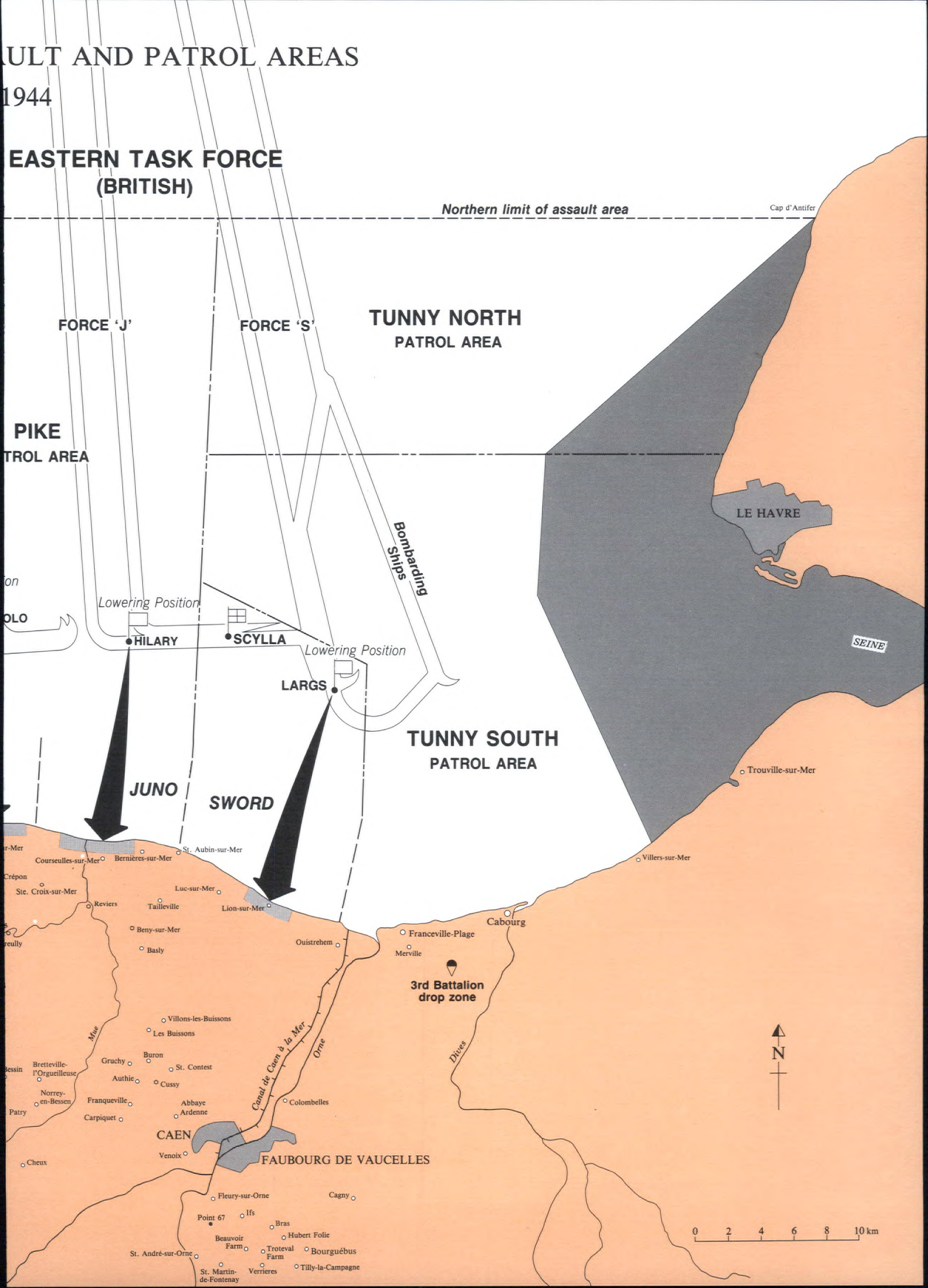
Assault beaches

ULT AND PATROL AREAS

1944



third salvo, Knight ordered fire for effect and crews responded with sets of four-gun shoots. After the third, Kroyer reported target destroyed, the Chaudières moved out, and *Algonquin* cruised about waiting for other fire-support requests. Some months later Lieutenant Commander Piers received a letter from Captain Blunt which explained what had happened on the ground:

> *I have been in touch with Michael Kroyer, our 6th June FOB, and the shoot you did that day was an example of perfect naval support. For speed and accuracy it was unbeaten by any of the other shoots I have heard about and Mike and his battalion were extremely grateful. The story was that S.P. [self propelled] 88s opened up from a flank at about 400 [metres] range at the Battalion H.Q. and Mike and all of their trucks on the road. The 88s did not have much time to do much damage and were later found destroyed. Mike later had 'HMCS Algonquin' painted across the front of his jeep, which was later seen over most of Northern France, Belgium and Holland.*

Before he came ashore around noon, Keller had ordered his reserve 9 Brigade — the Highlanders — to land over the beach at Bernières where exits appeared to be better than at Courseulles. The brigade's mission was to expand and exploit the foothold which the assault battalions had gained. Its objective, the slight ridge west of Caen overlooking the city's airport at Carpiquet, was about 15 kilometres south. After offloading just before noon, forward units tried to get through Bernières quickly, but congestion in the town stopped all movement for a time. Landing ships continued to disgorge cargoes of men, vehicles and supplies of all kinds onto a beach that shrank inexorably as the tide rose. Beyond the shoreline minefields canalized movement to restricted lanes, and the narrow funnel exits could not accommodate the continuous flow which poured into the wide end. Consequently, it was not until late afternoon that 9 Brigade's battalions were able to connect with their supporting tanks a few kilometres inland at Beny-sur-Mer, organize themselves for battle, and head south for Carpiquet.

The spearpoint of 9 Brigade's advance, its advance guard, was a battle group of The North Nova Scotia Highlanders and tanks of The Sherbrooke Fusilier Regiment. Leading was a mobile vanguard led by the Sherbrookes' reconnaissance troop. In echelon behind was C Company of the North Novas, carried in bren-gun carriers with battalion mortars and pioneers, a medium machine-gun platoon from The Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa, a troop of M-10 anti-tank guns from the 3rd Anti-Tank Regiment, and two flail tanks to clear minefields. In a broad arrowhead behind the vanguard were the three other North Nova rifle companies riding on Sherbrooke tanks. Yet further behind were The Highland Light Infantry and The Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders. Three companies in each of the reserve battalions started out riding on bicycles.

The North Novas and Sherbrookes had trained intensively together for their role, getting to know one another as individuals and learning to work as a team. They advanced several kilometres before dark, clearing out German detachments before reaching Villons-les-Buissons where, in the coming darkness, they were ordered to stop and dig in for the night. The Canadians expected the Germans to react quickly to their intrusion — counterattacking immediately was central to German tactical doctrine — and they had trained to defeat them by forming brigade and battalion fortresses, all-around defensive positions from which their anti-tank guns could meet German armour on more or less equal terms.

Nighttime for the survivors of this extraordinary day was hardly restful. The Luftwaffe, so quiet in daylight, bombed the beaches — killing, wounding, blowing up ammunition and destroying equipment. The North Novas drove off probes by mechanized German troops, as did the Chaudières who lost an entire platoon taken prisoner. Another German patrol waylaid a Sherbrooke scout car carrying the adjutant and signals officer, who were carrying a set of radio procedures and codes.

It was to prove a costly loss — the Germans were able to match the radio details with a set of marked Canadian operational maps that they obtained soon afterwards from another disabled vehicle. The maps were marked with nicknames, for instance, the Orne River was the Orinoco. *"Taken together with the wireless codes,"* a German officer wrote, *"we were able to understand much of the enemy's radio traffic. . .*

". . .an example of perfect naval support." On the bridge of HMCS ***Algonquin****, Lieutenant Commander D.W. Piers and his army liaison officer, Captain G. Blunt, locate targets ashore. (DND, PMR92-447)*

In another view from ***Algonquin****, a gun line of destroyers batters positions along the beachfront. (DND, PMR92-448)*

all that was left was to form special recce units to do radio listening work and so on; and in this way we were repeatedly successful. In effect it was espionage by radio." Brigadier D.G. Cunningham, Commander of 9 Brigade, agreed.

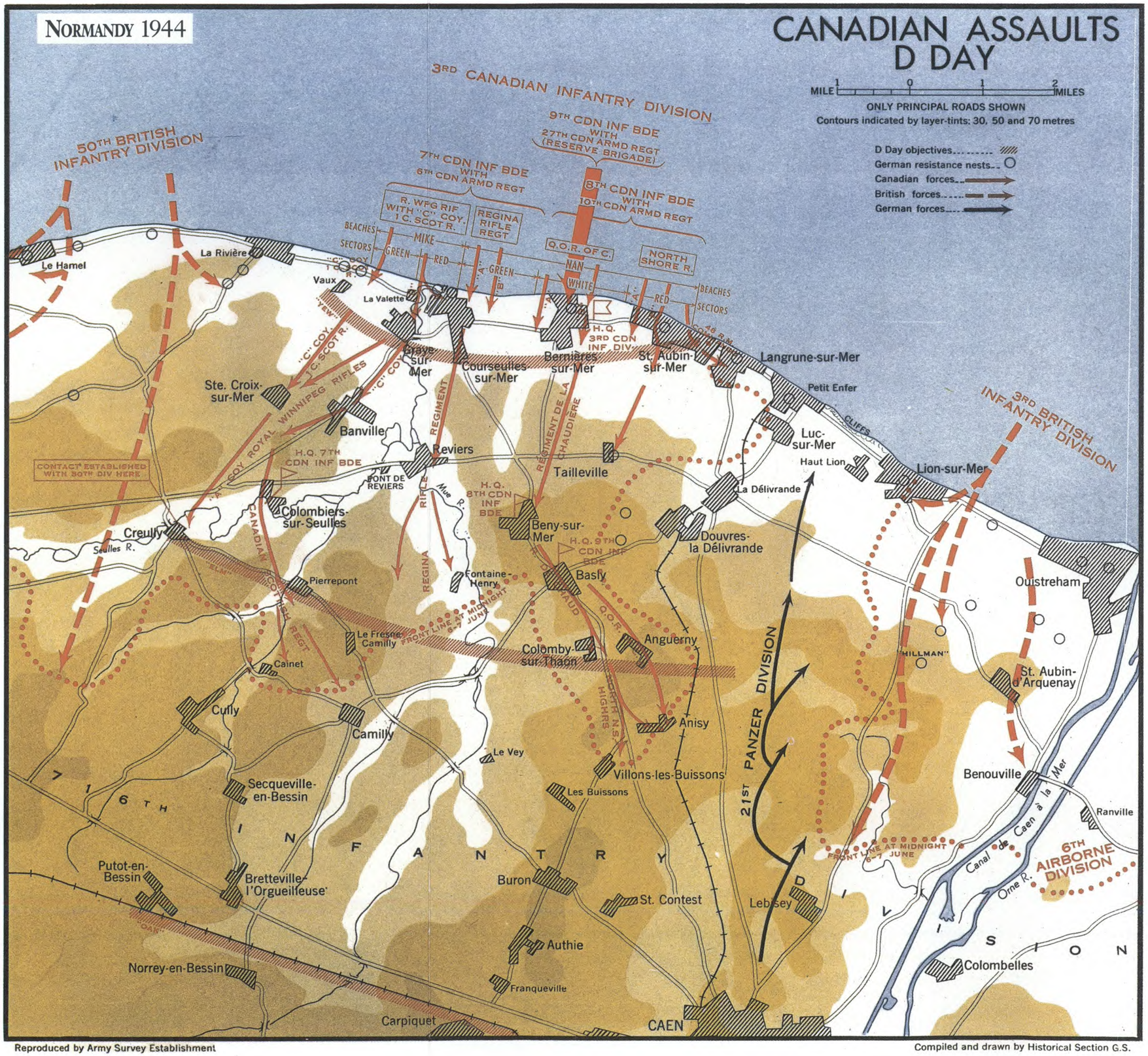
An interesting example of enemy ingenuity [he reported] is afforded by the skill of a German wireless operator whose set was functioning on the brigade link to 27 Armoured Regiment [the Sherbrookes] and who quickly adopted our own wireless procedure, even to such detail as 'report my signals' and 'say again all after.' His cleverness was annoying at most, since it became difficult to know if wireless messages were being received, but his skill at mimicry was such that by the end of [D-Day] he could imitate the voice of Lt Col Gordon, OC [Officer Commanding] of 27 Armoured Regiment.

Father Hickey survived the beach, spending most of the day working with the unit medical officer and stretcher bearers. *"The first French people I saw that day,"* he wrote, *"were some men, women and children crouching in a little cave near the beach."* A French civilian in St-Aubin appealed for help and Hickey, with the Medical Officer, Doctor Patterson, followed the man to his house where his wife lay badly wounded.

Their children, three little girls of about four, six and eight, looked on terrified, maybe as much because of us as of their mother. I spoke to them, but it only seemed to terrify them all the more. Then I remembered I had three chocolate bars in my pocket, part of my day's rations. I gave them to the little girls. Oh the power of a chocolate bar! The terror vanished from six brown eyes and even there as terror reigned, three little girls attempted a smile as I patted their curly heads.

The woman's mangled leg and other wounds strongly suggested that she should soon receive the last rites of her faith, but her spirit remained strong. As Captain Jamie Stewart passed by on his way to assist D Company and the Royal Marines, she gave him the "V for Victory" sign.

Hickey was with Colonel Buell when the welcome sound of outgoing shells told them their artillery was ashore. But then, *"will you believe it, [he wrote] right there an old French woman made us and our artillery look ridiculous; for, with a pail in her hand, she sauntered across the field, sat down on her milking stool and calmly milked her cow."* Hickey had well learned by then that, like an infantryman, a unit chaplain *"depended on a strong pair of shoulders, a sturdy pair of legs, a stomach that could digest shoe leather, and two feet that wouldn't blister,"* and when the battalion stopped for the night he dug in like everyone else until a couple of men invited him to share their slit trench. *"So in I crawled,"* his account continues, *"but the part I'll never forget is the can of self-heating soup Fred Druet opened and handed to me. That was the first food I tasted that day. No sir, the Savoy in London never produced the like of it!"*



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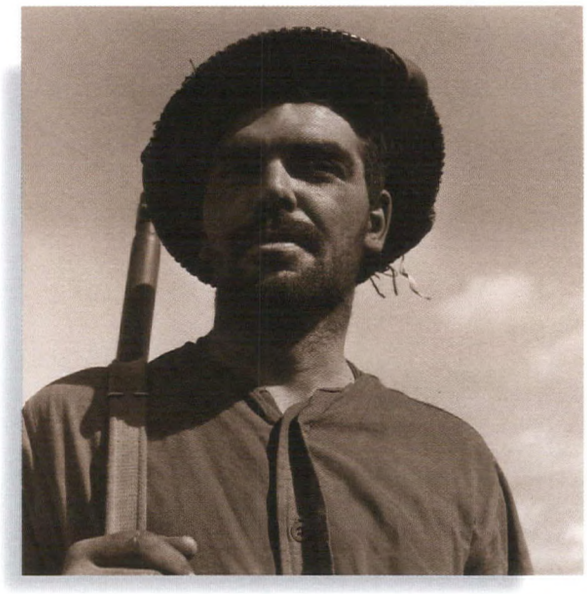


CHAPTER III

YOUNG MEN IN COMBAT

It had always been impossible to imagine D+1. Try as you would during the days of preparation, you could never project your mind beyond the great assault.
(Norman Scarfe, Assault Division)

Although still a few kilometres short of its final D-Day objectives, 3rd Canadian Division had cracked the crust of the Atlantic Wall's coastal defences, and it is as well for readers to pause with its young men peering apprehensively from their shallow slit trenches in the early morning of 7 June. They had been in transit for the past several days with little rest before boarding ships, then waited through the day's delay and passed another sleepless night while crossing the Channel. Those not seasick on the crossing were surely so when their landing craft tossed about in the rough sea on the run in. Assaulting the beach was another shock, followed by the sheer relief of survival. Adrenalin, rum and benzedrine could keep soldiers going for awhile, but they had to pay a price eventually. Moving out at all on D+1 was a feat in itself.

But move they did, until meeting other young men coming to stop them. Because a gap was opening up on their left between them and 3rd British Division, which had the all-important D-Day role of taking Caen, the North Nova/Sherbrooke advance guard proceeded cautiously. Their mission was to secure the British flank while they took Caen, but at that time this task was unrealistically over-optimistic, especially since intelligence sources indicated that the 21st Panzer Division was deployed in the immediate vicinity. The British 3rd Division had landed on a one-brigade front: 8 Brigade to gain a foothold, 185 Brigade to move through rapidly to Caen, and 9 Brigade to fill in the right flank and link up with the Canadians. As elsewhere, German resistance and beach congestion slowed them down, and by the time 185 Brigade approached Caen, 21st Panzer was already there. When 9 Brigade's commander got ashore, his divisional and corps commanders told him to forget his original plan of securing the Canadian flank and, instead, go in the opposite direction to reinforce the positions that 6th British Airborne Division had carved out at the Orne bridges. Hence a large gap opened between the British and Canadian divisions, which the Germans were eager to exploit.

Filling this void would have been an appropriate task for the reconnaissance regiment of General Keller's division, the 7th Reconnaissance Regiment (17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars), which unfortunately was still in England. Keller had decided to deploy just one of its squadrons during the

landing, not for reconnaissance but to provide him with an alternate radio net. Broken down into jeep-mounted detachments deployed to brigades, battalions and beach groups, the squadron acted as another set of eyes and ears to provide divisional headquarters with tactical information. If its few messages recorded in the divisional log are an accurate indication, the scheme did not achieve as much as expected, when radios did not work or were knocked out. Unaccountably, the unit's other two squadrons had been given a lower shipping priority and did not reach the bridgehead for several weeks, leaving the division without the first link in the tactical trinity of "find, fix and fight."

Somewhat blind, therefore, the North Novas and Sherbrookes moved out in the same formation as before, clearing scattered pockets of Germans as they went. When the battalion's C Company began clearing Buron in the late forenoon, B Company in the left rear of the arrowhead came under fire from the vicinity of the village of St-Contest and dismounted. The vanguard commander, Major J.D. Learment, decided to stop in Buron until B Company's situation cleared, while the Stuart light tanks of the recce troop continued on, eventually to the Caen-Bayeux road. Moving forward to see for himself, Lieutenant Colonel C. Petch, commanding the North Novas, called on naval gunfire to hit the towns on his open flanks and ordered the vanguard forward, but heavy shelling forced all the companies to dig in where they were, around Authie and Buron, and between the two. German reserves had arrived to fight.

Allied deception, air supremacy, poor communications, and indecision hampered the Germans' first attempts to defeat the landings. Their most immediately available armoured reserve, 21st Panzer Division, astride the Orne, was on a field exercise the night of the invasion. Quickly deploying, it was just approaching the precarious airborne bridgehead east of the Orne when told, instead, to attack the seaborne invasion west of the river, forcing the division to backtrack through Caen, all the while under severe air attack. By the time the Germans struck the British, on the Canadians' flank, on the afternoon of D-Day, anti-tank guns were in position to stop them. The few tanks that got through to the coast withdrew when, to their great chagrin, a strong force of gliders carrying airborne reinforcements swept in behind them. Fearing that he would be cut off, and under fire from naval guns, the local German commander withdrew to a position just north of Caen.

The 12th SS Panzer was the next available German tank division. It was a unique formation, the bulk of its soldiers being teenagers who had been strongly indoctrinated in the mores of the Nazi youth movement. Their experienced officers trained them hard and well. *"In training, any thought of parade-square drill was frowned upon,"* a German account tells us; *"Marching in review, and things of that nature, were not practised. Everything was oriented toward combat training, and this training took place under conditions that were as combat realistic as possible."* When the division, numbering more than 20,000 with 214 tanks, deployed west of Paris in the vicinity of Dreux and Évreux in May, it was fit to fight.

As a key armoured reserve, 12th SS was responsible for counterattacking anywhere from Dieppe to the mouth of the Loire and prepared four contingency plans accordingly. Deployment Plan C was directed against an assault west of the Orne River, precisely where 3rd Canadian Infantry Division landed. After being alerted by reports of parachute landings early on D-Day, the divisional staff was astounded by an order to ignore its plans and move in a completely new direction, and under command of a different headquarters with which it had no communications. Then, while they were on the move, new orders told them to revert to their original Plan C. Their closest unit was now more than 70 kilometres away and had to cross the lines of communication of 21st Panzer Division while swarms of Allied aircraft harassed them. The result, to the Canadians' great fortune, was that 12th SS Division was unable to intervene on D-Day.

Leading elements of Colonel Kurt Meyer's 25th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment — mechanized infantry — reached Caen early on 7 June, as the Canadians approached it from Les Buissons where they had spent their first uneasy night in France. Caen was burning, its streets blocked with rubble. Experienced German soldiers among them noticed the apparent calm of the youngsters as they drove through, which *"was all the more amazing because even the old Russian campaign veterans in the division were greatly impressed by the powerful air attacks and*

Not in contact, a battalion moves through a village in close formation past an armoured bulldozer. (NAC, PA131436)

Soldiers quickly spread out when encountering Germans. Many have written of the "emptiness of the battlefield," and artists have found it difficult to capture the essence of a fighting soldier's life because live infantrymen are usually below ground. These soldiers are probably moving from one hole to another. (NAC, PA 131375)

Just before D-Day, armoured regiments received a few Sherman Firefly tanks, with 17-pounder guns that matched those of German tanks. Malfunctions were common at first, including that of the lead Sherbrooke Firefly at Buron, until crews found they had to drain oil from the recoil mechanism to eject empty shell casings. (NAC, PA 131391)

the heavy shelling of the ships' guns." By mid-morning, Meyer's 3rd Battalion supported by tanks of the division's panzer regiment were assembling in the western outskirts of the city. Meyer himself found an observation post in a tower of the Abbaye d'Ardenne just north. From there he could see the ship-filled Baie de la Seine 15 kilometres away, and in the foreground, two kilometres to his left front, Canadian tanks and infantry were milling around Buron as his artillery and mortars drove them to ground. Meyer waited, wanting, as his operations officer wrote, *"to wrest the advantage of a deep flank from the enemy."*

The Sherbrookes were now circling Buron, A Squadron to the right and B Squadron around to the left, while C Squadron followed Petch's command group into the town itself. It was an hour after noon when a tank commander, likely from C Squadron, reported seeing German tanks 800 metres east of Authie near the Abbaye d'Ardenne. They were one of two groups of tanks supporting Meyer, the other being hidden in dead ground about two kilometres west near the hamlet of Franqueville, just a few hundred metres from A Squadron's leading tanks. On Meyer's order, both attacked.

Lieutenant Jack Veness, whose North Nova platoon was in the outskirts of Authie, saw a file of soldiers moving through the adjacent field whom he thought were welcome reinforcements. Leaving cover to guide them, to his great surprise these strangely uniformed men began shooting at him and he quickly returned to his troops, but by then it was clear that the incoming platoon was just part of a much larger force that was infiltrating through the scattered North Nova positions.

The Sherbrookes were now in a pitched battle with the two panzer companies. Their war diary describes how:

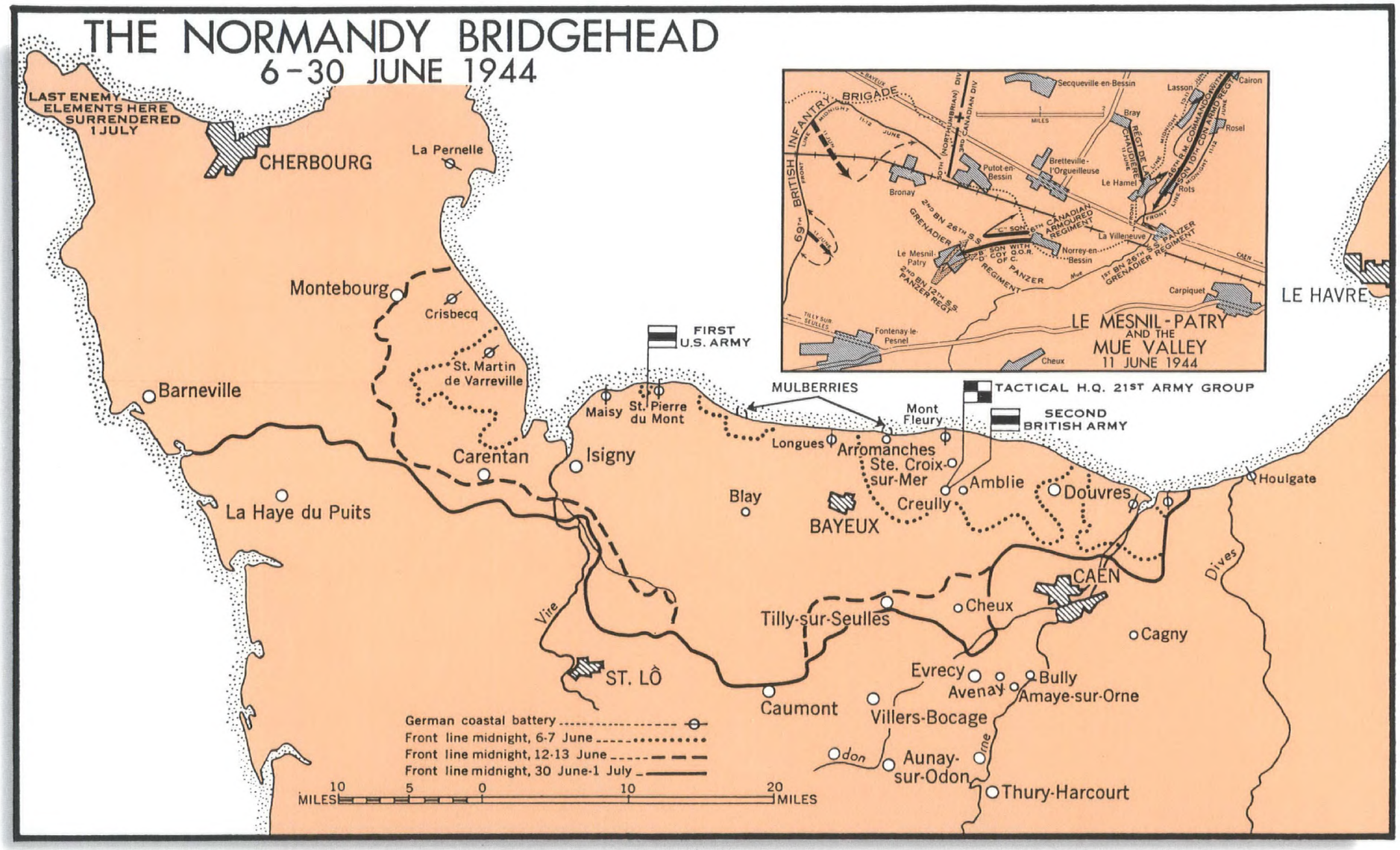
> At this point of advance, 1410 hours, German tanks made their first appearance on the left and shortly afterwards "A" Squadron also met them on low ground on the right. . . . Several tanks went forward of Authie to the outskirts of Franqueville. . . . "C" Squadron was sent forward on the left to get in on the enemy's flank. Lt Fitzpatrick's troop dropped infantry just north of Authie and he lost two of his three tanks in 60 seconds. With his remaining tank he took up a position in the orchard just south of Authie and then discovered that his 17-pounder would not work due to the failure of the breech mechanism. He observed the German attack and countered it with MG fire. It consisted of two waves of infantry and then the tanks moving forward slowly and with determination. The infantry of the NTNS Highlanders moved back to positions just south of Les Buissons and there found that only 5 men from "C" Company and a few from "A" Company had returned.

Late in the afternoon, Sherbrooke tanks counterattacked Buron to evacuate the few North Novas pinned down there, and then withdrew to Les Buissons where The Highland Light Infantry and The Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders were digging in. The Germans also stopped when, they reported, their *"forward line was carpeted by an unprecedently heavy shelling from the guns of the enemy ships. The villages of St-Contest and Buron were turned into heaps of rubble within the space of a few minutes."* Deciding that *"Any continuation of the attack through this furious barrage of the enemy guns appeared to be a hopeless endeavour,"* Meyer ordered his soldiers to hold where they were.

It had been a bloody and costly day. Eight of the North Nova rifle company officers and more than 200 men were killed, wounded or missing. The Sherbrookes lost 60 men and more than a third of the regiment's 50 tanks were destroyed. But Meyer had lost men and more than 30 of his own tanks, and had failed to drive the Canadians into the sea.

The German attacks also gave 7 Brigade, on the right, ample warning to prepare for more. The Winnipegs, Reginas, Canadian Scottish, and 1st Hussar tanks had moved quickly south after getting clear of the beaches on D-Day. Like 9 Brigade, they stopped in the early evening and formed a defensive block a few kilometres short of their final objectives on the Caen-Bayeux road. Next day they reached them, dug in, and prepared to fight off the counterattacks they knew were coming. Concerned about the wide gap between him and 9 Brigade, Brigadier Harry Foster sent a Canadian Scottish company and a squadron of tanks there to plug the hole until he could fill it properly.

On the other side, 12th SS Division had two immediate objectives: to hold on to Caen and Carpiquet, and probe the Canadian positions on a wide front to find weak points that they might


THE NORMANDY BRIDGEHEAD
6-30 JUNE 1944
LAST ENEMY ELEMENTS HERE SURRENDERED 1 JULY
CHERBOURG
La Pernelle
Montebourg
Crisbecq
St. Martin de Varreville
Barneville
Carentan
La Haye du Puits
Maisy
St. Pierre du Mont
Isigny
FIRST U.S. ARMY
MULBERRIES
Longues
Arromanches
Mont Fleury
TACTICAL H.Q. 21ST ARMY GROUP
SECOND BRITISH ARMY
Ste. Croix-sur-Mer
Amblie
Douvres
Creully
Blay
BAYEUX
Houlgate
LE HAVRE
CAEN
Dives
Cheux
Tilly-sur-Seulles
Cagny
Vire
ST. LÔ
Evrecy
Avenay
Bully
Amaye-sur-Orne
Caumont
Villers-Bocage
Odon
Aunay-sur-Odon
Orne
Thury-Harcourt
German coastal battery
Front line midnight, 6-7 June
Front line midnight, 12-13 June
Front line midnight, 30 June-1 July
MILES 10 5 0 10 20 MILES
LE MESNIL-PATRY AND THE MUE VALLEY 11 JUNE 1944
Secqueville-en-Bessin
Lasson
Cairon
Bray
Rosel
Bretteville-l'Orgueilleuse
Putot-en-Bessin
Le Hamel
Rots
Bronay
La Villeneuve
Norrey-en-Bessin
Le Mesnil-Patry
Carpiquet
Fontenay-le-Pesnel
Cheux
69TH BRITISH INFANTRY BRIGADE
30TH (NORTHUMBRIAN) DIV
2ND CANADIAN DIV
2ND BN 26TH S.S. GRENADIER REGIMENT
6TH CANADIAN ARMOURED REGIMENT
1ST BN 26TH S.S. GRENADIER REGIMENT
2ND BN 12TH S.S. PANZER REGT
PANZER REGIMENT

exploit. The divisional reconnaissance company scouted west for an open flank, and also acted as a delaying screen until the 26th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment arrived on Meyer's left. Its 3rd Battalion reached the front during the late afternoon of 7 June, followed in a few hours by 2nd Battalion, and both headed directly for The Winnipeg Rifles, who held a tenuous position in line along the railway track which borders the southern fringe of Putot-en-Bessin. Early on 8 June the Germans hit A Company on the right, then infiltrated, outflanked and badly mauled the others. Only Major Lockie Fulton's D Company, which was echeloned in depth, held, and the battalion suffered grievously, losing the equivalent of two rifle companies.

Brigadier Foster ordered the Canadian Scottish to counterattack and retake Putot. The Scottish knew that there was trouble ahead when one company commander saw *"several men of the Winnipegs come back through our company area. They seemed completely disorganized."* Lieutenant Colonel F.N. Cabeldu told his company commanders that they must react immediately, before the Germans could secure Putot, and not for the last time carefully practised battle procedure was telescoped and briefings shortened. The battalion, with a squadron of tanks, moved into the attack on a one-company front behind a barrage from two field artillery regiments. D Company led with a platoon on either side of their axis road and the third platoon and company headquarters close behind. Major G.T. MacEwan, who commanded the company, described what happened:

The platoon commanders managed to get to the Start Line in the time available which was a miracle. Most of the platoon briefing took place as they moved into position. We managed to cross the Start Line on time or very little behind. The leading platoons spread out on either side of the road in the grain fields. After crossing the Start Line we came under enemy fire — automatic and mortar or artillery. It was hard to tell whether we were walking into our own artillery or if it was enemy fire. It was difficult to keep in touch with the two leading platoons from company headquarters further back although they could be seen. As the platoon on the right seemed to be veering off the axis of advance I moved forward on the road to a position behind the two leading platoons and moved forward with them. The enemy fire was intense and as evening was drawing on the tracer showed up brighter and brighter. The company passed through grain fields and orchards, pushing through each sparse hedgerow. Casualties were being suffered all along. We passed over part of the Winnipegs' position with their arms and equipment left on the ground beside their slit trenches. Further on a German armoured car opened up from behind a hedgerow on the platoon on the left. After several heavy bursts of fire he moved off. Later it was hit and burned on the objective. Just before here I was hit for the second time and was out of action.

MacEwan was evacuated before learning that the attack had driven the Germans out and completely restored the position.

The rest of the 26th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, having arrived in small detachments, now went after the Regina Rifles a few kilometres east of Putot. The Reginas had three companies around the village of Bretteville-L'Orgueilleuse, and the fourth just south across the main road and railway track in Norrey-en-Bessin. German tanks and infantry probed around their positions throughout the day, but held their attack until after dark when panzer grenadiers hit C Company in Norrey but were driven off. Soon after, tanks roared along the Caen-Bayeux road into the Reginas' main position around Bretteville. These were formidable Panthers from the 12th SS Panzer Regiment which had reached Caen a few hours before, and were led by Kurt Meyer's reconnaissance company. A German account tells us, *"Colonel (Waffen SS) Meyer accompanied the attack on his motorcycle, because he had promised the company, during their period of training, that he would be with them when they had their baptism of fire."* They got it promptly. Meyer was riding in the sidecar when his own cycle was hit; he was sprayed with flaming gasoline and his driver killed.

With their Panthers in the centre of Bretteville, the Germans were under the impression that they had routed the defenders, but no one had told the Reginas and darkness evened the odds between man and machine by blinding the tank crews. Among several Panthers in the town, two attacked battalion headquarters. A rifleman hit the first with a PIAT (a hand-held anti-tank weapon) from a 15-metre range:

A section position of the Regina Rifles at Bretteville which was briefly overrun by the German counterattack on 8 June. (NAC, PA 129042)

The PIAT, or Projector Infantry Anti Tank, was a difficult but reasonably effective weapon that infantrymen could use at short range against tanks, as at Bretteville. It was not a rocket launcher, and gave the operator a powerful kick when fired. (NAC, PA 177100)

It halted for a moment, started again and after 30 yards was hit again by a second PIAT. It stopped, turned around and headed out of town. A third PIAT hit finished it off so that it slewed around, out of control, running over a necklace of 75 [anti-tank] grenades which blew off a track. The crew dismounted and attempted to make off, but were killed by small arms fire. During this incident the second Panther had remained further up the road. Seeing the fate of its companion, it commenced to fire both 75 mm and mg [machine-guns] wildly down the street 'like a child in a tantrum,' doing no damage whatsoever except to set fire to the first Panther.

Altogether the Reginas estimated that 22 Panthers got in and around their position during the night, but they held on and destroyed six. In darkness the tanks were vulnerable unless they had escorting infantry to protect them from short-range anti-tank weapons and, Foster later commented,

The German attacks were launched without any semblance of tactical sense. The flanks of the battalion were exposed and the position almost isolated. In such a case, where a carefully conceived flank attack might have been deadly, the enemy flung himself straight against the strongest points and utterly failed to exploit the undoubted weakness of his opponent's position. All his attacks were beaten off.

Although Foster was referring to his open left flank, his criticism also applies more generally to the German counterattacks on 7 and 8 June. While they stopped the Canadian advance short of Carpiquet, their piecemeal assaults were not fully effective. Driven partly from necessity, but also from their tactical doctrine which was based on immediately counterattacking at all command levels, the Germans committed their units prematurely, directly from the line of march, as they arrived at the front. There is no denying the severe difficulties that air interdiction and naval gunfire imposed on any German deployment, but had Meyer waited only a few hours longer, 9 Brigade would have given him an even more vulnerable flank. A concentrated attack more closely coordinated with 21st Panzer Division through the wide-open corridor between 3rd British and 3rd Canadian Divisions, or between 7 and 9 Brigades, might well have struck brigade and divisional headquarters a few kilometres away and split the still-precarious bridgehead. Meyer's division had abruptly halted the advance, but was unable to annihilate the Canadians as he had pledged to do.

Casualties during the assault landing and immediate combat had not been as high as predicted but, as Canada's official army historian, Colonel Charles Stacey, noted with some asperity, "To say that more than a thousand killed and wounded in the initial battles can be considered light was nonsense." Extraordinarily, some wounded soldiers were on board ships bound for England within hours after they were hit, evacuated by a remarkably flexible and responsive field medical system.

The first doctors, battalion Medical Officers, set up their aid posts immediately behind leading companies to sort and revive patients brought to them by stretcher bearers — many of them unit bandsmen. Jeep ambulances took them from there to forward treatment and surgical units, from which they went to beach dressing stations. They either held casualties for evacuation across the Channel, or sent them to a Field Surgical Centre where surgeons were working on wounded cases by mid-afternoon on D-Day in a wrecked landing craft that had been converted into an impromptu operating theatre. A few hours later two advanced surgical centres opened just behind the beaches, at Graye-sur-Mer and Bernières, and a damaged LST (Landing Ship, Tank) became a hospital holding ward for 90 patients who were then transferred to hospital ships by DUKWs (amphibious trucks). A medical report noted that "In the first four days the surgical teams performed about 220 major operations and handled in all about 1,800 casualties."

A Canadian surgeon, Dr J.B. Hillsman, graphically described in his memoir, *Eleven Men and a Scalpel*, one possibly representative case who got to his surgical tent. The soldier had a bad leg wound; but that didn't account for his *"very weak and thready"* pulse. Turning him over, Hillsman found a small dry hole in his back:

"It was obvious he was bleeding internally from a large vessel, deeply placed . . . Almost in whispers we planned to save this boy. Pour the blood into him fast then a quick attempt to stop the bleeding . . . I looked at the anaesthetist. He nodded. A quick incision . . .

"To say that more than a thousand killed and wounded in the initial battles can be considered light was nonsense." (DND, PMR93-384)

During the assault, landing craft with wounded on board sought out medical aid where they could. Some were evacuated to Britain . . . (NAC, PMR92- 448)

. . . while others found treatment in larger warships with medical staffs who treated not only their own ships' companies but anyone who reached them. (DND, PMR93-411)

furious haemorrhage . . . I can't see! He's bleeding too fast . . . Suction, quick! . . . Still can't see . . . A pack! Press hard! . . . It's still flowing . . . Big forceps, quick! . . . I'll have to clamp blind . . . Oh God I hope I get it . . . It's no use. It won't work . . . To the main vessel quick . . . Another incision . . . Rapid dissection . . . The vessel is tied . . . Back again to the first incision. It's slowed up but not stopped . . . Suction! Pack! Sponge! Quick . . . I straightened up . . . A sigh of relief. It's stopped. A quiet voice from the distance, 'I'm afraid he's gone . . . I felt like hell. 'Sorry old man. I'm a lousy surgeon.' A tap on the shoulder. 'The Resuscitation Officer wants to see you. Another belly.'

The remarkable medical evacuation and treatment system was one part of an extraordinary managerial achievement in planning and sustaining the invasion. It is as well to note that there were many more planners and maintainers in the army because the fighting point of a Second World War Canadian infantry division was relatively small. For instance, of an establishment of about 18,000, just 3,000 or so were combat riflemen. The rest were in supporting arms, services and headquarters that gave fire support, built bridges and roads, fed, watered, supplied and administered everything from pay records to grave registration. OVERLORD presented managers with an unprecedented challenge, and they planned in excruciating detail the loading of supply vessels according to precisely calculated manifests that, hopefully, would arrive at the right beach at the correct time. Most did.

Ammunition, clearly, was a vital commodity, shrewdly handled by the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps (RCASC) and Royal Canadian Ordnance Corps (RCOC). For the assault, units carried a limited ammunition supply with them, and most vehicles went ashore towing a sled or trailer loaded with ammunition, which they dropped on the beach. Other sleds contained water and vehicle fuel. A specially organized jeep platoon coming in behind them picked up the trailers and towed them to a forward dump. They astounded one brigade by establishing a forward Ammunition Point for them within 15 minutes of their urgent request for ammunition.

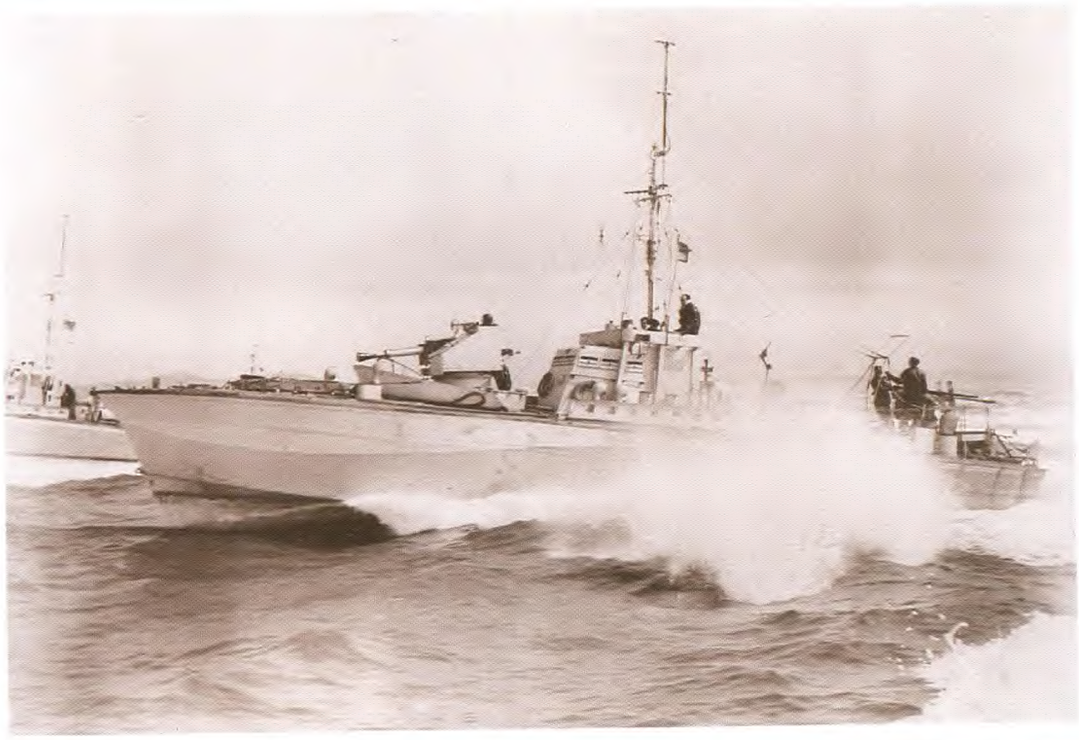
Other 3rd Division Army Service Corps troops travelled across the Channel in four LCTs, each loaded with 165 tons of ammunition. It was a dicey passage. One diarist recorded it for the RCASC historian: *"Our path is being swept for mines ahead of us and if one floats away we are not supposed to sink it by gun fire because of the security of the thing. One just floated by about fifteen yards distant and nearly caused the Old Man to jump off the bridge."* Incidentally, the 'Old Man' was twenty years of age with two years of service; the 'Old Man' of his companion vessel was two years younger. The diarist continued:

[Captain] Brennan was just told he was nearly hit by a mine, so immediately he went to sleep. [Captain] Ledingham, who hates the sea and who gets sick just by looking at it, has been stuffed with food and sea-sick pills and he is all right. [Private] Webb doesn't seem to be worried about anything. I am chewing gum and have one more whisky left, so I am going to have that.

The LCTs beached in the early afternoon of D-Day and work parties set up two forward ammunition dumps behind the leading brigades. *"Everything has been RUSH-URGENT,"* another diarist wrote for the same historian, as units being counterattacked demanded immediate resupply. It was done *"all at forty miles an hour, right into their lines, and under fire. The chaps never turn a hair, and I suggest it takes a particular type of guts to drive a thin-skinned three-ton lorry into Battalion lines."* Especially, he may have added, one loaded with ammunition.

Supplying food and water was also carefully arranged. Soldiers went ashore carrying an emergency ration and another day's ration packed in their two mess tins — rectangular aluminium containers with folding handles that fit into a canvas pouch fastened to shoulder straps or a web belt. Typically the day's ration contained packets of corned beef, biscuits, cheese, chocolate, hard candies, soup and tea. For obvious reasons they were even more basic than the supplies of composite, or compo, rations that followed. These were boxes of rations meant to feed five, ten, or fourteen men for one day. Based on canned food, the several varieties of compo had common staples — cigarettes, biscuits, jam, margarine, fish, tea, soup, candy, toilet paper — and different meal items. The one most commonly remembered, if not fondly, probably was "M and V," or meat

*"Canadian destroyers witnessed the random destructiveness of mines firsthand." HMS **Swift**, her back broken by an Oyster mine, settles to the bottom off SWORD beach. (DND, PMR92-484)*



Motor Torpedo Boats of the 29th Flotilla at high speed in the Channel. These small, uncomfortable boats patrolled off the beachhead for three trying months. (NAC, PA 144580)

and vegetables, an unpalatable stew that became even more so when mixed in a mess tin with the treacle pudding that usually accompanied it. One soldier recalled, *"we used to grab the ones with tinned fruit in preference to the others."* Once unit field kitchens got ashore, compo was supplemented or replaced by fresh rations, which unit cooks prepared and transported to the front lines in large thermos containers, or Hay Boxes. In time, that same soldier continued, *"A lot of cows were shot by 'nervous sentries' and the company butchers did their stuff."*

Unsung engineers also played key roles, taking very heavy casualties on the beaches, and afterwards, while performing a myriad of specialized tasks. Among others, they had to clear mines and booby traps, construct routes — on which military policemen directed traffic — lay minefields, and establish water points. None of their jobs was spectacular but all were important. One war diarist wrote that by *"9 June, things seem[ed] to have settled into a routine. One section was sent to delouse the new Div Hq [Division Headquarters]. Two dozers dug in the Div Hq Ops room. The other dozer cleared rubble and debris and dug graves. Route recces were carried out, and an 88 mm gun was destroyed."*

Some soldiers with more unusual tasks came ashore in the immediate aftermath of the assault landing. Captain Jack Martin was 3rd Division's Historical Officer, whose job was to collect the data on which this and other historical accounts have been based. Captain Orville Fisher was the division's War Artist, with the task of recording the timeless essence of this momentous human endeavour in a form that only a gifted artist can. Naval and air historians and artists did the same. Third Division's psychiatrist, Major Robert Gregory, came ashore while the Germans were counterattacking the Winnipeg and Regina Rifles, and began the complex process of trying to restore minds shattered by the fear and chaos of combat.

While, in retrospect, OVERLORD's success may appear to have been assured, success or failure depended on how effectively the Germans reacted. In the event, the Allies' combined operations triumph mirrored an equally impressive German combined operations disaster. The German army's command indecision was matched by that of its navy and air force and, as the three German military services were barely on civil speaking terms, they failed to coordinate an effective intervention. Notably, of their 300 aircraft within range of the beaches, just a rare few flew towards them on D-Day. Nor did German warships intervene decisively. None of this could be predicted beforehand, of course, and planners took exceptional steps to secure the sky and sea flanks of the soldiers fighting on shore. Enemy aircraft appeared in increasing numbers in the following days, and especially nights, but there were never enough of them to challenge the Allies' overwhelming aerial superiority, which swept them aside. RCAF squadrons participated in every phase of the aerial operations: day and night fighters gained aerial supremacy; Typhoons provided close ground support; Mustangs flew continuous armed reconnaissance; Lancasters and Halifaxes bombed direct and indirect targets; and maritime aircraft patrolled the seas.

While the air force flew its protective shield, the navy guarded the sea lanes from Britain to Normandy. One of the most dangerous threats they faced were the hundreds of mines the Germans had planted in the Channel and around the beachhead which, in the week following D-Day, claimed 33 vessels sunk or damaged. Minesweeping forces were kept extremely busy — Commander Storrs's 31st Flotilla alone swept 93 in one day — but there was little they could do about troublesome new "Oyster" mines that were triggered by the pressure of ships passing overhead. Because they were virtually unsweepable, the Allies learned that the only way to counter Oysters was for ships to crawl along at extremely slow speeds.

Canadian destroyers witnessed the random destructiveness of mines firsthand on the morning of 24 June. *Algonquin* was leading *Sioux* and HMS *Swift* into their anchorage when her First Lieutenant, L.B. Jenson, spotted a mine on the surface. When *Algonquin* pulled out of line to destroy it with machine-gun fire, an Oyster mine exploded under *Swift* sinking the ship in minutes. Fifty-five men died.

At this time, *Algonquin* and *Sioux* had several tasks: to provide gunnery support, hunt submarines, and defend the anchorage. Few of the enemy ships were willing to give battle, most returning to port when challenged, but the destroyers were kept busy, especially after dark. The night of 7/8 June was routinely busy. While anchored in the patrol line, *Algonquin* first

responded to a warning that German midget subs were in the vicinity by securing the ship and running a bottom-line under the hull to ensure that no one had attached mines. That alarm had scarcely passed when all hands again leapt to action stations for an E-boat alarm. Once more no German ships appeared, but sporadic Luftwaffe visits kept everyone alert and triggered almost continuous anti-aircraft barrages.

The MTBs of the RCN's 29th Flotilla had more contact with the enemy while patrolling off the bridgehead to intercept German ships trying to disrupt the invasion. Throughout June, the flotilla followed a patrol cycle that had half the boats off the beachhead while the remainder replenished at Portsmouth. On D-Day afternoon, Lieutenant Commander Tony Law, the flotilla leader, took four boats across the Channel and that night, while patrolling approximately 20 kilometres west of Le Havre, Law got a firm radar contact on six German coastal craft heading towards the beachhead on a minelaying sortie. A typical, fast-paced night encounter ensued. Attacking at a speed of 25 knots, the MTBs closed to within 150 metres of the enemy craft, all the while blazing away with their two-pounder and 20 mm Oerlikon guns. The Germans shot back, and despite the stream of colourful tracers that crossed the night sky, both sides suffered only light damage — in small ship engagements gunners usually fired high — but, most importantly, Law's boats forced the Germans back to Le Havre.

The next night, a decision taken weeks earlier cost Law a golden opportunity. In April, naval staff had received intelligence of a new German midget submarine that could travel at an incredible 30 knots on the surface and submerged. To counter this menace, three MTB flotillas, including the 29th, were stripped of torpedoes and armed with small depth charges. The report proved false, but the 29th did not get their torpedoes back and this bothered them when, during the night of 7 June, they encountered three German destroyers that had slipped out of Le Havre on an offensive mining and strike operation. Warned of the Canadians' approach by their radar and hydrophones, the Germans were alert and, when they sighted recognition signals being flashed off their port bow, they opened fire with their main armament. The signals originated from Law's boats who thought the destroyers were friendly, but any doubts felt by the Canadians immediately evaporated under a hail of enemy tracer fire. With no torpedoes, a bitter Law had no choice but to withdraw under cover of smoke.

Lieutenant C.A. Burk, the officer leading the other division, had a similar experience the next night, but fortune turned it to his advantage. Burk's boats found two destroyers on a mining sortie in the same area. The German vessels *Jaguar* and *T-28* spotted shadows that materialized into Burk's MTBs but, according to their ships' diaries, they thought the boats had fired torpedoes so they turned back to Le Havre. Although they were unaware of it at the time, Burk had scored an important victory with a phantom weapon. After that failed sortie, German naval commanders concluded that destroyer operations against the beachhead were too dangerous, and restricted them to acting as decoys.

Life was Spartan in the small, cramped and crammed MTBs that could carry little beyond their fighting gear. The tiny galley produced sandwiches which rough seas ensured were sodden, and perpetually wet sailors slept on deck when they could. Crews learned that the best respite from pounding seas was to berth in the lee of *"a fat pudgy merchant ship"* or *"a nice soft spot behind a battleship."* Casualties presented particular problems as MTBs carried little more than first-aid kits. Law had four sailors wounded in his first brief encounter and had to rely on medical facilities in larger ships. He first headed for *Scylla*, but its sick bay was full so he found a nearby hospital vessel. It was also filled to capacity and it took him an hour to locate an LST with doctors who could care for his men. MTB conditions contrasted starkly with the comparative luxury of the Canadian destroyers off the bridgehead, which *Sioux*'s officers demonstrated with flair by having a special mess dinner complete with stiff collars, sherry, and formal toasts.

Circumstances precluded such elegance ashore as the Canadians slowly consolidated their positions. At this stage, their principal concern was to link the brigades securely and close gaps on their flanks, so 8 Brigade sideslipped west to positions between and behind the two forward brigades. In their midst, General Montgomery set up his headquarters on the grounds of the ancient chateau at Creully.

Having failed to take Caen straight away on D-Day, he now developed plans for his first reinforcement divisions to pinch it out. The 51st Highland Division was to attack through the airborne bridgehead east of the Orne, while 7th Armoured attacked to the right of the Canadian positions, through Villers-Bocage, and looped around behind Caen from the west. Initially, Montgomery wanted to drop an airborne division behind Caen to link up with the others, but he abandoned the scheme when air commanders objected.

On 10 June, in support of 7th Armoured Division's pincer, 2 Canadian Armoured Brigade was told to mount an attack two days later on the British left flank. Then, in mid-morning on the 11th, the Brigade was told instead to go as soon as possible. The brigade in turn ordered the 1st Hussars to coordinate their attack with The Queen's Own Rifles and go just after midday. Both units soon learned bitterly how ground, Germans, faulty intelligence and untimely haste could combine to thwart any premature attempt to break through the strengthening defences.

Their objective was high ground near the village of Cheux, a few kilometres south of Putot-en-Bessin where the Winnipeg Rifles had been mangled a few days earlier. In late morning, with H-hour a couple of hours off, word went around that the Germans were on the run. Consequently, the plan — *"conceived in sin and born in iniquity,"* in the caustic words of one Queen's Own company commander — was hurried and inadequately prepared. Sergeant Major Charles Martin recalled:

> *We had no information on the enemy. The QORs were being asked to push forward seven miles against unknown opposition. There was none of the usual aerial photographs. There was no opportunity to send out patrols. It really made no sense. So the whole idea of this action seemed a little suspect. . . . There was a fair amount of confusion which did nothing to reassure any of us.*

It was a warm, sunny June day when B Squadron moved out. Riding on the tank decks, D Company riflemen were *"having the time of their lives, smoking, talking, enjoying the trip,"* the lead tank commander, Sergeant Leo Gariepy, told Alexander McKee for his informative book *Caen: Anvil of Victory.* Gariepy was leaning out of his open turret hatch looking for mines when he found himself looking into eyes staring up at him from under German steel helmets. All hell broke loose as German artillery came down, the riflemen jumped off into very close combat, and the tanks roared forward to a slight rise in the fields near the village of Le Mesnil-Patry where six of them blew up within a minute.

The Germans were from 12th SS Division, whose radio intercept detachment was functioning most effectively. As the 1st Hussars assembled in the morning, the enemy eavesdropped, located them and gave their artillery lucrative targets. Warned in advance, the panzer grenadiers were told to let the tanks roll by, isolating them from their infantry which they expected would be following. When they saw the riflemen riding on the tanks they opened fire immediately, and others went after the tanks with anti-tank rockets and limpet bombs.

On the Hussars' left flank, Captain Hans Siegel happened to be a few kilometres south of Le Mesnil, heading for his headquarters to award decorations to some of his men. Hearing firing in the distance, his battalion commander told Siegel to *"clarify the situation and clear it up if necessary."* Taking three tanks with him to investigate, Siegel drove forward and *"during an observation stop [he] realized from the gestures of several grenadiers who pointed in the direction of the enemy in an agitated way with their bare spades that the situation was extremely dangerous."* Siegel fired first from a flank and knocked out the six Shermans and then, with his other tanks, traversed up the line shooting out several more before they were themselves hit and disabled.

The attack was sheer butchery. D Company lost most of the 135 men who started out, and the 1st Hussars lost another 80 killed and wounded along with 37 tanks — more than a third of the regiment's entire casualty list of the war. Siegel's reminiscences continue:

> *As I returned to my own lines with a Canadian Corporal, who had surrendered, there was an unusually impressive scene. Canadian ambulances were driving onto the battlefield. A man waving a large Red Cross flag was standing on both sides of each one. Orderlies carrying stretchers jumped out, the flag bearers kept waving their banners, and for about half an hour wounded and dead were searched out and gathered, as if this*

German POW's (NAC, PA 116509)

POW's of the 12th SS: "Little boys who never had the chance to be the little boys they might have been." (NAC, PA 129130)

were a peacetime exercise. Not a single shot disturbed these events.

Third Canadian and 12th SS Panzer Divisions fought one another to a draw in the first few days of the invasion. Most of the fighters in both were new to combat, but the Germans had a distinct advantage because their officer and NCO cadres had a wealth of operational experience acquired in Poland, France, Greece and Russia. If battle wisdom can only be gained in combat, they had that distinct edge, and there is no denying their youthful soldiers' skill and endurance. They are frequently described as being fanatical, although more appropriate terms are determined and highly motivated, as those Canadians who fought them directly will readily attest. Captain Jack Martin, who sat in on some of their prisoner interrogations, wrote that they were *"beardless youths, most of them only 16 or 17. They stood rigidly at attention in the presence of an officer and answered all questions truthfully and without hesitation but were adamant in their expressed conviction that Germany will never be defeated."* The war correspondent Ralph Allen thought them *"little boys who never had the chance to be the little boys they might have been,"* and it is an abiding shame that their motivation was so abominably warped by the values of a rotten regime.

Many of the Canadians who fought them to a standstill were just as young; the gravestones of many Canadian youngsters fill military cemeteries in Normandy. They were ordinary Canadians, not professional soldiers, who likely wondered more than occasionally about what they had got themselves into. A North Shore platoon commander recounted for his regimental historian how he got to know his men well during watchful nights in slit trenches. He found that:

A burning desire to kill Germans was lacking among the soldiers of the North Shore. I am not suggesting that in battle they were hesitant to carry out their tasks but rather that in battle their thoughts surrounded their more personal lives. When one is standing in a slit trench at two in the morning overlooking a battle area and not knowing whether he will have the opportunity to talk with another human being, confidences of family life, finances, personal behavior, flow freely. The problems of a wife and children back in Jacquet River were more pressing to a soldier than whether he would be alive by noon the next day; the possibilities of what he was going to do at the end of the war were more real to the soldier than what he would be doing a week hence. At two in the morning war takes on an unreal atmosphere . . . one is quite easily mentally transported back to the hill overlooking his home town. The burned-out tanks and carcasses of animals, the bombed-out barns and houses one sees so clearly in the daylight, are obscured from view and thoughts at night.

They were there to do a job and get home, and the survivors learned the bitter profession of arms in the hardest school of all, close combat. Their shrewd intelligence and guts were plainly evident and, in time, they learned about combat as thoroughly as their forbears who captured Vimy Ridge.

Trapped between the two deadly enemies were the innocents among the country folk who were trying, sometimes vainly, to survive. Brigadier James Hargest, a New Zealander observing operations in the bridgehead, detected an ambivalent attitude among the Allies towards the French. That may explain an initial reluctance to make full use of local intelligence; *"mistrust becomes more pronounced as the rank becomes more exalted."* But of the plight of common people, he wrote:

Since we have arrived here the people have been distinctly friendly. They offer us a welcome, they have acted as guides; they are our best informants. Certainly they are not effusive but after their gruelling experiences we should not expect effusiveness from them. They have seen us arrive under fire, which destroyed their villages, their homes, their barns. We have destroyed their cattle, and their crops. Their furniture and effects are in many cases a complete 'write off.' They must be stunned by the misfortune that singled out their villages for destruction and scattered their life savings. But they are still friendly and glad to be free. . . . If one travels along roads one comes on numerous graves of. . . soldiers with small wreaths or just bunches of flowers placed on them — mainly by French women who do this out of love at a time when their own distress must be overpowering.

Harold Beament, 1898-1984
***Disembarking Troops By Landing Craft Tank, Normandy Assault,* n.d.**
Oil on canvas
Canadian War Museum, 10023.

Orville Fisher, 1911-
***D-Day - The Assault,* 1945**
Oil on canvas
Canadian War Museum, 12469.

Jack Nichols, 1921-
***Normandy Scene, Beach in Gold Area,* n.d.**
Oil on canvas
Canadian War Museum, 10523.

Orville Fisher, 1911-
***Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders Advancing in Caen,* 1946**
Oil on canvas
Canadian War Museum, 12618.

CHAPTER IV

JUNE: STALEMATE

"Nightmares to the participants."
(A German soldier)

After driving off the German counterattacks of 7 and 8 June the Canadians remained in an arc, northwest of Caen, for a month. Infantry battalions dug in deep and strung protective wire around themselves. Artillery batteries improved their gun positions and plotted targets so they could respond quickly to fire requests. Armoured regiments absorbed new crews and shot up German positions. Service and suppport units received, stored and delivered supplies dumped on beaches by an endless stream of vessels. Sappers laid and lifted mines, maintained roads, built bridges, bulldozed rubble, opened water points and made wooden crosses. Doctors tended to the sick and wounded. Padres buried the dead.

Few in the bridgehead were ever free from danger; the Germans were too near. The Luftwaffe visited normally secure rear areas nightly, and for weeks front-line troops shot at one another, deliberately or casually, while living in holes in the ground like their fathers and uncles of 1914-18. Continuous artillery and mortar exchanges gave it much the same attritional character as each side tried to wear the other out. This was particularly hard on soldiers arriving as replacements for those killed and wounded, many of whom had scant time to be absorbed into platoons before becoming casualties themselves.

The transition from peacetime exercises to actual operations was also traumatic, making it difficult for units to sustain the cohesion that underlies combat effectiveness. Take, for example, the experience of The Winnipeg Rifles which lost a rifle company on D-Day, two others on 8 June, and about the same number a month later at Carpiquet. It was not the same finely-tuned battalion that had landed in Normandy; it was more like an old axe that had been in the family for three generations having just had four new handles and two new heads. Then there was Sergeant Major Charles Martin's company of The Queen's Own Rifles. Each of its three platoons had its own character: No 7 were the Miners from Geraldton; No 8 the Cabbagetowners from downtown Toronto; No 9 the Farmers from the west end. The company's carefully cultivated cohesion was cruelly torn on D-Day alone when half of its soldiers were killed or wounded and, within a month, just one of four original men remained. Fortunately, a few strong individuals like Martin survived to lead the replacements.

Infantrymen got to know the terrors of patrolling. Some patrols sought information, others went out to capture prisoners, still others to provoke fights, take out snipers, or protect specialists like engineers laying minefields. Each

required its special touch. But, also, soldiers were able to catch up on lost sleep, replace lost equipment, eat more or less regularly, cope with rampant dysentry, and read mail from home. A North Shore subaltern, Lieutenant Bernard McElwaine, left a rare word picture for his unit history of his day-to-day life:

I want to wash, shave, brush my teeth, take my boots off and not have to dig a trench to live in. Surprising, how friendly the earth is. Even two feet down makes you feel better. Had eggs and champagne for breakfast — a real slit trench party. . . if anyone ever tells me army life is healthy I'm going to laugh. . . . Movement by day is not good for one's health, so sleep is the rule. Up before light each day to be ready for visitors. People here of uncertain loyalty, waiting to see which way the cat jumps. Traded bully for eggs. One of the boys got some milk, a real treat. . . . Was out on a sad errand at a little cemetery. Today bought steak and kidneys enough for 20 men for 280 francs. The people have eggs and meat but coffee, soap, cigarettes and drink they rarely see. The Germans cleaned them out. We searched the house of a mayor. His cupboard stuffed full of every kind of luxury and rare foodstuff. . . . Everything dusty. Clouds attract attention. The steak I spoke of was horse, the sergeant says, but I enjoyed it. The plight of the people is woeful. They sleep in groups in barns and old chateaux. They have hordes of children with them. . . . Our ears are getting tuned to off-stage noises. It saves a lot of ducking when you can tell a Jerry from one of ours. The slit trench is usually a humble abode but in a day or two there are compartments in it for kits; bunkers for cooking; a sliding roof; straw-lined beds. Yet from 25 yards out it looks like a grain field. One boy adopted a cow, milked her twice a day, gave her salt, water, changed her pasture regularly. . . . During a recent warm session we were astonished by an uncommon sight. A real live lieutenant-general bouncing around on a tank, red hat and all. He went further forward on the back of a motor cycle. The boys gave him a cheer.

Berlin was a long march from Normandy, and it is likely that McElwaine and his mates had little idea of that general's plans for getting there, but before D-Day General Montgomery had described the battle he intended to fight in the bridgehead. His immediate objective was to build up a lodgement more quickly than the Germans could concentrate their armoured reserves to drive it out. He wanted Second British Army to push forward aggressively in its eastern sector to seize Caen and the open terrain beyond that extends south to Falaise. Here were the flatlands the air force needed for forward airfields. The Caen-Falaise plateau was also the best tank country in Normandy, through which German armoured divisions would have to move to reach the bridgehead. Montgomery wanted to get there first, in strength, so that he could fight the panzer divisions on favourable ground of his own choosing.

He then planned to expand the bridgehead with a series of sequential attacks to gain and retain the initiative. When all was ready, General Bradley's First and Third US Armies were to break through the German defences at the base of the Cotentin Peninsula and slice into Brittany to secure deep-water ports. Then, wheeling on General Dempsey's Caen-Falaise hinge, the Americans would sweep south to the Loire, swing east and drive to the Seine alongside the British and Canadians. Montgomery foresaw reaching the Seine around D+90, or early September.

The Germans' objective was to rope off the bridgehead, split it, then destroy the parts in turn. They achieved the first but failed to accomplish the others, for several reasons. For one, as Charles Stacey observed, their faulty command system created "apoplexy at the centre [which] led to the inevitable paralysis at the periphery." For another, they took Prime Minister Churchill at his word when he told the House of Commons, in announcing OVERLORD, that it was only the first of several landings to come. For weeks Operation FORTITUDE continued to deceive the Germans into believing that the Allies would assault the Pas-de-Calais, an invasion that existed only in their imaginations. Finally, the devastating power of Allied air, naval and artillery fire so destroyed, delayed and demoralized the Germans that they were unable to mount a decisive counter stroke. The Allies were materially helped by their remarkable capacity to read the Germans' encrypted radio traffic. ULTRA, the highly secret interception system, allowed the Allies systematically to plot German operational deployments. One particular intercept, as seemingly innocuous as the distribution list of a

Company Sergeant Major Charles Martin, on the left, preferred patrolling with only two or three men because it allowed him to move quietly close to dangerous German positions. (Martin collection)

Mail had a huge effect on morale: positive if the news from home was good, negative if otherwise. (NA, PA 177596)

cocktail party announcement, offers a glimpse into this ethereal world of signals intelligence. In April, Colonel General Heinz Guderian, the Inspector General of Panzer Troops, planned an inspection visit to his tank divisions dispersed throughout occupied France. His itinerary, routinely broadcast through the air, located all their key formations and drew a convenient, if unwitting, map of the German order of battle. Ongoing ULTRA intercepts then closely tracked troop movements for the watchful eyes of reconnaissance aircraft and fighter bombers, which shot up any worthwhile targets they could find. The most lucrative were these same armoured divisions.

Allied tank-hunters initially flew from British bases, but their limited range prompted the Second Tactical Air Force to move units to Normandy within a few days of D-Day. Flying from the lodgement more than doubled mission range, and allowed the air force to extend its protective umbrella further inland. They needed ample ground for emergency landing strips that could be improved to refuel and rearm aircraft, and finally converted into advanced landing grounds with more or less permanent wing operating and servicing facilities.

RCAF squadrons were among the first to arrive. Specially trained Servicing Commandos began clearing land for a strip near Ste-Croix-sur-Mer, behind Courseulles, on 8 June and two days later Squadron Leader Dal Russel, commanding No 442 Spitfire Squadron, landed with his wingman to check out the facilities. A few hours later Russel, along with Nos 441 and 443 Squadrons in No 144 Wing RCAF, commanded by Group Captain John E. Johnson, flew in to refuel on returning from a long-range sweep inland. The formation moved over permanently a few days later and by the end of June were joined by Nos 126 and 127 RCAF Wings. Their primary task was to fight the Luftwaffe and maintain air superiority over the bridgehead, and ships at sea, and the three claimed 100 enemy aircraft destroyed with another 37 probables or damaged in the month, 26 of them on 28 June when they flew more than 300 sorties.

The RCAF's fighter-bomber Typhoon squadrons, Nos 438, 439 and 440 in No 143 Wing RCAF, also moved into the bridgehead and on 14 June responded to an army ground support request against infantry and guns by dropping 30 bombs on the target. Following them were the reconnaissance squadrons, Nos 400, 414 and 430, in No 39 Wing RCAF. While the Luftwaffe gradually became more active, the main danger pilots faced was from low-altitude enemy flak-gunners, and also their Allied counterparts who had evidently slept through their aircraft recognition lectures. Untypical only in the laconic manner in which a unit diarist recorded it, was an incident where *"One enemy plane flew over at 1900 hours and was being engaged by six Spitfires when our AA [anti aircraft] opened up and effectively broke up the Spitfire attack."*

At the end of June, 2nd Tactical Air Force operated 11 airfields in the bridgehead, handling 35 fighter, fighter-bomber, and reconnaissance squadrons, but by then they had planned to have 27 airfields functioning for 81 squadrons. Lack of space in the crowded lodgement became a serious problem. A loaded fighter bomber needed over a kilometre of runway on take-off and landing, and more open land at either end. Laid out east to west in order to avoid both German and their own anti-aircraft gunners at sea, and because of the prevailing winds, the rough landing strips had to compete for limited bridgehead space with 20 army divisions and countless headquarters. Airspace was also crowded and becoming unsafe as air controllers tried to accommodate a continuous flow of fighter, transport, observation, and liaison aircraft. Until Second British Army secured the Caen-Falaise plateau for more airfields, the tactical air forces were unable to achieve their full potential.

Nonetheless, despite restrictions, the air force held the ring, with fighters shooting on sight during their freewheeling armed reconnaissance missions. Panzer Lehr Division's experience was typical. Its commander, General Fritz Bayerlein, received orders to move his division, possibly the best equipped of all panzer formations, to the front in the early afternoon of D-Day. Bayerlein asked to delay his move until dark, but he was ordered to move in daylight regardless. The result, a German soldier wrote, was that *"The aircraft swarming in the almost clear sky spotted the columns, assaulted, pulled off and returned or called for reinforcement. Soon black smoke-mushrooms of burning vehicles marked the routes for new waves of aircraft. Even today, [he added], many years*

The RCAF's No 412 Squadron in the bridgehead. On 24 July four of its Spitfires engaged more than forty enemy aircraft and downed seven of them without a loss. (NAC, PL 30268)

RCAF ground crews consistently maintained a remarkable eighty per cent serviceability rate in the field. (NAC, PL 30262)

Powerful rocket-firing Typhoons on steel matting used for airfields constructed in the beachhead. (NAC, PL 42759)

later, the memories of this march cause nightmares to the participants."

General Bayerlein's car was one of those hit, disabling him for several key hours. Another important victim was General Geyr von Schweppenburg who was wounded on 11 June when ULTRA identified the location of his Panzer Group West Headquarters, which aircraft then put out of commission. Air attacks paralysed those below, and one soldier looking up at the endless stream of fearsome machines trying to kill him cautioned:

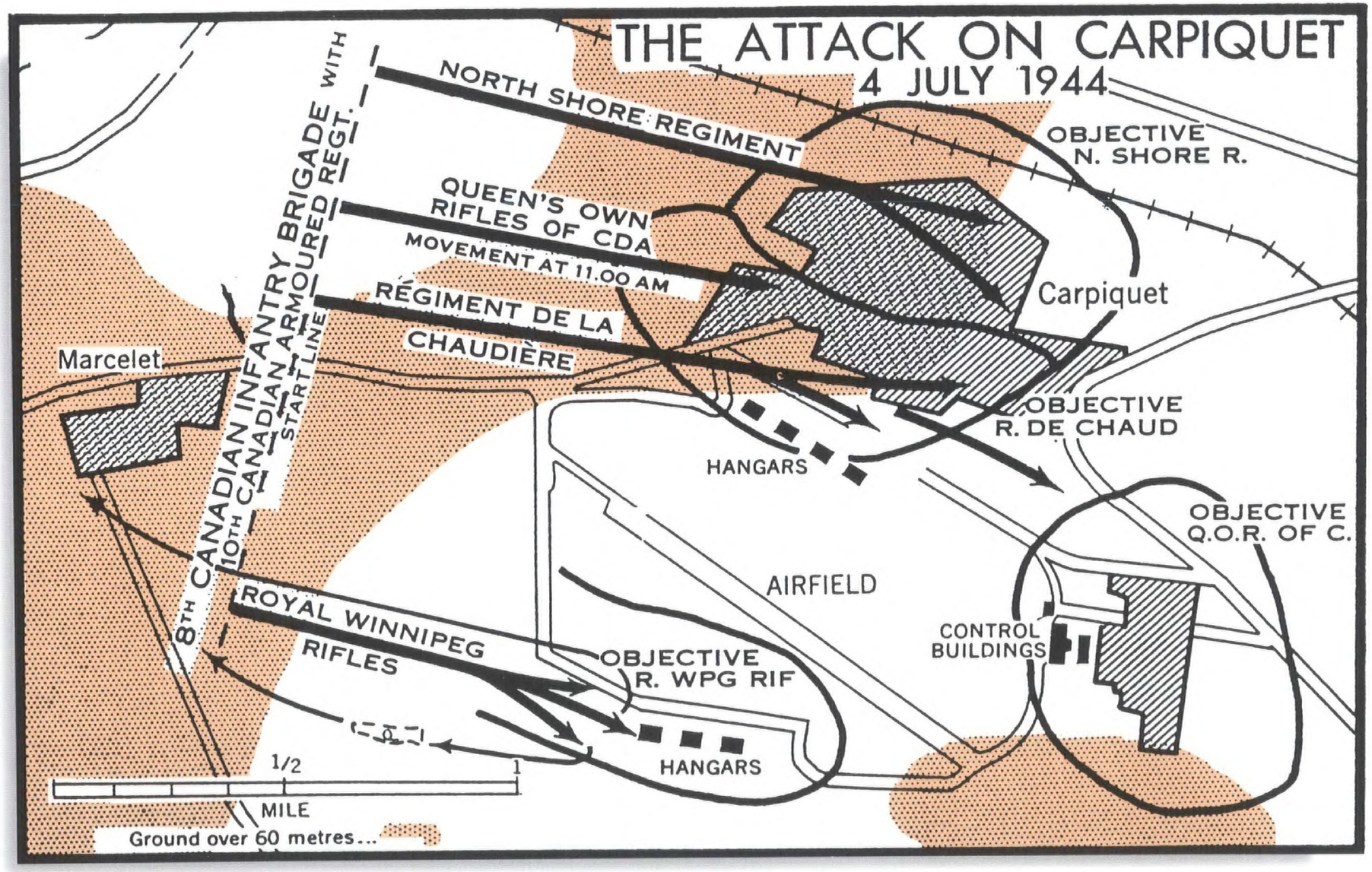
> *Unless a man has been through these fighter-bomber attacks he cannot know what the invasion meant. You lie there, helpless, in a roadside ditch, in a furrow on a field, or under a hedge, pressed into the ground, your face in the dirt — and then it comes toward you, roaring. . . . Then the bird has gone. But it comes back. Twice. Three times. Not until they've wiped out everything do they leave. Until then you are helpless. Like a man facing a firing-squad. Even if you survive it is no more than a temporary reprieve. Ten such attacks in succession are a real foretaste of hell.*

Others might have reserved the deeper recesses of hell for naval gunnery, whose devastating power and accuracy caused 12th SS Division's operations officer to acknowledge that his "*counterattack [at Buron on 7 June]. . . was brought to a standstill mainly by the artillery of the invasion fleet. Because of this concentrated fire, such as [he] had never seen before on any battlefield, both officers and men became demoralised and were forced to dig in.*" A week later naval guns hit his divisional command post, their flat trajectory shells giving no warning, and killed the Commander, General Fritz Witt. Colonel Kurt Meyer assumed command.

It was this unrelenting deluge of lethal high explosives shielding the bridgehead that led German field commanders to propose withdrawing to the Seine, beyond range of the guns. Unsurprisingly, Hitler adamantly refused to leave, bitterly criticized those who suggested doing so, and ordered his beleaguered soldiers to hold at all costs. It doomed the Germans but also condemned the Allies to three months of bitter fighting in the fields and farmyards of Normandy.

Two factors partially balanced the Allies' overwhelming air and naval power: German fighting skills, and the excellent defensive terrain. Overlooking the British-Canadian sector was an imposing east-west ridge a few kilometres south of Caen. In the centre, just beyond Carpiquet airport, is Point 112 (signifying a spot height of 112 metres) which dominates the ground to the north. The Germans appreciated the ridge's vital significance and applied their remarkable battlefield flexibility to control it. Observers all along the crest dominated the low ground the Canadians occupied, and they brought down artillery and mortar fire on any head that appeared. Curiously, Allied planners seem to have paid little attention to its tactical importance, possibly because of an unfortunate tendency to focus more intensely on landing in Normandy than moving out of it. But move beyond the high ground they must, and for the next several weeks the balance of the Normandy fighting, Montgomery's familiar "dog-fight," hung on which side was able to mass sufficient force to break the stalemate.

Having failed to secure Caen and the vital high ground with an immediate frontal assault on D-Day, or by enveloping it a few days later, Montgomery had to pause and wait for more fighting troops before attacking in strength. In a little more than a week the Allied reinforcement stream had worked wonders, putting ashore half a million men with more than 75,000 vehicles and tons of stores. Nineteen RCN corvettes were among the 200 vessels that shepherded the endless flow of convoys across the Channel in a masterful organizational feat. English ports west of Southhampton fed the American sector, those to the east the British-Canadian sector, and they shared Southhampton itself. Ships followed tight sailing schedules, and traffic controllers off Normandy directed them to their correct anchorages and return routes. The navy so dominated the seaward flanks that the corvette crews met few Germans so, to find action, HMCS *Mayflower* — "Daisy Mae" to her sailors — moved inshore on 8 June and cheekily offered its single 4-inch gun to assist the USS *Arkansas*' twelve 12-inch and sixteen 5-inch guns in its bombardment behind OMAHA beach. With little sense of occasion, the battleship's crew "coldly informed her that that there were no targets within her range." *Mayflower*'s spirit may have outranged her guns, but it was the offer that mattered, and several days later HMCS


THE ATTACK ON CARPIQUET
4 JULY 1944
NORTH SHORE REGIMENT
OBJECTIVE
N. SHORE R.
QUEEN'S OWN
RIFLES OF CDA
MOVEMENT AT 11.00 AM
RÉGIMENT DE LA
CHAUDIÈRE
Carpiquet
Marcelet
8TH CANADIAN INFANTRY BRIGADE WITH
10TH CANADIAN ARMOURED REGT.
START LINE
OBJECTIVE
R. DE CHAUD
HANGARS
OBJECTIVE
Q.O.R. OF C.
AIRFIELD
ROYAL WINNIPEG
RIFLES
OBJECTIVE
R. WPG RIF
CONTROL
BUILDINGS
HANGARS
1/2
1
MILE
Ground over 60 metres...

Alberni contributed directly by shooting down a German bomber.

General Montgomery needed a continuing flow of fresh divisions, tanks and ammunition for his offensive plans, but these were badly skewed when an unexpected storm struck the Channel on 19 June and severely disrupted reinforcement schedules. For 36 hours a strong northeast gale built up destructive three-metre waves that pounded the assault beaches. Unloading stopped and ships at sea were hit hard, more than 800 landing craft being forced aground. The two MULBERRIES protected some vessels, but they were themselves damaged so badly that one had to be abandoned and its parts cannibalized to repair the other. The five-day disruption delayed the unloading of an estimated 20,000 vehicles and more than 100,000 tons of supplies, including badly needed artillery ammunition.

It might have been worse. Readers may recall that 19 June was in the middle of the last favourable landing period. Had Eisenhower postponed D-Day on 5 June, the Allies would have been caught in the storm, and it was fortunate that troops were not coming ashore when the "Great Gale" struck.

The same bad weather grounded aircraft, giving the Germans time to reinforce their Normandy defences with II SS Panzer Corps (9th and 10th SS Panzer Divisions), coming from the eastern front, 1st SS Panzer Division from its base near Paris, and 2nd SS from southern France. The Germans intended to mass their tanks for a decisive counter stroke in the Caen sector at the same time that Montgomery was readying his next attempt to break through the German cordon. The result, Carlo D'Este has written in his masterful account, *Decision in Normandy*, was that "In late June the struggle for dominance of the Caen bridgehead was much like that of two wrestlers tussling for position, neither of whom was yet capable of defeating the other."

Montgomery forestalled the German counter-offensive with his own, Operation EPSOM, that began on 26 June. Intending to outflank Caen from the west and secure the Caen-Falaise plateau, the British VIII Corps managed to force a bridgehead over the Odon River but could only get to the base of Point 112 before losing momentum in an appalling bloodbath. On EPSOM's immediate left flank, 3rd Canadian Division watched it stall, and waited until General Dempsey ordered it to attack to secure Carpiquet town and airport.

Carpiquet had beckoned the Canadians since D-Day: so close yet so unreachable. A glance at the map graphically illustrates how little the front had changed since 7 June. Caen, Authie, Buron and the Abbaye d'Ardenne formed the German front lines north and east, leaving the only approach from the west through the wide-open airport. Scattered through the area were concrete and steel bunkers manned by a battalion of panzer grenadiers in the hangars and airfield control buildings, and another company in the village of Carpiquet. Several 88s and more than 20 tanks were either dug in or sited for immediate counterattack, while the flat airfield was dominated by Point 112 and overlooked by the Abbaye d'Ardenne. Observers in both could readily direct devastating artillery and mortar fire onto the open fields and 88 gunners had perfectly open killing grounds.

Towards the end of June 12th SS Headquarters, nearby in the Caen suburb of Venoix, reported an increasing Canadian interest in the airport's western perimeter, detecting *"repeated probes of the front with reconnaissance patrols."* Lieutenant Lorenzo Bergeron of The Regina Rifles conducted one of these on 30 June, and the detailed description that he gave to 3rd Division's Historical Officer gives a vivid sense of that most dangerous of activities. Bergeron had a demanding task: *"to determine in what strength [Carpiquet airfield] was held, the nature of its defences, and the state of its landing field."* He went forward in the afternoon to obtain information about the defences from a British battalion holding the line, and then took his sergeant and three men at last light to an observation post from which they could see the airfield. They spotted German troops and bunkers in several locations, but what especially concerned them was the complete lack of cover. The open runways and low grass left Bergeron *"not at all confident of success, but [he] decided nonetheless to set out between the enemy-held sheds to his left and front."*

Just before midnight the five patrollers, faces blackened, crawled from cover in enough summer light to read their watches. Regularly they froze as flares went up, and they could

"OVERLORD presented managers with an unprecedented challenge, and they planned in excruciating detail the unloading "of men . . . (DND, PMR 93-402)

. . . and vehicles . . . (NAC, PA 138182)

. . . and yet more. (DND, PMR 93-406)

hear human sounds close by on either side. On reaching the runway, *"Two men lay on the near edge, to give covering fire while another crossed it; he then turned to give covering fire from his side while the others crossed."* The runway was undamaged, and they spotted no mines, contrary to earlier reports of French civilians, and from indiscriminate firing, Bergeron concluded *"that the enemy appear[ed] often to put out flares and fire weapons almost at random, in the hope either of catching a patrol unaware, or frightening an imagined patrol into giving its position away."*

Still on their bellies, and stopping frequently to take compass bearings on mortar flashes to fix their positions, they reached the far side of the airfield where a large gun thought to be sited apparently had been moved. They had now crawled about two kilometres and with daylight a little more than an hour away they returned, dangerously, by the same route; *"easily recognizable by the flattened grass over which they had crawled."* Just as they approached their start point a British mortar flare lit them up. Luckily no one shot, and five hours of nerve-wracking tension had passed. Bergeron was not fazed; he volunteered to form and lead a battalion scout platoon.

The active Canadian patrolling caused 12th SS's staff to conclude that *"the enemy was planning an attack to capture the Carpiquet airfield."* The divisional operations officer warned that, *"If such an attack should happen to succeed, the front north of Caen would be threatened from the rear, and could no longer be held."* He promptly despatched three more tanks to the hangars on the south side of the field and an 88 gun to cover the Caen-Bayeux road.

General Keller gave 8 Brigade the task of taking Carpiquet. Besides his own three battalions, Brigadier Blackader had the tanks of The Fort Garry Horse and squadrons of flails and flamethrowers, as well as The Winnipeg Rifles under command to secure three hangars on high ground to the south side of the airport. In addition, a squadron of Sherbrooke tanks was to stage a diversion on the north side to distract German gunners.

Eight Brigade's set-piece, or deliberate, attack displayed classic Second World War British/Canadian tactical doctrine. Across the almost two-kilometre front Blackader deployed the North Shores forward left, the Chaudières forward right, and the Queen's Own back in reserve (aside from the Winnipegs' flank role). Each of the assault battalions spread out its companies in an open formation, with two companies up and two back. Companies deployed like an inverted triangle with two platoons up and one back, and platoons spread their three sections of eight men similarly. With intervals between men, and larger ones between platoons and companies, a battalion covered a front of perhaps a kilometre.

Infantrymen had to walk two kilometres from their start line to their objectives, over absolutely flat ground devoid of cover, and were supported by the largest fire plan the Canadians had had since D-Day. It called on the guns from twelve field, eight medium and one heavy regiments; a company of heavy mortars and another of medium machine-guns; the nine 16-inch guns of HMS Rodney; and air support including two rocket-equipped Typhoon squadrons. The plan was for the guns to lay down a rolling carpet of high explosives 400 metres deep across the two-kilometre front, lifting one hundred metres every three minutes in front of the advancing infantry.

The attack began badly. Once more 12th SS's radio intercept detachment noticed that *"the enemy tank voice radio traffic began to increase. The type of message transmitted indicated assembly for an attack." "Judging by our previous experience,"* the divisional staff concluded, *"we anticipated the attack would start at 0700 hours."* They accurately reckoned the assembly area to be in the wood near the town of Marcelet, which they promptly shelled. German and Canadian accounts differ on the timing of this shelling, but it seems likely that it was this concentration that caused the Fort Garry war diarist to comment that:

> Probably never before had the Regiment taken such punishment from enemy mortars, artillery and rocket projection. On top of these lethal weapons, the Germans employed 88 mm guns firing H.E. airbursts. This type of weapon [is] particularly disliked since [with] high muzzle velocity, no warning sound is given.

H-hour was at 0500 when the infantry crossed their start line. One problem with the timed barrage that preceded them was that it left a predictable signature as it moved inexorably on in measured steps. By this stage of the war the Germans well knew that they would find

*Some of the blockships that were sunk to form the MULBERRY artificial harbour breakwater, as viewed from HMCS **Prince David**. German intelligence was misled when their aircraft reported sinking Allied ships that were actually those sunk deliberately to form the breakwater. (DND, PMR 93-410)*

*The Canadian corvette HMCS **Baddeck** in mid-Channel. These veterans of the Battle of the Atlantic escorted scores of build-up convoys down the Spout to Normandy. (NAC, PA 108159)*

infantry following, so they dropped their own defensive fire immediately behind the lifts to catch them in the open, as the Chaudières' unit history describes:

> Everything went according to plan until the moment when the Germans began to lay a barrage 100 yards behind our barrage in order to make us believe that our shells were falling short and so cripple the advance. Our barrage continued to go forward, but we were held back by the enemy's barrage, which became more intense.

Major Clint Gammon, commanding the North Shores' D Company had a similar experience. As he told his regimental historian,

> *At zero hour the whole horizon in a semi-circle behind us became a blaze when the artillery opened up. The shells screamed overhead and landed perfectly, about 200 yards out in front of us. We were to stay ten minutes on our line and then the artillery was to lift one hundred yards a minute. After assuring myself that our barrage was falling in the proper range. . . . shells began falling in my area. By that time the grain began smoking and burning. . . . the enemy counter-barrage was really coming down and a lot of my men were dead or wounded. It looked for a while as if we would never get off the start line. Finally our barrage lifted and we moved with it."*

Behind them, B Company took the brunt of the shelling. When soldiers had filed forward earlier on their way to the start line, they had greeted Father Hickey who saw them on their way: *"'Oh, it's you Father, God bless you.' 'Best of luck to you Father.' 'We don't care Father, we're well prepared.'"* Hickey found them an hour or so later and, he wrote, *"Everywhere men lay dead or dying. I anointed about thirty right there."* The rest moved through the fire, smoke and dust on sheer guts and determination to the edge of Carpiquet village. Captain W.B. Nixon, one of their artillery forward observation officers, kept a daily log whose casual words belie the chaos of the scene.

> *At 0500 hours went forward with the North Shore Regiment under barrage. The enemy laid down counter fire with mortars and guns using smoke and HE. Infantry casualties amounted to approximately forty per cent. Very few prisoners taken. Reached objective at 0800 hours. Layed [sic] on DF-SOS [defensive fire-emergency] task for "C" Company. Enemy commenced mortar fire on Carpiquet at approximately 0900 hrs. Occupied OP [observation post], town empty, even of dead, but very battered. Enemy mortar fire increased during day, six-barrelled rocket guns being used. Fire of this weapon, the 'Nebelwerfer,' very shattering to nerves and morale but did not cause many casualties.*

Although there were only about 50 panzer grenadiers in Carpiquet village, their strongpoints were all but immune to artillery fire and the Chaudières and North Shores bypassed them to get into town, while tanks and flamethrowers took on the bunkers. By noon the Queen's Own had just begun the last phase of the attack, against the airport control buildings at the far end of the field, when they were told to stop. The Winnipegs on the other side of the airfield were in severe difficulty.

The Winnipegs were orphans in this encounter. Tacked on to the main assault, and operating well off the main axis, they were on their own, beyond the limits of the fire plan. The Fort Garry's B Squadron was to support them with fire, but its primary task, as the regimental reserve, was to wait for the Queen's Own. The well-positioned Germans around the three hangars — the Winnipegs' objectives — had call on 88s and Panther tanks, and took the battalion under severe mortar fire even before it began its long approach march through the fields of metre-high wheat that absorbed some of the shrapnel. Leading platoons reached the hangars, but Germans they had bypassed shot them from behind and then shot out two Fort Garry tanks that moved up to assist. Major Lockie Fulton's D Company retained a precarious hold on the hangars, but had to withdraw with the rest of the battalion after dark. The Queen's Own dug in around the airfield runway.

As night fell, 8 Brigade's three battalions were fighting hard against severe pressure in Carpiquet and around the north end of the airfield. The Germans were alarmed because the Canadians seriously threatened their Authie-Buron flank. Earlier in the day they had attempted to counterattack with a battalion, but were disrupted, probably by Major Sydney Radley-Walters' bold diversionary sweep in front of them with his squadron of Sherbrooke tanks. Twelfth SS had few infantry left for another counterattack, so they tried to dislodge the

Carpiquet bunker. "It was later found that . . . the whole structure [was] a gigantic armed respirator." (NAC, PA 116513)

Canadians with heavy weapons. As the division's operations officer described, these were not to be taken lightly.

For the defence of the city of Caen, mortar launcher racks had been installed at numerous places, primarily at railway bridges and underpasses. They had, for the most part, been equipped with 50 kg mortars. These were filled with high explosive charges in some cases and, in others, with flamethrower fuel. These launcher racks were. . . . brought up into positions from where they could bombard Carpiquet.

These infernal gadgets inflicted some of the almost 400 casualties that the Canadians suffered getting into and holding Carpiquet, and over the next three days the Germans mounted one counterattack after another that the Canadians just as regularly threw back. The medium machine-guns of the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa were particularly effective in blunting several German attacks that had overrun forward infantry positions. Neither side expected nor received quarter. Major Steven Lett of the Queen's Own described how one strongpoint had to be handled. After several tank and infantry attempts failed, Crocodile flamethrower tanks sprayed flaming fuel at them. It only blackened the surface.

The [sappers] now placed Gen Wades on its roof. (These are demolition charges weighing 25 lbs). Still penetration was not achieved. Others attempted to blow the steel doors set within the entrances, but here the approach was covered by fire from a sliding panel in the wall through which weapons could be pointed. Several men were killed in this attempt. It was then discovered that two small ventilators protruded through the ground above the roof. Smoke blown down these apertures produced no results. (It was later found that the interior was fitted with an anti-gas device which made the whole structure in effect a gigantic armed respirator.) Next the cover was pried off one ventilator and a grenade dropped down, the explosion blowing away the protective steel plate at its lower end. Petrol was then liberally poured down into the room below and this was followed after an interval by a second grenade.

Father Hickey possibly had Carpiquet in mind when he wrote that if his battered crucifix could speak, *"it could tell of things my pen won't write — better that it can't, for it might speak of things a war chaplain tries to forget, things he may hold in his memory, but will carry down with him unspoken to his grave."*

While 8 Brigade was bitterly contesting Carpiquet, the rest of 3rd Division was preparing Operation CHARNWOOD, whose purpose was to take Caen and gain bridgeheads over the Orne River. Spread in an arc around Caen's northern outskirts, 3rd and 59th British Divisions were to attack first, then 3rd Canadian would assault from its by now well-worn slit trenches around Les Buissons. General Keller's plan was in three phases. First, 9 Brigade and the Sherbrookes would take the much-contested villages immediately in front: Gruchy, Buron, Authie, Franqueville. Then 7 Brigade and the 1st Hussars were to pass through and secure Cussy and the Abbaye d'Ardenne. Finally, 8 Brigade would complete its Carpiquet mission by seizing the control tower and hangars at the airfield's southern edge.

The three divisions struck on a curving front of 15 kilometres in the early morning of 8 July, the two British formations going first to anchor the Canadians' left flank, and all behind massive fire support: tanks and assorted other specialized armoured vehicles; divisional, corps and army artillery weapons; battleship, monitor and cruiser guns; and tactical aircraft. Further, in the evening before the assault, RAF Bomber Command air crews, including many Canadians, flew over in two waves to drop their bomb loads on Caen.

Unfortunately the Germans were not in the city but in positions around the northern outskirts that were too close to the Canadian positions to be bombed safely. Protected by several metres of protective cover, 12th SS Division Headquarters was not seriously affected in the northern suburbs, and although bombs disabled several tanks and vehicles, most were quickly put back in running order. The major tactical effect of the bombing was to dump rubble into the streets, restricting movement, but the positive effect was on morale. This awesome display of destructive power undoubtedly boosted the spirits of those watching; and destroyed the morale of at least some defenders, dampened that of others, and wearied them all. The greatest tragedy was the suffering inflicted on the French inhabitants who lost their families, their homes and their city.

Men of the Highland Light Infantry take a break. (NAC, PA 131370)

Lieutenant Colonel F.M. Griffiths briefs his officers on their tasks before "Bloody Buron." (NAC, PA 116520)

Despite its power, heavy bombing could not defeat the Germans by itself. The six-hour gap between the end of the bombing and the morning's assault gave the Germans time to recover, as best they might in their severely battered circumstances, and they got ready to meet the attack they knew was coming. The inevitable result was a charnel house of mutual slaughter in the once pastoral farm fields and apple orchards that young Canadians and Germans had been contesting for weeks. Combat ended as it usually did, tank against tank, with small groups of infantrymen struggling to survive and make sense of the noise, smells, smoke, dirt, blood and sheer terror of the battlefield.

The Highland Light Infantry was on the left of 9 Brigade's attack in this, its first major battle, which a unit account memorializes as *Bloody Buron.* Platoons were all very familiar with the terrain, having looked through rifle sights across the wheat-covered fields at their objectives for the past month. Soldiers watched the high explosives of their supporting guns pulverize Buron and other villages, but had few illusions that they would walk into them unopposed. Possibly the fire might keep German heads down long enough for platoons to cross the open ground, but they couldn't count on it. A prisoner taken a few days before had described the German positions they had to take.

> *Since taking up positions . . . they had been engaged in digging weapon slits connected by communication trenches and camouflaging them with grain. In some cases the walls of the slits had been revetted with branches. Concertina wire was erected along the front of the platoon position and linked up with the wire behind the platoon position. Between the wire and the trenches were sown anti-personnel mines. In front of the wires there was a trip wire attached to egg grenades and a flare device which consisted of a pipe fixed in the ground with a key attached to the trip wire. When the trip wire is disturbed, the key is withdrawn and the flare goes up.*

The Highlanders likely agreed with a Sherbrooke tanker who wrote, *"Heavy arty preparation opened Op CHARNWOOD, but [while] arty can shake the Hitler Youth. . . it cannot stop them killing till they're dead."* If soldiers needed further reminder of what was in store, the battalion was heavily shelled before starting out, and became concerned that the fire would hit the dumps of mines they had just lifted to clear their attack routes.

The battalion's objective was Buron. The Germans held their direct fire until platoons reached an anti-tank ditch five metres wide and four deep where they opened up at short range, inflicting heavy casualties. Short of men on the ground, the Germans relied on mutually supporting machine-guns that crisscrossed their front with interlocking fire, and had bolstered their own weapons with Bren guns they had captured in the first battle for Buron a month earlier. Once the Highlanders cleared the ditch, the Germans brought down their own defensive mortars killing more men, but all four companies fought their way into Buron followed closely by a Royal Artillery battery of self-propelled anti-tank guns. Fortunately they were in place when the Germans counterattacked. One of the British guns *"knocked out a number of Panthers as they emerged from behind a stone wall, firing its last round as it itself was in flames, after which its detachment leapt from the vehicle."* The battery lost seven guns but got twice as many German tanks.

The Sherbrooke tanks supported the Highlanders as they fought their way into Buron. Major Radley-Walters' terse after-action report describes how he had:

> *No 1 Troop supporting "D" Company on the right, No 2 on the left with "B" Company. Squadron Headquarters moved centre rear in front of No 4 Troop which was in reserve. Flails remained on the start line until needed. As the platoons and tanks opened up in the fields facing Buron, No 1 Troop hit a minefield which disabled three of them, including their 17-pounder Firefly. Immobilized, they were then systematically destroyed by 88 mm anti-tank guns firing from positions approximately one and one-half miles southwest. The remaining tank was extricated by the flails and joined Squadron headquarters. No 4 Troop was called to replace No 1 Troop.*

On the left, No 2 Troop quickly lost two of its tanks to short-range anti-tank weapons and the crew of another to mortars: *"An 88 mm anti-tank gun in position southeast of Buron knocked out the remaining tank [Firefly]. Squadron Hq then moved to support this flank until the infantry moved through."* They made slow

The Sherbrooke Fusiliers used Flail tanks like these to clear trenches outside Buron. Possibly not since the days of William the Conqueror had chains been used as offensive weapons. (NAC, PA 129035)

Breakfast on the day after the battle. The evident weariness speaks for itself. (NAC, PA 131399)

progress because *"shelling, MG, mortar and small calibre anti-tank fire was constant and heavy."* Sappers helped get the tanks across the minefield and anti-tank ditch, and flails came up to clear the Germans out of their trenches around Buron. When the remnants of the squadron reached an orchard on the western side of town, several German tanks counterattacked: *"However by 1400 hours the squadron, which consisted of four tanks, was on the high ground without infantry support. It beat off the counterattacks for three hours until the ground was consolidated by the infantry."* Of their 11 tank casualties, squadron fitters recovered seven and they reckoned they had accounted for three Mark IV's, two 88s, a self-propelled 75 and a smaller anti-tank gun, seven machine-guns and uncounted infantry.

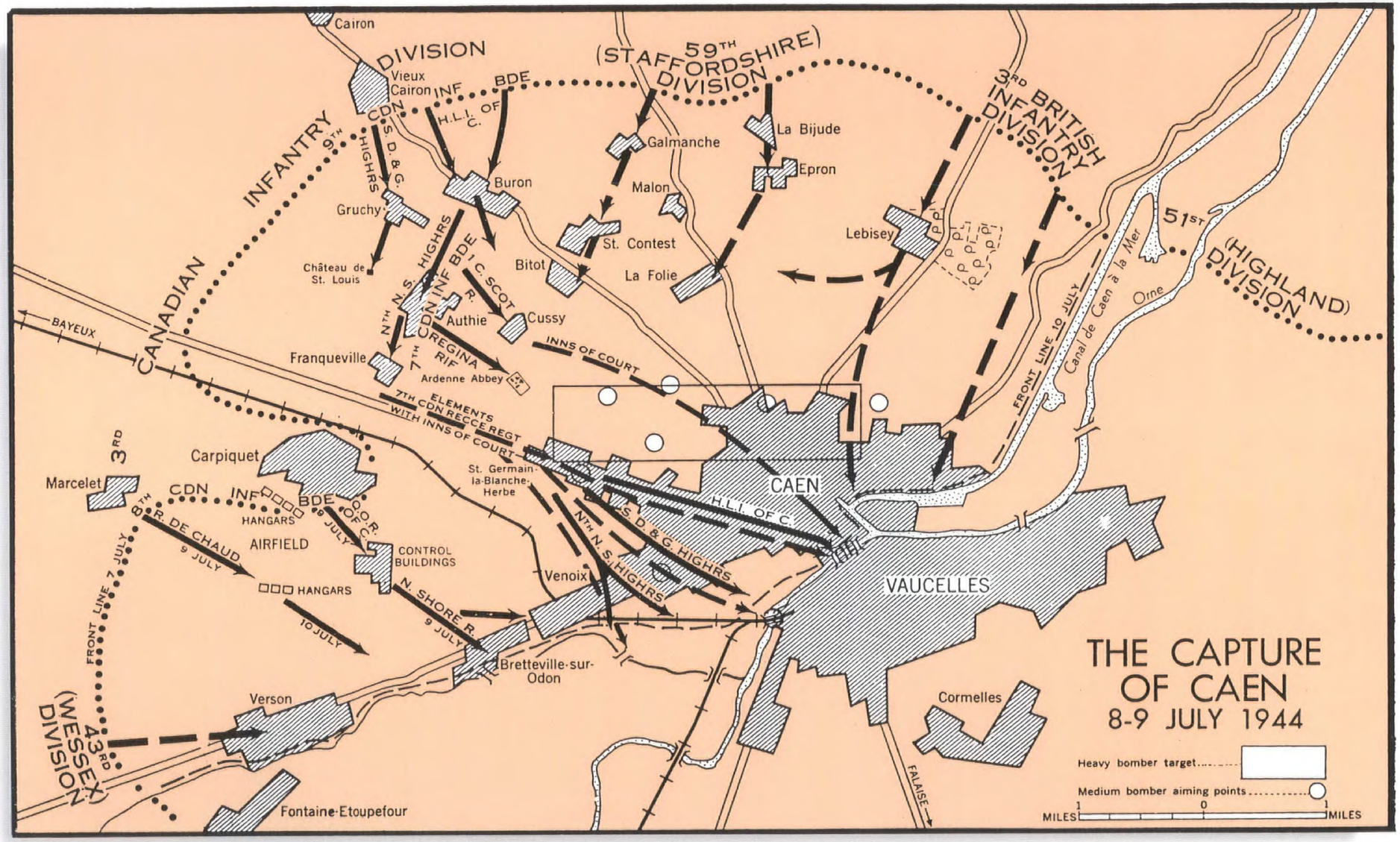
On 9 Brigade's right, The Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders, with the Sherbrooke's B Squadron, had as difficult a fight. Held up on reaching Gruchy, they were ably assisted by a gallant intervention by a detachment of bren gun carriers from the divisional reconnaissance regiment, the 17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars. Seeing the Glens in difficulty, the lightly armed carriers roared into the village, taking the defenders by surprise with their boldness. The North Novas fought their way back into Authie, which they had last seen a month earlier. In the early evening 7 Brigade passed through the Highlanders, the Canadian Scottish on the left making for Cussy, the Reginas for the Abbaye d'Ardenne. The Germans wreaked their usual bloody havoc on both battalions, but suffered as much. That evening, artillery observers of 13th Field Regiment directed an attack by the RCAF's 438 Squadron. The Typhoons roared down on the Château-de-Fontaine from south to north in a 60-degree dive to deposit their bombs on troops and transport. The gunners reported that *"the damage to the enemy was colossal."*

By evening, relentless pressure had reduced 12th SS's fighting infantry strength to not much more than a couple of battalions. Its operations officer noted with some considerable understatement that *"the situation was extremely serious."* The battered survivors were practically surrounded, and 25th SS Regiment's headquarters in the Abbaye was directly threatened. The divisional commander, Meyer, went there to see for himself and, on returning to his own headquarters, requested permission to withdraw across the Orne, leaving *"no doubt that Caen could not be held with the remnants of the division."* He continued, *"Corps rejected the proposal. The order had been given that the city must be held at all costs."* Hitler's no-withdrawal orders notwithstanding, 12th SS had to move, and Meyer pulled back his few remaining men to Caen's outskirts, abandoned the Abbaye at midnight, and sent the division's heavy weapons across the Orne when permission to pull back eventually arrived a few hours later.

During the night Major Lockie Fulton was ordered to take his company of Winnipeg Riflemen and capture the Abbaye. Assuming the Germans were still holding it, Fulton was understandably taken aback: a company to take an objective that had successfully withstood everything that had been thrown at it for a month? The Regina Rifles and the Canadian Scottish were fighting around the Abbaye's northern walls, so Fulton decided to scout the western approach personally. It was deceptively quiet as he approached one of the Abbaye's massive gates, and he could think of nothing else than to push it open. A Panther tank immediately to his right startled him to the core before he realized that it had been abandoned, as had that part of the Abbaye itself. Fulton retraced his steps and reported that he had secured the Abbaye's courtyard.

Next morning, 9 July, the Glens and a squadron of Sherbrooke tanks began moving into Caen itself. Mines, rubble, devastating fire from well-sited 88s, and small German detachments continually delayed them, but they pushed on past the prison and hospital to the city centre and the racetrack by the Orne, where the battalion consolidated. Its commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel G.H. Christiansen, reported that:

> *In Caen the Canadian troops saw for the first time a populace which welcomed them heartily. Here too the first authentic members of the Resistance Movement were encountered. During the brisk engagements with snipers, civilians invariably made their appearance out of cellars at the first lull, bringing roses and wine to the troops. The roses were gratefully accepted, but the drinking of wine during the action had been strictly forbidden and no soldier broke that rule.*


THE CAPTURE OF CAEN
8-9 JULY 1944
Heavy bomber target
Medium bomber aiming points
MILES
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MILES
CANADIAN INFANTRY DIVISION
59TH (STAFFORDSHIRE) DIVISION
3RD BRITISH INFANTRY DIVISION
51ST (HIGHLAND) DIVISION
43RD (WESSEX) DIVISION
CAEN
VAUCELLES
Cairon
Vieux Cairon
Buron
Gruchy
Château de St. Louis
Franqueville
Authie
Cussy
Ardenne Abbey
Bitot
St. Contest
Galmanche
Malon
La Folie
La Bijude
Epron
Lebisey
Carpiquet
Marcelet
AIRFIELD
HANGARS
CONTROL BUILDINGS
Venoix
St. Germain-la-Blanche-Herbe
Bretteville-sur-Odon
Verson
Fontaine-Etoupefour
Cormelles
BAYEUX
FALAISE
Orne
Canal de Caen à la Mer
FRONT LINE 10 JULY
FRONT LINE 7 JULY
CDN INF BDE
H.L.I. OF C.
S. D. & G. HIGHRS
N.S. HIGHRS
C. SCOT R.
REGINA RIF
INNS OF COURT
7TH CDN RECCE REGT
ELEMENTS WITH INNS OF COURT
R. DE CHAUD
N. SHORE R.
9 JULY
10 JULY
7 JULY

The aftermath of combat is not pretty. The Highland Light Infantry alone lost half its attacking troops. In *Bloody Buron*, one survivor recalled, *"That night I saw grown men crying. They had gone through on their nerves alone."* Another man *"didn't eat for two days after. Kinda shook up like, you know."* Yet another said, *"It's not like witnessing death in civilian life — I think that affects you more. In battle, there is no feeling to describe it. You are operating under extreme physical and mental strain. That's why war is for young people — actually it's not for anyone."*

While most wounded got to a treatment centre within an hour, some did not. Finding soldiers hurt in a night action, or left behind in metre-high wheat, was particularly difficult. Unit stretcher-bearers followed the battle, collecting those they could find, and brought them to unit medical officers who sorted and prepared them for further evacuation. Their system of triage had three categories: those seriously wounded and unable to survive a long ride who went for resuscitation; those requiring early surgery; and the lightly wounded.

It was after battles like this that some of the wounded saw the first Canadian women — nurses and Red Cross volunteers — who arrived in the bridgehead about this time. One of the latter, Jean Ellis Wright, has described how she met wounded men who were brought directly to the admitting tent:

Connie and I gave cigarettes and hot coffee to patients who had been medically examined and [who had] permission . . . written on the records hung around their necks. We wrote hundreds of Air letters home to wives, sweethearts and "Mum" as the lads dictated them. Some were too badly injured to dictate, so we found the next-of-kin on their "dog-tags" and advised her that he was safe . . . and would be transferred to England within a few days. New arrivals were undressed with the help of orderlies and put into pyjamas. One lad asked where he was, then said: "Please — take my . . . boots off." He hadn't had them off for two weeks and his socks were stuck to them. I washed his face in the little pan of water, then washed his feet. He gave a sigh of relief, opened his eyes and whispered, "Ahhh . . . . thanks." A precious moment. Some just wanted to talk about how they were wounded. So often, just the nearness of a Red Cross girl relaxed them, probably because they were not alone. The stretcher-bearers worked endlessly and tirelessly — always being so gentle with the boys.

Those requiring surgery went to a tented operating theatre. One Field Surgical Unit reported, *"bellies comprise our major problem. Our mortality is surprisingly lucky and out of the 19 cases we lost only one which was a hopeless 'butto-abdominal' with multiple wounds. Our real worry is the traumatic amputation cases and, of course, gas gangrene."* Dr. Hillsman graphically described those rough days which changed them *"from mere soldiers to war-wise veterans."*

We saw the tragic sights from which we were never to be free for ten long months. Men with heads shattered and grey, dirty brains oozing out from the jagged margins of skull bones. Youngsters with holes in their chests fighting for air and breathing with a ghastly sucking noise. Soldiers with intestines draining faeces onto their belly walls and with their guts churned into a bloody mess by high explosives. Legs that were dead and stinking — but still wore a muddy shoe. Operating floors that had to be scrubbed with lysol to rid the Theatre of the stench of dead flesh. Red blood that flowed and spilled over while life held by the slender thread of time. Boys who came to you with a smile and died on an operating table. Boys who lived long enough for you to learn their name and then were carried away in trucks piled high with the dead. We learned to work with heavy guns rocking and blasting the thin walls of our tent. We learned to keep our tent ropes slack so that anti-aircraft fragments would drain down harmlessly and bounce off the canvas. We became the possessors of bitter knowledge that no man has ever been able to describe. Only by going through it do you possess it.

Padres had the grisly task of tending to the remains of those beyond the need for surgeons. The Highland Light Infantry's padre, J. Anderson, described in *Bloody Buron* the toll it took on him.

There were no funeral directors — we usually did the burying. But at Buron we couldn't cope. I had to go back in a 60 Hundredweight truck and took a man from each Company with me. We spent all day picking up. Not to

Nurses and Red Cross workers arrived in the bridgehead in July. Some of their patients "just wanted to talk about how they were wounded. So often, just the nearness of a Red Cross girl relaxed them, probably because they were not alone."
(NAC, PA 108174)

An RCN Beach Commando relaxing at home in a bunker. Note the hammocks and the mixture of Army and Navy dress. This specialized unit's function was to manage unloading, traffic, and communications on a beach. Although eager to get to Normandy early on, it did not deploy until mid-July. (NAC, PA 180822)

bury them; but to send them back to Beny-sur-Mer. The padres back there would bury them. We took one dog tag and left the other then wrapped the body in a blanket. We ran out of blankets.

I went to our rear echelon. All gone. I continued back to rear division. When I asked for blankets, some clerk got my back up by telling me we were using too many. I was angry — out of my mind — I marched into the large Divisional marquee tent and gave them all Hell — then I started to cry.

I was put on a stretcher with a card reading 'Battle Exhaustion — Return to England.' I sent for the Senior Padre and hid the card. He sent me back to Caen.

That evening they caught up to me. I was placed under close arrest and paraded before the Colonel of the Field Ambulance. 'Don't send me back,' I pleaded, 'Then I WILL be a broken man!' They gave me a note to the MO, who put me under for 24 hours. I was 'canned in Caen' — but this let me see that everyone can break.

Even rest and relief could be illusory. A week after CHARNWOOD the Sherbrooke tanks withdrew to a "Happy Valley" for a welcome break, and:

On Sunday 16 July 1944, all officers except the Duty Officer shared enjoyment of an at home at headquarters 2nd Armoured Brigade, their first opportunity to meet other officers of the brigade for several weeks. There was a marked and striking change.

Two days later, *the shadow of death passed over Happy Valley. . . in the form of 21 cm mortars causing casualties, losing us 5 officers and 26 other ranks. . . . In those few minutes casualties were heavier than in a normal day's fighting.*

After all this came an equally grim epilogue. Several months after the Canadians reached the Abbaye d'Ardenne, the returning owners noticed small flowers, snowdrops, growing in an enclosed garden where they had not been before. They dug into ground that had settled unusually and found human remains. Notifying the authorities, a Graves Registration Officer searched and found the bodies of 18 Canadian soldiers. He had them exhumed and examined by a pathologist who concluded that some had died from close-range gunshot wounds, others from multiple bullet wounds, and still others from blows to the head. Discs identified them as soldiers gone missing from the fighting on 7-8 June.

Reports of murder had been current within 3rd Division, and among Germans, since D-Day, each side accusing the other of having begun a tragic slide into infamy by refusing to take prisoners. Shooting an enemy in the immediate aftermath of combat was one thing; killing one in cold blood while captive was quite another. After the disaster at Le Mesnil-Patry, Sergeant Major Martin took a patrol through the area and reported finding the bodies of six of his men bunched together with bullet wounds in the head. Other reports filtered in from missing Canadian soldiers who had escaped custody and returned to their units.

For example, a week after being taken prisoner at Le Mesnil-Patry, Sergeant Payne from the 1st Hussars made his way back with a hair-raising tale. He had been slightly wounded, and after he and two of his mates were questioned a guard opened fire on them from behind. Payne feigned death, remaining in a ditch for three days until the Germans moved, when he carefully crawled away. "Many stories began to circulate through the regimental area about other reported cases of the shooting of prisoners in the back by the Germans," the Hussars' history notes, "and the troops were fighting mad over these outrages." Around the same time a Canadian officer serving with a British battalion, who had been a sergeant with the Winnipegs before being commissioned, reported discovering the bodies of Winnipeg Riflemen who appeared to have been shot while prisoners near Putot-en-Bessin where they had been captured. A French family in the Château d'Ardrieu nearby found others.

The spate of reports prompted the appointment of a high-level Court of Inquiry to investigate. The Court eventually concluded that in the ten days between 7-17 June 1944, 134 Canadians had been murdered by soldiers of 12th SS Panzer Division. Three more had been shot and wounded but, like Sergeant Payne, had escaped to tell their grisly stories. Several Germans were involved, in locations occupied by the 25th and 26th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiments, and both regimental commanders were held responsible for the actions of the soldiers under their command.

CHAPTER V

JUNE TO AUGUST: THE CANADIAN WAR AT SEA

Invasion is not merely a matter of putting troops ashore on hostile beaches.
(Kenneth Edwards, *Operation Neptune*)

While Canadian soldiers expanded their lodgement in Normandy their countrymen, at sea and in the air, fought to secure the supply links from Britain. A continuing stream of ammunition, fuel, food and other supplies — all required for a successful land battle — could only be assured by controlling the Channel and adjacent seas, from the Strait of Dover to the Bay of Biscay. Canadian naval and maritime air units participated in all aspects of the operations that gave the Allies complete dominance of the sea.

The naval commander for OVERLORD was Admiral Bertram Ramsay who oversaw naval planning and, from June, assumed general control of all maritime forces taking part in the invasion. Under his guidance, two admirals — one British, one American — commanding the eastern and western task forces were responsible for the seaward defence of the assault area, while local naval and air commanders directed operations in their respective areas of responsibility in the Channel and into the approaches to Britain.

The Canadian maritime forces that served in the campaign at sea came well prepared. Unlike soldiers, whose training can only imperfectly

imitate actual operations, RCN ships and RCAF squadrons had accumulated priceless operational experience before OVERLORD during three or four years fighting in the North Atlantic, one of the most demanding environments imaginable. For instance, the captains of the RCN warships in the invasion had, on average, 16 months' command experience, besides considerable sea time before getting their own vessels. Similarly, Coastal Command airmen had flown hundreds of hours on anti-submarine and anti-shipping missions. They also had the advantage of superior communications, intelligence and command facilities. Throughout, the Allies were able to read German intentions in advance and coordinate their responses accordingly.

During OVERLORD, Canadian sailors and airmen fought a small unit war. The largest formations they led were flotillas of eight ships or squadrons of 16 aircraft, and on only rare occasions did such units operate as a whole. Engagements were usually short, sharp, intense encounters — almost always at night — with a few elusive enemy craft. In such fighting, experience, strength and surprise, each of which the OVERLORD maritime forces almost always had on their side, were key factors.

U-boats were Germany's most dangerous weapon and the principal threat to the shipping that supplied the lodgement in Normandy. Although they did not leave their Biscay ports in time to intercept the NEPTUNE assault forces, the undersea marauders were organized in two groups: 22 in southern Norway and 36 in Biscay ports. Seventeen were on passage to the Atlantic from Norwegian ports but, unknown to their commander, Admiral Dönitz, five of the latter group had already been sunk by Coastal Command air patrols, including one by the RCAF's No 162 Squadron. Fifteen of the U-boats were fitted with the snorkel, a newly developed breathing apparatus that could be raised above the surface when a submarine remained at periscope depth, allowing fresh air into the boat and venting exhaust fumes. The snorkel enabled U-boats to use their air-breathing diesels and recharge batteries without surfacing, allowing them to avoid the radar-equipped patrol aircraft that were their most deadly opponents.

To keep German submarines away from the Spout — the main shipping lanes across the Channel to the beachhead — NEPTUNE planners erected an "unclimbable fence" in the western Channel. Naval hunting groups, including the RCN Escort Groups (EG) 11 and 12, concentrated off Ushant and along the lines Plymouth/Ile-de-Batz and Portland/Cap-de-la-Hague in the Channel. Further to sea, six more groups, among them Canada's EG-6 and EG-9, guarded the western approaches to the Channel, patrolling about 200 kilometres west of Land's End. Twenty-one maritime patrol squadrons of Coastal Command's 19 Group, including the RCAF's 407, 422 and 423, strung the barbed wire atop the fence. They dominated the skies from southern Ireland into the Bay of Biscay to the extent that any one position was overflown at least every half-hour around the clock. Finally, north of the British Isles, Coastal Command squadrons also patrolled to catch U-boat reinforcements from Norway.

When Admiral Dönitz learned of the invasion he immediately ordered the submarines in Biscay ports to sea. The eight snorkel boats — or snorts to the Allies — sailed for the invasion area. Despite their vulnerability, nine of the standard boats also sailed for the English coast, and were ordered to run at full speed on the surface at night. Still baffled by FORTITUDE, Dönitz deployed his remaining boats along the Biscay coast to guard against an expected assault there, while the submarines in Norway were held in readiness in case of a landing on that coast.

Allied air patrols wreaked havoc on the approaching U-boats. On the night of 6/7 June, they destroyed two of them and six more, including one snort, turned back damaged. Faced with such heavy casualties, Dönitz forbade high-speed surface runs but, nonetheless, the next night aircraft destroyed two more boats on the surface, and damaged two others. On 10 June, U-boat command recalled all but snorkel boats from the Channel.

The three RCAF maritime patrol squadrons based in southwest England were only indirectly involved in these early encounters, as their patrol areas were not over the main German transit route into the Channel. A Wellington from 407 Squadron made one attack but was shot down. However, Flying Officer Ken Moore, an RCAF pilot flying Liberators with No 224 Squadron RAF, was credited with both U-boats sunk on the night of 7/8 June. In an outstanding performance, Moore and his mostly Canadian

...“Two deadly attacks within twenty-two minutes.” Flying Officer Ken Moore tells his mascot how his crew destroyed two U-boats on the night of 7/8 June. (DND, PL 28003)

U-boats running on the surface – at day and night – were extremely vulnerable to attack from maritime patrol aircraft. Here, a boat is straddled by a stick of depth charges. (DND, PL 25259)

crew completed two deadly attacks within 22 minutes. Radar detected each U-boat at about ten kilometres, allowing Moore to set up a good approach and surprise his quarry. Accurate bombing did the rest. *U-629* literally disintegrated from six depth charge explosions, while six others blew *U-373*'s bow to near vertical before it plunged to its watery grave.

Meanwhile, naval escort groups succeeded in keeping U-boats away from the main shipping lanes extending along the south coast of England and across the Channel. The escorts themselves were vulnerable to bold U-boat commanders. Lieutenant Commander Alan Easton RCNR, the commanding officer of EG-12's HMCS *Saskatchewan* recalled in his memoir, *50 North*, that the evening of 7 June was like a *"summer excursion"* as the group patrolled northeast of Ushant:

> *. . . the four of us were gliding along in line abreast, listening for the sound of U-boats beneath the quiet sea. It was like drawing a net through the water, stretched tightly between the ships, so that it would snag the big fish while letting through the small unwanted ones. But the net did not always hang down as it should; temperature gradients sometimes interfered with it.*

In the late evening, however, *"a low rumble was heard, the unmistakeable sound of an underwater explosion."* Presuming it to be a torpedo hitting the bottom or exploding prematurely, EG-12 searched but saw or heard nothing else. An hour later a violent blast shook *Saskatchewan*, and 70 metres off the ship's port quarter *"a solid column of water shot a hundred feet in the air"* when a torpedo exploded just before reaching the destroyer. By the grace of *"a miracle,"* in Easton's words, *"this fast-moving, fish-like machine had self-triggered when only four seconds short of wreak[ing] havoc in the bowels of its target."* As the destroyers continued to hunt through the night and the following morning, two other torpedoes exploded close by while another narrowly missed *Skeena*. Easton described his frustration:

> *Where was the enemy who was so persistently endeavouring to sink us? Where were the other U-boats? We had not the slightest idea except that we knew the one who attacked us was probably within a mile or so. The asdic could pick up nothing except useless echoes. It was extremely aggravating. Here was a submarine almost below us and here were we, a modern anti-submarine vessel, quite unable to find it.*

EG 12's inability to find its stalkers — there were in fact two U-boats present, one of which reported sinking two destroyers — was a result of the abysmal anti-submarine conditions in Channel waters, something the Allies and Germans were just beginning to learn. The strong tidal currents and temperature gradients often blinded sonar, the Allied navies' main underwater search device. The U-boats, moreover, could hide among the many wrecks that littered the bottom. For anti-submarine crews used to the North Atlantic, it was a completely new type of war.

Still, the surface warships were notably successful in their principal task, the protection of shipping. Rarely daring to make sustained attacks in the face of ever-present surface and air patrols, during the first two weeks after D-day U-boats sank only four transports and two escorts. They also paid a heavy price for these small victories, losing 20 either in or on passage to the Channel. Almost all fell victim to air attack; the RCAF's No 162 Squadron alone, which patrolled the German routes from Norway, destroyed or shared in the destruction of five submarines.

The passage of one boat from Norway illustrates the gauntlet that the Germans had to run. On 8 June, *U-971*, a snorkel craft under the command of Lieutenant Walter Zeplien, departed Kristiansund, Norway on her first patrol with orders to proceed to Brest. On the 15th, she fought off a Sunderland aircraft while running on the surface northwest of the Shetland Islands. The next day Zeplien received new orders to head directly into the Channel.

On the night of 20 June, a 407 Squadron Wellington piloted by Flying Officer Frederick H. Foster caught *U-971* on the surface southwest of Land's End. According to 407's report, the aircraft was flying south at 60 metres' altitude following up a radar contact when:

> *. . . Captain and 2nd Pilot saw first the wake of, and then a fully surfaced U-boat on course 090 deg. True speed 15 knots. Captain immediately turned to port again to get ahead of the U-boat and the final approach was made on a course of 130 deg.-140 deg. True. At 23.37 six D[epth] C[harge]'s set to 14-18 feet, spaced at 60 ft. were dropped from 100 feet at about 125 deg. Red to U-Boat's heading, rear*

"Where was the enemy who was so persistently endeavouring to sink us?" Lieutenant Alan Easton of HMCS ***Saskatchewan****.*
(NAC, PA 190080)

Anti-submarine warfare in the Channel could be a tedious business. Here, sailors on HMCS ***Kootenay*** *relax during a patrol.*
(NAC, PA 190087)

gunner saw all six D.C.'s enter the water, two to port, about opposite conning tower, and four to starboard, Nos two and three were close to hull. Then he saw them explode, just aft of the conning tower. The conning tower was distinctly visible just in front of D.C. plumes. As aircraft passed over, rear gunner fired 400 rounds and saw his bullets ricocheting off U-boat.

Foster and his crew returned to base having badly shaken *U-971* and damaging three of her torpedo tubes. The U-boat continued east but the next day a Sunderland and a Halifax attacked, causing further damage.

When Zeplien fired two, as he thought undamaged, torpedoes at warships on 24 June, one failed completely while the other ran "hot" — its propeller started running but the torpedo did not eject from the tube, a situation terrifying to submariners. Zeplien now concluded that *"it was hopeless to operate in this area"* and headed for Brest.

U-971 never arrived. On 24 June, while on patrol northwest of Ushant, HMCS *Haida* and HMS *Eskimo* saw a nearby Liberator patrol aircraft attack a contact. They moved in and *Eskimo* soon picked up *U-971* with sonar. Over the next three hours the two destroyers carried out nine depth-charge attacks, seven by *Eskimo* with *Haida* directing. After the last of these, a bizarre scene played itself out on the sea bottom. As Zeplien later told his interrogators, he had:

. . . decided that the position was hopeless. His starboard diesel was out of action, he could not proceed submerged owing to lack of current and he had only just enough air to surface. He ordered the destruction of all secret gear and papers. He then issued a bottle of beer all round, which the men drank standing knee deep in water. He assembled his men in the control room telling them his intentions and thanking them for their loyalty. The tanks were then blown and U-971 *surfaced.*

Haida was just beginning another depth charge attack when the submarine burst to the surface between her and *Eskimo*. The British destroyer went full astern to clear *Haida*'s range, and as the Germans abandoned ship, the Canadians hit the conning tower with two 4.7-inch rounds. Both destroyers launched boats in an attempt to salvage the U-boat, but Zeplien had opened the sea cocks and scuttled his *U-971*. The destroyers picked up all but one of 53 crewmen.

The most powerful surface vessels that the Kriegsmarine could throw against the invasion were a few destroyers. Fast and heavily armed, they could quickly devastate formations of slow, thin-skinned transports or landing craft. On the western flank, four such warships based in the Bay of Biscay did not threaten the beachhead but could strike vulnerable convoys crossing the Channel. The task of containing them fell to the 10th Destroyer Flotilla of Plymouth Command — the combined headquarters that controlled maritime operations in the western Channel — which included HMCS *Haida* and *Huron*, and Coastal Command's 19 Group including 404 Squadron RCAF.

On D-Day, the Germans ordered the three destroyers based in the southern portion of the Bay of Biscay, *Z-32*, *Z-24* and *ZH-1*, to Brest to join Torpedo Boat *T-24*, and attack into the Channel. Allied cryptographers read the orders, and 30 Bristol Beaufighters — 16 from No 404 RCAF and 14 from 144 Squadron RAF — took off from Davidstow Moor in Cornwall to intercept. Locating the enemy vessels at 2030 on 6 June, the fighter bombers split up to attack out of the setting sun. No 404 carried out the brunt of the attack with its rocket projectiles while 144 used its cannon and machine-guns to suppress flak. Both squadrons scored hits but, despite dramatic claims from air crew, the destroyers suffered only moderate damage. No aircraft fell to the heavy anti-aircraft barrage. A second attack achieved similar results although one 404 Beaufighter was forced to ditch. Once the destroyers reached Brest, they repaired their damage, fitted additional anti-aircraft weapons and loaded extra torpedoes for E-boats based at Cherbourg. After darkness on 8 June, they departed for what their veteran flotilla commander, Captain Baron von Bechtolsheim, suspected would be a perilous passage up the Channel.

He was right. Allied intelligence once more deciphered the intended course of the German force and the 10th Destroyer Flotilla's eight ships, positioned north of Isle de Batz, used their superior radar to surprise the Germans. The enemy turned away and fired torpedoes but, by steaming in line-abreast, the 10th Flotilla got

"An outstanding officer, not only in skill but in aggressive spirit." In the destroyer battle on the night of June 8/9, Commander H.G. DeWolf, seen here at centre recounting the results of a night patrol, refused to give up his pursuit of ***Z-32****. (NAC, PA 180384)*

"Bechtolsheim's only recourse was to run the ship aground on the nearby Ile-de-Batz." (DND, CN 6870)

amongst the Germans before they could escape. A typically confused night action ensued, one British and one German destroyer being heavily damaged early on. Four inexperienced crews of Polish and British ships lost contact, leaving just three, which evened the odds. The onus for success now lay with the veteran Allied ships, two of which were *Haida* and *Huron*.

The Canadian destroyers had modern equipment and experienced, well-trained ships' companies who had learned much from hard service in the Channel and on Russian convoys. They were led by *Haida*'s commanding officer, Commander H.G. DeWolf, a quiet, determined man described by a colleague as *"an outstanding officer, not only in skill but in aggressive spirit. Furthermore he had that priceless gift of fortune. . . of there always being a target in whatever area he was told to operate."*

Haida and *Huron* fought two long-running actions. In the first they pursued *Z-24* and *T-24* southwest towards Brest. Head seas and rain squalls obscured visibility and impaired radar, but it looked as if the Canadian ships would at least overhaul the slower *T-24* when the Germans entered an Allied minefield that the Canadians were ordered to avoid. The two German warships steamed through unscathed and, by the time *Haida* and *Huron* went around the mines, they had stretched the range and soon disappeared from the Tribals' radar screens. Frustrated, DeWolf broke off the chase and headed back to rejoin the rest of the force.

While steaming northeast, the Canadian ships picked up a radar contact that eventually proved to be the German flotilla leader, *Z-32*. Another long chase began as *Haida* and *Huron* pursued the enemy on a northeasterly course. They hit *Z-32* at long range but at 0311 the same minefield helped the enemy again. Once more the Canadian ships lost ground while the German steamed through with impunity. But this time DeWolf continued the pursuit, and at 0412 was rewarded with a contact heading westward. Not wanting to tempt Allied aircraft at daybreak, von Bechtolsheim had decided to return to Brest despite suspecting that warships were blocking his path. At 0444 *Haida* and *Huron* opened fire from 6,000 metres. Every minute, eight to ten accurate salvoes of 4.7-inch shells roared out from each ship and, by 0513, had damaged *Z-32* so severely that von Bechtolsheim's only recourse was to run the ship aground on the nearby Ile-de-Batz. Now only one German destroyer remained on the western flank of the beachhead, and there was little it could do by itself.

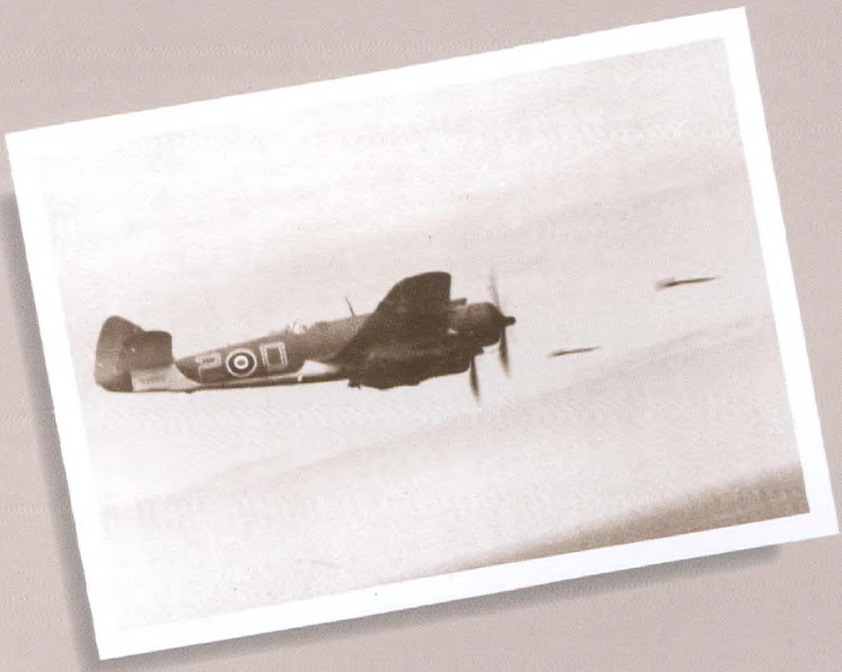
On the eastern flank, meanwhile, during the night of 14/15 June, more than 200 RAF Lancaster bombers raided Le Havre and destroyed three destroyers, fifteen E-boats, seven minesweepers, and a score of smaller vessels against the loss of only one bomber. The next night the E-boat base at Boulogne received similar treatment, and in these two raids Allied aircraft had crippled the Germans' surface strength in the eastern Channel.

By the end of June, Allied naval and air forces had secured the Normandy lodgement. German operations against the bridgehead on the western flank ended when Cherbourg fell to the Americans, while on the eastern flank they were limited to nuisance raids. With the defensive battle won, the navy and air force went over to the offensive. Their aim was now the destruction of German shipping carrying men and supplies along both flanks.

The 29th MTB flotilla welcomed the change. As Lieutenant Commander Tony Law recounted after the war, a gruelling schedule of patrols defending the anchorage since D-Day had taken its toll:

> *The officers and crews were beginning to show the strain caused by months of these nerve-wracking operations, and this combined with irregular meals was responsible for many of us losing weight. The 29th was battle-weary, and we were beginning to feel that we could not last much longer under the severe conditions: mines going off; shore batteries pouncing on us; and dive bombers, like vicious bats, roaring out of the night and putting the fear of God into us. Off Seine Bay the nights had been sheer terror — hot fierce engagements at close range with the enemy. The personnel of the 29th were falling victim to horrible, haunting fears, and the boats, whose arduous task of defending the Anchorage had almost burnt them out, were badly in need of repair.*

At the beginning of July, the 29th joined the British and American MTB flotillas east of the bridgehead that were intercepting German shipping moving close along the high chalk cliffs that line the Baie de la Seine between Le Havre and Cap d'Antifer. Shore batteries, mines and



Rocket-firing Bristol Beaufighters of the RCAF's 404 Squadron took a heavy toll of German shipping throughout OVERLORD. Here they shoot up a merchant ship and a group of minesweepers. (DND, PL 33496, PMR92-580, and PMR92-581)

aircraft were a constant menace and claimed three Canadian boats with some of their crew. Slightly less dangerous, but more spectacular, were their five sharp, violent clashes with the "night train," armed trawlers carrying supplies in and out of Le Havre. Neither side sank vessels but both suffered casualties.

The experience of RCN MTBs and destroyers on the western seaward flank was quite different. Because the Germans had few fighting ships in the area, there was greater scope for free-ranging offensive operations, especially after the United States Army took Cherbourg. Based around Plymouth, firmly astride the enemy's shipping lanes running along the rugged coast of northern Brittany, the 65th MTB Flotilla and the 10th Destroyer Flotilla saw much action.

In the first weeks of NEPTUNE, the 65th MTB Flotilla had mainly conducted defensive patrols along the south coast of England, waiting for E-boats that never appeared. When it became clear that the Germans were concentrating their efforts in mid-Channel, Plymouth Command ordered sweeps against coastal traffic running between St-Malo and Cherbourg. After several uneventful outings, on the night of 17/18 June four MTBs attacked a convoy, damaging two minesweepers. A few nights later, when seas moderated after the great gale, the flotilla fought one of its most successful actions.

On the night of 22/23 June, the flotilla leader, Lieutenant Commander J.R.H. Kirkpatrick RCNVR, took four boats on a sweep off the Channel Islands. Like Lieutenant Commander Law, Kirkpatrick had commanded MTBs since 1941 and had a reputation as a strong and determined fighter. On this sweep he got into the midst of the St-Malo-Cherbourg convoy route where his boats shut down their engines to conduct a listening watch, with a crewman sitting on the side of the boat dangling a hydrophone into the water, like a fisherman hanging his line. Before this crude but effective system produced any contacts, Kirkpatrick received a report of a convoy. Firing up their four powerful 1,250 horsepower engines, the MTBs raced in that direction at 25 knots and, after chasing an E-boat into the port of St-Hellier, they picked up a radar contact heading northeast at ten knots.

Kirkpatrick launched a bold attack. Once he found the convoy, the MTBs reduced speed to conceal their approach but at 3,700 metres a starshell illuminated them. Despite defensive fire from the German escorts, Kirkpatrick maintained his course and speed and fired torpedoes from 400 metres. The MTBs then increased speed and zigzagged to bring their two-pounder and 20 mm machine-guns to bear. The encounter quickly dissolved into a melee. A hit staggered *MTB 745*, knocking out three of four engines and damaging her steering gear. The rest of the confused action is best described by Kirkpatrick:

> *M.T.B. 748 turned to lay off smoke between 745 and the enemy were within 400 yards of 745 and apparently plotted her to be a friendly escort. M.T.B. 727 and 743 carried on to engage minesweepers and what is described as an E or R-boat. M.T.B. 743 engaged one minesweeper at point blank range, raking her from stem to stern with both her six pounders and oerlikon. When the above mentioned E or R-boat attempted to contest the action M.T.B. 743 directed her after six pounder on this target which turned her away after receiving one hit in the bows. M.T.B. 743 received damage, and her navigator and cook were wounded. M.T.B. 727 proceeded to standby M.T.B. 745. M.T.B. 743 rejoined M.T.B. 748.*

MTB 745 repaired her damage and Kirkpatrick led his force home as dawn broke. They had sunk a supply ship and a minesweeper, and heavily damaged another escort.

Kirkpatrick carried out another attack on the night of 3/4 July in the harbour approaches to St-Malo. Establishing radar contact with a convoy of three merchant ships and several escorts, the Canadian took four MTBs close inshore to attack out of the darkness of the coast. Closing to within 450 metres before launching torpedoes, the MTBs sank two patrol boats and damaged two others, along with a supply ship and a minesweeper, while suffering five casualties and light damage themselves.

Destroyers of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla, normally operating in pairs, had to adopt MTB tactics when they became involved in fighting along the Brittany coast. *Huron* learned this when she led *Eskimo* in an attack on a minesweeper and two armed trawlers. These should have fallen easily to the Tribals' heavy guns but because the big destroyers approached fast from seaward, the Germans sighted them early, and when the Tribals opened fire, all but one vessel were shrouded by smokescreens. They sank the minesweeper but the others got

away. From then on, the Tribals concealed their presence by approaching slowly from landward as MTBs did.

Destroyers could range farther afield, and in July they went into the Bay of Biscay when anti-submarine destroyers of EG-12 made the first anti-shipping sweep past Ushant. U-boats entering or leaving Brest were meeting their surface escorts about 16 kilometers southwest of the harbour, and on the night of 5/6 July Plymouth Command mounted Operation DREDGER, a combined anti-shipping, anti-submarine mission. Presumably because the primary object was to intercept submarines, EG-12 was deployed instead of the Tribals, and another escort group was positioned to seaward to catch any U-boats that escaped EG-12's net.

When Commander McKillop led the four destroyers into Brest, Lieutenant Commander Allan Easton, second in line in *Saskatchewan*, followed warily. The escort group had never conducted a surface action and the approaches to Brest were notorious for their treacherous rocks and shoals, and dangerous shore batteries. In fact, the Canadian force was the first to operate that close to Brest since the fall of France in 1940. Easton's apprehension moderated when he spotted navigation lights that showed the way through the shoals, and shore batteries remained quiet. When the destroyers sighted four enemy trawlers and two U-boats, they wheeled down their line, firing torpedoes and guns as they sped by. For Easton,

> *The noise was terrific; the four-point-sevens were firing upwards of ten rounds a minute, and between the heavy boom of these could be heard the continuous deep-throated grunt of the bow-chaser and the high-pitched rat-tat-tat of the three starboard oerlikons. The one on the lower bridge was deafening.*
>
> *As we sped on beyond our target I saw another hit, this time square in the enemy's fo'c'sle. Her bow surrounding the point where the shell entered seemed to cave in, glowed a little inside, then millions of sparks flew outwards. Even amid the din I could hear a cheer go up from those on deck.*

After the first pass, McKillop led EG-12 round again, this time splitting the German line. The enemy kept up stubborn return fire, damaging the lead destroyer and wounding McKillop. She pulled out of line and the other three ships made a final pass before rejoining their leader and withdrawing at high speed in order to escape the powerful shore batteries. Within hours, EG-12 was back at Plymouth, and Easton concluded that he *"would prefer this kind of thing at any time to the long-drawn-out, anxious nights of the submarine war."*

DREDGER was only a qualified success for, although EG-12 destroyed one patrol vessel, the U-boats escaped both the Canadians and a British group to seaward. For the enemy, however, it marked the beginning of gradual Allied infiltration into the Bay of Biscay that they realized they could do little to stop. Initially, they attempted to keep the surface groups away from the coast by attacking them with glider bombs — primitive guided missiles controlled from bombers. On 20 July one of these damaged the frigate HMCS *Matane* when she was on an anti-submarine sweep off Brest with EG-9. The frigate was towed safely to Plymouth, but the attack persuaded the Allies to increase patrols by long-range Mosquito fighters to provide air cover over the surface groups. This ended the glider bomber menace, and the Allies soon stepped up their operations in the Bay.

Despite mounting losses to his U-boats in the early days of the invasion, Dönitz was determined to keep striking. On 11 June, Allied cryptographers intercepted his unequivocal order to the remaining boats:

> *The invasion fleet is to be attacked with complete recklessness. Every enemy vessel that aids the landing, even if it puts no more than half a hundred men or a tank ashore, is a target calling for all-out effort from the U-boat. It is to be attacked, even at the risk of losing one's boat. When it is necessary to get to grips with the enemy landing fleet, there is no question of any regard to danger through shallow water or possible minefields or reservations of any kind. Every man and every weapon destroyed on the enemy side before landing diminishes his prospects of success moreover. A U-boat which inflicts losses on the enemy during landing has discharged its highest duty and justified its existence, even if it does not survive.*

Thereafter, the inshore submarine war entered a new phase. Snorkel-equipped U-boats, closer to true submarines able to remain submerged for the full duration of patrols, now intensified their efforts, and Allied aircraft lost their predominant

role in anti-submarine warfare as they had difficulty detecting the new U-boats, especially at night. The brunt of the anti-submarine campaign shifted to surface forces but, as was readily evident, traditional methods for locating U-boats had not worked well. Complicating matters, submarine commanders were learning to use the unique characteristics of the Channel to their advantage by drifting away from their hunters with the current, or escaping detection by lying amidst the natural and man-made debris strewn over its floor.

Allied naval forces, for their part, countered with new techniques to stalk their prey. The biggest improvement was in the compilation of detailed charts of wrecks on the sea bed and the fitting of precision radio navigation equipment in escorts, allowing them to make maximum use of every sonar echo, however feeble and confused. The key ingredients in the new search methods were patience, tenacity and superb seamanship. Commander J.D. "Chummy" Prentice, senior officer of the RCN's EG-11 (the destroyers *Ottawa*, *Kootenay*, *Gatineau*, *Chaudière*, and *St. Laurent*) epitomized these qualities, and for that reason EG-11 was one of the most successful escort groups. Prentice, at 45 the grand old man of the Canadian escort force, had served more than 20 years in the Royal Navy before retiring to his native British Columbia in the 1930s. He had joined the RCN on the outbreak of war, and soon proved himself a brilliant anti-submarine officer. According to one of the young captains in EG-11, Prentice had little difficulty adjusting to the challenges of the Channel:

> *Chummy had one rule — persist! Attack anything that gives an echo, however bad; keep attacking it as long as you have it; if you lose it don't go away; search and search and search. Most impatient young heroes would attack a lousy echo, do a couple of passes when it fades and sail on. Chummy would drive everyone nuts because he had not the 'sense' to let go. He would find the echo again, still lousy, finally sink it and get another medal. . . . This is where the old bulldogs like Chummy became ace U-boat killers and taught young bucks like me how to fight an ASW (anti-submarine warfare) ship.*

On 6 July, Prentice's *Ottawa* in company with *Kootenay* joined the British corvette *Statice* in pursuing an echo. At Prentice's instance, the first ship to make contact hovered there at dead slow speed while directing another ship onto the echo. While these two alternated their attacks, other ships present circled the area, keeping the U-boat penned in and distracting its hydrophone operator by streaming their noisy anti-acoustic torpedo decoys. *U-678*, the victim, attempted to escape this net by drifting away on the tide but was stopped by a series of depth-charge attacks that brought debris to the surface.

The submarine then settled on the bottom where it was subjected to repeated salvoes of depth charges and hedgehog bombs — small, contact-fused bombs fired from mortars in patterns ahead of a ship. Prentice also used a new tactic devised to split open U-boats bottomed in shallow water. A single depth charge with a grapnel hook attached was dragged along the seabed; when it hooked the target so that the charge lay within lethal range of the U-boat, it was detonated electrically from the surface. Several of these attacks produced more wreckage, including: *"one tin of German butter, two censor stamps, a tin of white powder and a very worn coat of blue serge with three German buttons attached."* Still, Prentice called off the action only after 60 hours of slow deliberate attacks had brought up further evidence of *U-678*'s destruction. Such prolonged engagements became the norm in the inshore campaign.

U-678 was one of six U-boats sunk in the Channel during July as against a loss of just two merchant vessels to submarines. This extremely favourable balance was mainly due to the strong defences around convoys. A postwar British study vividly captures the conditions endured by submariners, and demonstrates the powerful deterrent effect of the hundreds of aircraft and escorts that screened convoys:

> In these Channel operations, the din endured by the U-boat crews surpassed anything experienced hitherto; the buzzing and screaming of various types of noise-box [anti-acoustic torpedo gear], the pinging of asdic and the whirring of propellers were continuous, while the detonation of innumerable bombs and depth charges shook the boat as a constant remainder of the enemy's presence. It was impossible to estimate the range of a noise source; the faintest humming could spell danger, and a sustained noise often drowned the whir of approaching propellers. On occasion, a

Commander J.D. Prentice, "the grand old man of the Canadian escort force," led EG-11 to the most U-boat kills of any support group in OVERLORD. Barely discernable in his right eye is his trademark monocle. (DND, PMR93-400)

During the successful hunt for ***U-621****, a hedgehog pattern from HMCS* ***Kootenay*** *begins its deadly descent to the lurking submarine. In the distance, HMCS* ***Ottawa*** *acts as directing ship. (NAC, PA 190084)*

destroyer would suddenly be directly overhead, or depth charges would explode nearby without warning. Even the bravest — one must grant that these pale-faced U-boat men were brave — could not fail, eventually, to become adversely affected by such conditions.

But the submariners persisted and, in August, as they began to master the lurk-strike-and-hide techniques of shallow water fighting, sunk ten ships, more than in June and July combined. Among them were two Canadian corvettes, the only substantial warships the RCN lost during the invasion.

On 8 August, HMCS *Regina* was off the north coast of Cornwall escorting a small convoy towards the beachhead when an explosion shook the American Liberty ship *Ezra Weston*. The stricken transport's captain immediately signalled that he had been mined, a not unreasonable conclusion since U-boats had not operated in that area since the invasion. *Regina* did not make a sonar search but was stopped, awaiting the transfer of the merchant ship's survivors, when the corvette suddenly exploded in a great plume of smoke and spray. Within 30 seconds she was gone. The ship's doctor, Surgeon Lieutenant G.A. Gould, was one of many who barely got away:

The main force of the explosion was expended about the area of the boat station on the port side, aft of the bridge. Trapped beneath the steel hand rails of the bridge ladder, which had evidently been twisted together in the form of a 'V,' it was with great difficulty that I managed to extricate myself from this underwater mass of tangled metal. Finally, however, after what seemed an eternity of suffocation, my head broke surface.

When the blinding film of oil cleared from my eyes, there, towering above me, were the last few feet of our funnel. It seemed certain to pin me beneath its massive form, but just as it was about to strike, it rolled away, then slithered beneath the surface.

Twenty-eight men, including the entire engine room crew, went down with the ship, and two others later died from wounds. Gould recalls that *"had it not been for the presence of nearly all hands on deck at the time, for the failure of the oil-soaked sea to burst into flame, and for a goodly portion of the grace of God, our lot would have been vastly different."*

The corvette *Alberni* went down still more quickly. On 28 August, she was heading independently to a patrol area in mid-Channel when, without warning, an explosion ripped through the port side aft of the engine room. Within 20 seconds the ship plummeted beneath the surface taking 19 sailors — again, most of them from the engine room — to their grave. Initial inquiries concluded that both *Regina* and *Alberni* had been mined, but after the war German records revealed they were the victims of *U-667* and *U-480* respectively.

In one of his Hornblower novels set during the Napoleonic wars, C.S. Forester describes a scene where a British force, including Hornblower's sloop HMS *Hotspur*, is lying close off Brittany waiting to pounce upon a small enemy convoy known to be skirting the coast. Eagerly anticipating the coming battle, Mr. Bush, *Hotspur*'s first lieutenant, exclaims, "We're the terrier at the rat hole, sir." "Exactly," agrees Hornblower.

August 1944 found Allied naval forces playing terriers in the same waters. The American breakout from the Normandy lodgement in the third week of July, and First US Army's subsequent drive across Brittany, triggered a supporting maritime offensive in the western Channel and Bay of Biscay. In a campaign that has received scant attention from historians, Allied anti-submarine and anti-shipping forces under the control of the Commander-in-Chief, Plymouth Command, clamped a close blockade on German bases that choked off communications and harassed defeated German units attempting to flee to safety.

ULTRA intelligence was critical in this final Bay offensive. Land lines between the German coastal bases and their headquarters in Paris had been severed by the Allied advance, leaving only coded wireless communication which, as the enemy did not realize, the Allies could rapidly decrypt. This source revealed that as the American armies advanced against the northern Biscay ports of Brest, Lorient and St-Nazaire, equipment and personnel were being evacuated by convoys or U-boats to the southern bases of La Pallice, La Rochelle and Bordeaux. Not only did ULTRA disclose that the Germans were taking flight; it often revealed precisely when they would be doing so.

Overwhelming air and sea power went into action to intercept this traffic. Coastal Command

squadrons flew anti-submarine patrols around the clock and anti-shipping missions during the day. The RCAF's 404 Squadron, the only Canadian Coastal Command unit remaining in southwest England, was among the latter. Naval anti-submarine support groups, including EGs 11 and 12, patrolled off U-boat bases, while anti-shipping forces swept inshore at night.

Kirkpatrick's 65th MTB Flotilla patrolled the northern flank of the American advance along the coast of northern Brittany. The Canadian seamen were frustrated by the lack of contact with the enemy — at one point Kirkpatrick asked that the flotilla be transferred to a busier sector — but they did take casualties. On the night of 4/5 August, in one of those incidents that are an unfortunate part of war, three MTBs strayed across a patrol line and came under fire from a Polish destroyer. Before the MTBs convinced their attacker they were friendly, one sailor had died.

Although the flotilla never met the enemy, one night in August, Kirkpatrick added to his dare-devil reputation. Six MTBs were off St-Malo watching the land battle for the city when they heard a BBC radio report that it had fallen to the Americans. Kirkpatrick, according to his navigating officer, Lieutenant David Wilson,

> *. . . conceived the brilliant notion of immortalizing ourselves in history by being the first Allies to sail into St. Malo from seaward after it had been liberated. . . . So he left the rest of the flotilla in Ollie Mabee's charge, at a safe distance, and we mozied down in all by ourselves in the 748. There I was on my bridge with my chart, piloting us right in, and the closer we got the more and more we began to wonder at the extraordinary stillness and quiet. There wasn't anything moving anywhere. And just about the point where we thought maybe we'd gone as far as we safely could or dared — we hadn't been challenged, no flashes of light, no nothing, no port war station — suddenly there was a loud BANG and a puff of smoke, and I've never seen anybody move so fast. I think we were around and heading back north at full speed in less than about 60 seconds, and zigzagging, making smoke and saying to ourselves, 'Well, that's that, I guess we aren't going to liberate St. Malo today.'*

Despite the best efforts of Canadian sailors, St-Malo did not fall for another week; Kirkpatrick conceded only that his *"faith in the BBC news bulletins was badly shaken."*

The 10th Destroyer Flotilla carried out most of the anti-shipping sweeps past Ushant into the Bay of Biscay. The flotilla had important new additions, including cruisers: big ships with heavy long-range gun armament and excellent communications and command facilities. The Tribal-class destroyer HMCS *Iroquois* also rejoined the flotilla, after being equipped with perhaps the most modern radar and combat control facilities of any destroyer in the theatre, which enabled her to build an accurate tactical plot that was vital in inshore operations. In Commander J.C. Hibbard RCN, *Iroquois* had an experienced, innovative captain who could take advantage of her new capabilities.

The first successful sweep took place off St-Nazaire. On the night of 5/6 August, Force 26 — the cruiser HMS *Bellona* with the destroyers *Tartar*, *Ashanti*, *Haida* and *Iroquois* — detected a convoy heading south at about 25 kilometres' range. *Bellona*'s captain allowed the convoy to pull away from shore, and then slipped between the ships and their base before engaging. This tactic worked perfectly. Completely surprised, the enemy was soon in total disarray. Two minesweepers, one patrol boat, one cable layer and two coastal auxiliaries, some laden with soldiers, were sunk and only one vessel escaped. Force 26 continued its sweep and one hour later engaged a smaller convoy, sinking two escorts. The only casualties that night were two sailors killed by a cordite explosion in one of *Haida*'s turrets. Another would have perished but for Able Seaman Michael Kerwin who, though badly wounded and partially blinded, entered the blazing turret and pulled a shipmate to safety.

The enemy had little chance in such engagements. Not only did the Allied ships' superior radar allow them to outmanoeuvre and surprise their prey, but they also held an overwhelming gunpower advantage. For example, during the two actions of 5/6 August, *Haida* expended an astonishing 1,061 rounds of 4.7-inch and 425 rounds of two-pounder pompom at seven different targets, while *Iroquois* fired 865 4.7 inch, 1,300 pompom and 1,600 Oerlikon rounds at 11 different ships. It is impossible to calculate how many of these rounds hit, but the six 4.7-inch guns of each Tribal were radar-controlled and probably many

hit. In contrast, the German fire, while it lasted, was sporadic and inaccurate.

As the offensive continued, Allied maritime forces piled up impressive results. A week after Force 26 mauled the two convoys, EG-12 sank three armed trawlers south of Brest. On the night of 14/15 August, Force 27, consisting of *Iroquois*, the cruiser HMS *Mauritius* and the destroyer HMS *Ursa*, sank one ship and drove four others aground. In this latter action, the wily and lucky small German destroyer *T-24* escaped from its fourth encounter with Canadian Tribals. No 404 squadron's rocket-armed Beaufighters were also successful, sinking two minesweepers, three armed merchant ships and two smaller vessels in a series of attacks.

On land, by 16 August, American armies had reached the Biscay coast and cut off all lines of communication ashore between the northern and southern ports. In the days that followed, Canadian air and naval forces had some of their greatest successes.

Throughout August, Commander Hibbard had gained increasing confidence in the ability of *Iroquois*'s plotting team to develop an accurate picture of the tactical situation confronting Force 27 as they swept close inshore. For the unit's final operation on the French coast on the night of 22/23 August, he took the revolutionary step of directing his ship into action from the operations room rather than from the bridge. Hibbard anticipated what is now commonplace. Convinced that the radar-fed plotting tables gave him a better tactical picture, Hibbard only went to the bridge when *Iroquois*, which was formation leader because of her superb facilities, was about to engage.

That night and into the dawn, Force 27 repeatedly swept deep into Audierne Bay just south of Brest, intercepting convoys packed with German personnel fleeing the fortress. Seven vessels were sunk or driven ashore, forcing the Germans to abandon any further attempts to evacuate Brest — those left behind became prisoners when the garrison surrendered to the Americans on 18 September. As for Force 27, the captain of HMS *Mauritius* attributed the night's success to two causes: *"some lucky guesses and the excellence of* Iroquois' *radar and plotting teams."*

Two days later the Beaufighters of Nos 404 RCAF and 236 RAF Squadrons accounted for the last remnants of German naval surface strength in the area when they caught *Z-24* and *T-24* off Le Verdon. Completely surprising the two warships, according to 404's record book, they scored rocket hits on the hull of one destroyer — likely *Z-24* — and blew the superstructure off the other. The elusive *T-24*, which had survived four engagements with Canadian destroyers, now sank offshore while the larger *Z-24* limped into harbour before capsizing. No air crew were lost, although one aircraft was damaged and another crash-landed when it ran out of fuel.

U-boats suffered as heavily as surface vessels under the Biscay blockade. In the first days of the operation, U-boats attempted to intercept Allied blockading forces but were unable, or unwilling, to attack. Ashore, the situation was more and more desperate, and in the second week of August, the U-boat command finally transferred the boats from the beleaguered ports to the safer bases further south. Of the 16 that sailed, seven failed to make it. Two of these fell victim to EG-11.

The escort group had been in and out of the Bay since early August but had found no U-boats. Finally, on 18 August, *Kootenay*, in company with *Chaudière*, *Restigouche* and *Ottawa*, gained a contact 100 kilometres off the entrance to the Gironde. Despite the difficult sonar conditions, *Ottawa* made a hedgehog attack that produced a promising explosion, and the escorts subsequently located the U-boat on the bottom at 95 metres. Commander Prentice thought the submarine was disabled but not destroyed. In all, they carried out 13 additional attacks over five hours and, although some oil and wreckage came to the surface, Prentice remained sceptical, thinking that the U-boat was just waiting it out on the bottom. The C-in-C Plymouth eventually ordered EG-11 to move on, but Prentice left *Chaudière* over the contact. Unhappily, she lost it the next morning and headed off to rejoin her group, but Plymouth Command then ordered her back to continue searching. *Chaudière* soon relocated its quarry and, after hitting it with three successive hedgehog attacks, a huge explosion shook the ship and brought convincing evidence gushing to the surface. The victim was *U-621*.

EG-11's next kill took far less time. On 20 August while on passage to Londonderry, *Ottawa* gained a good echo 30 kilometres west of Brest. They lost contact in difficult water conditions and while *Ottawa*, *Kootenay* and

"The enemy had little chance in such engagements." An enemy vessel is ripped apart by a torpedo from HMCS ***Iroquois*** *in the final stages of the action on 22/23 August. Note how close inshore they were. (NAC, PA 138233)*

"An experienced, innovative captain" A pleased Commander J.C. Hibbard (right) joins Lieutenant Commander C.R. Coughlin in a hot drink – perhaps rum – after the action on 22/23 August. (NAC, PA 179886)

. . . while gunners, their faces and anti-flash gear blackened by cordite, enjoy a welcome smoke. (DND, PMR93-398)

Chaudière regained it sporadically, none of them could hold it for long. Finally, *Chaudière* kept it long enough to direct *Ottawa* in for a series of depth-charge and hedgehog attacks. *Chaudière* then followed with more of the same. At this point, the group had to break off the attack to refuel and make essential repairs. Although the crews were certain they had destroyed a U-boat, authorities ashore thought they had attacked a wreck. It was not until after the war, on the basis of German records, that EG-11 was credited with *U-984*, which gave them three kills, the most of any support group involved in OVERLORD. One final U-boat fell to Canadian anti-submarine forces in the Normandy campaign when, on 1 September, after a day-long hunt, the frigates *Saint John* and *Swansea* of EG-9 destroyed *U-247* off Land's End.

EG-11 had meanwhile put into Londonderry for a well-deserved rest. *Chaudière*'s captain, Lieutenant Commander C.P. Nixon RCN, remembers:

> *I did not realize quite how exhausted I was. After gathering the ship's company together and congratulating them on this highly successful period of operations, I recall going back to my cabin, at this time it was about eleven thirty in the morning, and somebody asked me something, and I said I was a bit tired and would they come back in half an hour. So I lay down on my bunk and apart from getting up and having some sandwiches during the night, I slept right through until the following morning. There comes a time even at twenty-six when one just has to catch up on lost sleep.*

For Nixon, like thousands of other Canadian sailors and airmen who preserved the seaward flanks of the beachhead, it had been a long summer.

CHAPTER VI

JULY: VERRIÈRES RIDGE

This apparently insignificant eminence is the Verrières Ridge.
(C.P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*)

On land, as well as at sea, the Allied campaign switched from the defensive to the offensive. Canadians had spent June trying to break into Caen and now, in July, they began the grinding battle to break away from it. There were now more of them, as 2nd Canadian Division's lead units had arrived just before CHARNWOOD and watched the awesome bombing of Caen. On 11 July they, along with the weary 3rd Division, came under the operational command of Lieutenant General G.G. Simonds' II Canadian Corps, which took over an eight-kilometre front around Caen.

Caen itself was in a pitiable state. For several weeks past, the 30,000 citizens estimated to be in its ruins had had no electricity, gas or main water supply, and little food. Uncounted numbers were buried in the appalling rubble. The medieval university had been destroyed, and parts of William the Conqueror's fortress blown away but, by some strange good fortune, the Abbaye-aux-Hommes and Abbaye-aux-Dames survived largely intact and provided shelter to some of the homeless and dispossessed. The price of liberation was high, and it is remarkable that those who asked "Why have you done this to us?" were outnumbered by those who greeted the weary Canadians with heartfelt thanks. They were also directly helpful, freely passing information on German

movements, stores, snipers, gun positions and ammunition dumps, which promptly became lucrative artillery targets.

The German front was bent but not broken. They still held the south bank of the Orne River which bisects Caen and, more ominously, the vital high ground beyond, having successfully fought off British attempts to expand their Odon bridgehead. The defenders were sorely pressed, however, as they plugged holes with badly depleted battle groups while trying to free their armoured divisions for a counter-offensive. General Montgomery's maturing scheme of battle was to keep them where they were, pinned down against Second British Army on the Caen front, and this gave the Canadians and British the unpalatable task of maintaining constant pressure by attacking, or at least threatening to attack. When the Germans hastily sent Panzer Lehr and 2nd SS Divisions to block an assault by General Bradley's First US Army, Montgomery ordered a new British offensive to pin the enemy tanks down.

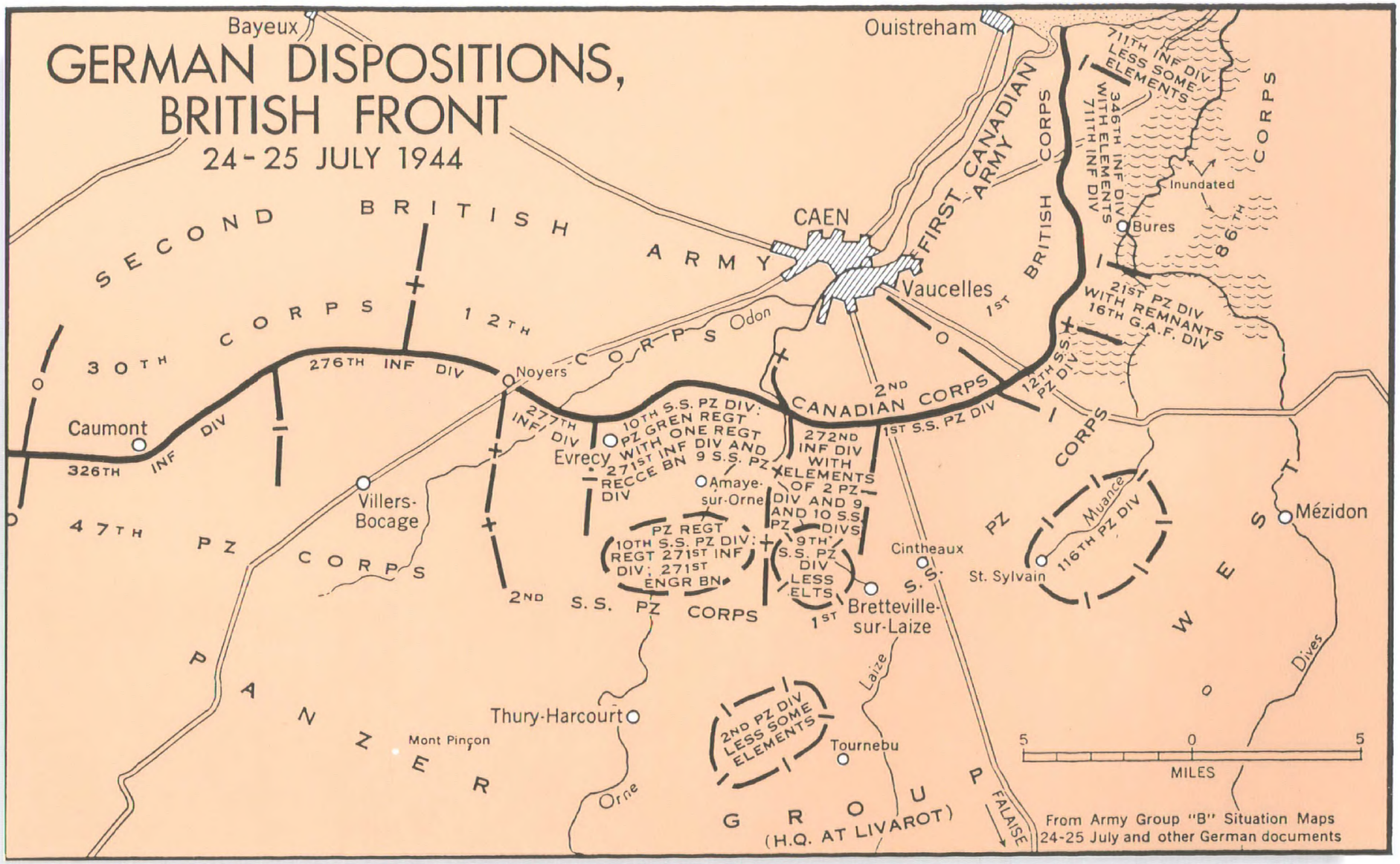
Although the "Great Gale" had slowed the Allied build-up, and heavier than expected infantry casualties had reduced combat efficiency, the 7th, 11th, and Guards Armoured Divisions were now in the bridgehead and, along with eight independent armoured brigades, they had more than a thousand tanks. While the Germans shot up many of them, crew casualties were not nearly so high, and the vehicles themselves were readily repaired or replaced. Montgomery therefore decided to group his three armoured divisions in VIII British Corps and mount a large-scale tank assault, Operation GOODWOOD, through the airborne bridgehead east of the Orne.

GOODWOOD's first objective was the high ground southeast of Caen centred on Bourguébus Ridge; its next the Caen-Falaise plateau; and its eventual goal, Falaise itself. The Canadian supporting role in Operation ATLANTIC was to pinch out Caen from either side, with 3rd Division going around from the east while 2nd Division approached from the west. The pincers were to meet in Caen's southern suburbs, the Faubourg de Vaucelles. On the left, General Keller planned to pass 8 and 9 Brigades across the Orne, at which time they would attack south to protect the British armoured thrust's right flank and clear out the heavy industrial suburbs in their way. Seven Brigade was in reserve, in Caen, ready to cross the Orne in the city should an opportunity arise. Holding the Canadian objectives were weakened but well-fortified units from several German divisions, which could call on a battalion of Tiger tanks.

GOODWOOD began shortly after first light on 18 July when more than a thousand heavy bombers spread their loads over a wide target area. Medium and fighter bombers, heavy naval guns, and about 800 artillery weapons followed. Planners assumed, because it seemed inconceivable otherwise, that few Germans would survive the devastating concentration of fire, but small groups, at first disoriented or disabled by shock, recovered. One fearsome Tiger tank was overturned and another destroyed, but six others were repaired, firing, and then counterattacking within a few hours. A battery of Luftwaffe anti-aircraft 88s along with a tank and part of a company of soldiers in the village of Cagny, at the very centre of the bombing, survived and shot out the leading British tank squadron in a few minutes; they also shot out two of their own Tigers when they broke cover. Wanting to push their armoured brigades forward rapidly, British planners had given infantry a lower priority on bridges and road space, but without them the tanks were vulnerable to anti-tank guns, and GOODWOOD's momentum sputtered out in the string of villages — Bras, Hubert-Folie, Bourguébus — that dotted the forward slopes of the ridge that was their initial objective.

As British tanks rumbled across the wide-open flatlands, 3rd Canadian Division began moving towards the two-kilometre square jumble of factories and smokestacks. Fighting through this built-up industrial area was a difficult and dirty business, not unlike trying to clear out the steel industry complexes in Hamilton. The Germans knew the ground intimately, had excellent observation from the high towers, and were hidden while their attackers were exposed. A few well-sited men with machine-guns had little trouble stopping a battalion.

Behind a light barrage, 8 Brigade led the advance: the Chaudières on the right, next to the river, and the Queen's Own on their left, astride the main road to Colombelles. Following were the North Shores and, behind them, 9 Brigade readied itself to pass through. Despite being left behind by their barrage, the Queen's Own


GERMAN DISPOSITIONS,
BRITISH FRONT
24-25 JULY 1944
Bayeux
Ouistreham
CAEN
Vaucelles
Noyers
Caumont
Villers-Bocage
Evrecy
Amaye-sur-Orne
Cintheaux
St. Sylvain
Bretteville-sur-Laize
Tournebu
Thury-Harcourt
Mont Pinçon
Bures
Mézidon
Inundated
Odon
Orne
Laize
Muance
Dives
FALAISE
SECOND BRITISH ARMY
FIRST CANADIAN ARMY
30TH CORPS
12TH CORPS
1ST BRITISH CORPS
2ND CANADIAN CORPS
47TH PZ CORPS
2ND S.S. PZ CORPS
1ST S.S. PZ CORPS
9TH S.S. PZ CORPS
PANZER GROUP WEST
(H.Q. AT LIVAROT)
326TH INF DIV
276TH INF DIV
277TH INF DIV
272ND INF DIV WITH ELEMENTS OF 2 PZ DIV AND 9 AND 10 S.S. PZ DIVS
10TH S.S. PZ DIV: PZ GREN REGT WITH ONE REGT 271ST INF DIV AND RECCE BN 9 S.S. PZ DIV
PZ REGT 10TH S.S. PZ DIV; REGT 271ST INF DIV; 271ST ENGR BN
9TH S.S. PZ DIV LESS ELTS
1ST S.S. PZ DIV
12TH S.S. PZ DIV
2ND PZ DIV LESS SOME ELEMENTS
116TH PZ DIV
711TH INF DIV LESS SOME ELEMENTS
346TH INF DIV WITH ELEMENTS 711TH INF DIV
21ST PZ DIV WITH REMNANTS 16TH G.A.F. DIV
5 0 5
MILES
From Army Group "B" Situation Maps 24-25 July and other German documents

fought their way into Giberville and cleared it during the day. The Germans, from a Luftwaffe Field Division, were badly demoralized and the riflemen's main problem lay in bluffing groups of them to surrender, which they did in large numbers. When the Chaudières were stopped until late afternoon by a stubborn strongpoint in Colombelles, Keller sent 9 Brigade around a flank, bypassing opposition, to Vaucelles which the North Novas reached around midnight. By next morning they had secured most of the sector except for isolated groups of Germans.

At midday Keller also instructed Brigadier Harry Foster, whose 7 Brigade was in Caen, to send a patrol across to the south bank of the Orne to scout its defences and, if feasible, send a battalion over. Foster gave the task to the Reginas and their Scout Platoon, led by Lieutenant Lorenzo Bergeron, prepared to cross. By this time Bergeron's platoon included Raymond Pierre Chatelain, formerly an officer with the French resistance forces, now a local guide wearing the Reginas' unit flashes. Soon after, Bergeron went over the river with Chatelain, 15 men and a radio link to battalion headquarters. Four men led the way to their objective, a large block of buildings near the railway station in Vaucelles, where the others quickly joined them. Boldness seemed to disconcert the Germans who failed to react, and when the battalion's carrier platoon got its machine-guns into firing positions on the north bank, Bergeron's men fed them targets. Their covering fire enabled the rifle companies to get over and as the companies infiltrated through the buildings the scout platoon withdrew, though without Chatelain who had been killed trying to aid a wounded rifleman.

That evening, 18 July, Major General Charles Foulkes's 2nd Canadian Infantry Division inserted the western pincer, its first action since Dieppe. Like other divisions, its brigades and battalions had loose regional affiliations. A First World War and Dieppe veteran, Brigadier Sherwood Lett commanded 4 Brigade's three Ontario battalions: The Royal Regiment of Canada from Toronto, The Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, and The Essex Scottish Regiment from Windsor. Brigadier William Megill, a signaller, commanded 5 Brigade: The Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) of Canada from Montreal, Le Régiment de Maisonneuve, and The Calgary Highlanders. Brigadier H.A. Young, also a signaller, commanded 6 Brigade whose battalions were: Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal, The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada from Winnipeg, and The South Saskatchewan Regiment.

Second Division's task was to cross the Orne in Caen, link up with 3rd Division in Vaucelles, then clear the Corps right flank following the eastern bank of the river along the line of villages: Fleury-sur-Orne — Point 67 — St-André-sur-Orne — St-Martin. Commanders expected, or hoped, that GOODWOOD's massive armoured thrust would be roaring simultaneously across the Caen-Falaise plateau a few kilometres east, and would loosen up the defences sufficiently to allow the Canadians to sweep up Verrières Ridge and advance south towards Falaise.

Second Division had 5 and 6 Brigades in Caen preparing to cross the Orne while Lett's brigade was in the hilly triangle, formed by the confluence of the Odon and Orne Rivers, that overlooked and threatened the Orne Valley to the east. Lett's task was to secure the division's right flank, and the Royal Regiment of Canada attacked toward Louvigny late in the afternoon, taking it next morning against stiff resistance. During the action Brigadier Lett, who had been wounded two years before at Dieppe, was hit by shell fire and evacuated.

The Black Watch of 5 Brigade got across the Orne in Caen that evening, followed by Le Régiment de Maisonneuve at noon next day. The Maisonneuves linked up with a squadron of Sherbrooke tanks that had been rafted across the river, and set out behind a barrage for their objective five kilometres south. New to battle, the leading companies were badly hit by their own gunfire when they moved prematurely beyond their start line, but they reorganized quickly and pushed on, followed by The Calgary Highlanders who moved through Fleury and took Point 67. Heavily shelled and mortared immediately, then counterattacked by tanks, the Calgaries held on with the help of Sherbrooke tanks. That evening The Black Watch moved up on their left to the town of Ifs. Behind them, in Caen, sappers worked through the night to construct bridges, which greatly eased traffic pressure on the other Orne crossings and ensured that ammunition and food got forward quickly.

A company commander of The North Shore Regiment briefs his officers on clearing out the jumble of factories on Caen's outskirts in Operation ATLANTIC. (NAC, PA 177597)

While leaders reconnoitred, planned and briefed, their soldiers moved forward to assembly areas. The infantryman on the right has a Bren gun; although it fired at a slower rate than its German counterpart, it was reliable and accurate. The one on the left is armed with the standard Lee Enfield bolt-action rifle, and is carrying an indispensable shovel. (NAC, PA 116528)

As GOODWOOD faded, General Dempsey ordered a major regrouping, placing the 7th and Guards Armoured Divisions, which were still battling on the slopes of Bourguébus, under Simonds' command. Simonds sent 3rd Division to take over their front line positions in order to free the tankers as a mobile reserve. He was pleased about the day's achievements and optimistic about the possibility of going further: when several 7th Division tanks sallied towards the town of Verrières, it seemed that the entire ridge line was there for the taking. The Queen's Own Rifles were warned to prepare a quick night attack to exploit the situation, an order that must have caused Le Mesnil veterans to shudder, but Simonds cancelled the order and instead ordered an assault on the ridge for noon next day. Brigadier Young's 6 Brigade, reinforced by the Essex Scottish of 4 Brigade and two squadrons of Sherbrooke tanks, deployed for the attack during the night.

Second Division's first day of action had been successful; its second was a disaster. Even against light resistance, the Verrières Ridge was a large objective for a single brigade. Attackers had to cross three kilometres of open ground before climbing an equally wide-open hill to reach its gentle crest. Along the forward edge of the ridge, a lateral secondary road connects St-Martin in the Orne Valley with Beauvoir and Troteval Farms and continues across the main Caen-Falaise highway to Hubert-Folie and Bourguébus. Beyond the road, behind the forward crest on reverse slopes, are the villages of Verrières, Rocquancourt and Fontenay-le-Marmion. The Germans had fortified them as defensive blocks, and they controlled all the approaches to this wide-open basin that was covered with fields of ripening wheat.

Contrary to hopeful expectations, the positions were not lightly held. Alarmed by GOODWOOD's threat to their vital Caen flank, the Germans had summoned up first-class formations from reserve, among them the 1st and 12th SS Panzer Divisions, to strengthen their defences all along the Verrières-Bourguébus Ridge. It must be borne in mind that German tanks and anti-tank guns outranged Canadian Shermans, and were able to sit in concealed hull-down positions on the ridge and pick the Shermans off from a distance as they negotiated the bare slopes. Then the defenders could deal with even more vulnerable infantrymen at their leisure.

Brigadier Young's plan was straightforward. Behind a creeping barrage, his own three battalions would assault in line across the almost four-kilometre front, while the Essex Scottish acted as a central reserve. On the right, the Cameron Highlanders' objective was St-André. In the centre, the South Saskatchewan Regiment was to take the dominating ridge southeast of St-André. On the left, the task of Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal (FMR) was to clear Beauvoir and Troteval Farms and then secure the village of Verrières.

The Camerons' attack went reasonably well. Bad weather disrupted planned air support, and delayed H-hour until mid-afternoon, but then the Camerons moved down the forward slope of Point 67 in an open "T" formation behind their supporting barrage. They fought their way into St-André, cleared part of it, and held on against repeated counterattacks. On the left, the FMR, with two depleted troops of Sherbrooke tanks, reached the stone-walled Norman farms of Beauvoir and Troteval, about half-way to their objectives, without much difficulty. Unfortunately, the British tanks that had explored the farms earlier had been withdrawn so they would not be caught in the Canadian barrage, and grenadiers from the 1st SS Panzer Division had moved into the buildings. Fusiliers cleared their upper stories but, when the two leading companies and battalion scouts pushed on towards Verrières, a German company came out of the cellars and caught them from behind. One FMR company got back behind the farm, but the Germans isolated and destroyed the other, along with its supporting tanks. Under fire from several directions, without their anti-tank guns, and having lost their artillery observer and communications, the rest of the battalion dug in south of Troteval.

The South Saskatchewans fared even worse. At first, when the battalion moved out, its open formation reminded some of an exercise as they cleared several German outposts along the lateral ridge road on the way to their objective several hundred metres beyond. They were now the tip of a very exposed spear, far ahead of flanking battalions, and less than a kilometre from Fontenay-le-Marmion. While still reckoning their good fortune, and before they could dig in, the lead company came under a storm of

artillery and mortar fire, then was hit from behind by half a dozen German tanks. Without their own anti-tank guns, the men could only try to find scarce cover in the waist-high grain; but when they went to ground they couldn't see to use their own weapons. As their anti-tank gun crews rushed forward, they were easy pickings for Germans who shot them before they could unhitch their weapons from the towing vehicles. Worsening an already tenuous situation, a sudden violent storm completely disrupted radio communications.

The prairie battalion's situation was desperate. With their commanding officer and two company commanders dead, companies scattered, out of communication, and lacking control or direction, groups of men began withdrawing, some of them precipitously. Behind them, the Essex Scottish were moving towards their reserve position around the main crossroads on the crest road when they came under fire at the same time as the withdrawing men went past. Two of the Essex companies joined their spontaneous withdrawal, opening a gaping hole in the centre of the Canadian line, and next morning German tanks were on the ridge line. Fortunately, the other Essex companies held on until next day, when The Black Watch restored the line. Second Division's early optimism turned to gloom as it licked its wounds.

Verrières ridge was a brutal place to introduce a new division to combat. Even the most battle-wise troops had trouble with its terrain and defences, and 2nd Division's debacle starkly displayed the essential tactical problem that the Canadian, British, and American armies faced in Normandy: how to attack eminently defensible ground with inferior tanks and inexperienced troops? They all found, no matter how hard they had trained, that battlefield realities sent tidy plans reeling in unexpected directions. Those able to learn from their bloody experience had a better chance of survival, so long as their luck held, and they didn't burn out from overexposure.

Since D-Day, Canadian units had continually monitored their own and German tactical performance, to learn from their combat experience and, not surprisingly, the transition from training to actual operations revealed faults. One common theme in after-action reports concerned a need for more practicable techniques of coordinating infantry movement with the fire power of artillery and tanks to help infantrymen cross exposed killing grounds. Theory held that artillery fire either killed or neutralized defenders by keeping them in their dugouts until infantrymen reached them. The more fire brought down, it followed, the greater its neutralizing effect. Using shells to save lives made sense but, one battalion commander observed, *"the intense concentrated pounding of a small area does not produce a great killing or even stunning effect. Defenders begin firing back almost immediately. . . . An additional disadvantage of the highly concentrated artillery fire is the dense smoke and dust raised."* He cited an instance where assaulting infantrymen were unable to see the exploding shells and walked into them: in another, they waited too long and lost their support because they couldn't see through the smoke.

The problem — the fire and movement core of battlefield tactics — lay in narrowing the gap between the time fire stopped and the time assaulting troops reached their objectives. For heavy bombers, that gap was between two and four kilometres; for medium guns 300 metres; and for field artillery perhaps one hundred metres. The usual means of delivering artillery support was the barrage, or moving belt of high explosives programmed to advance mechanically in front of the infantry on a timed schedule. As at Carpiquet, however, barrages not only often deserted the infantry, but undermined surprise by revealing the direction of attack. An after-action report noted, *"The problem facing the battalion commander, is that while he realizes he has artillery resources to call on it is extremely difficult in the confusion to make use of [them]."* Rather than rigid timetables, the infantry needed flexible fire plans that would help them respond quickly to continually changing combat situations. Ironically, while infantry units had trained in England to move flexibly on the battlefield, using company and platoon fire and movement drills, higher staff training emphasized the barrage.

These difficulties were possibly a natural result of the way Canadians, following British practice, arranged their battles. In contrast, for example, to German doctrine — that delegated responsibility downwards in order to exploit combat's natural chaos — the Canadian and British way of war attempted to manage the

battlefield. In trying to impose control, higher commanders and their staffs prepared meticulously detailed plans, including rigidly timed fire programs, for units to implement. These usually sent battalions directly against strongly defended positions, rather than around them. When combat challenged the premises on which they had based their plans, and communications failed, commanders were often left unable to respond rapidly and flexibly to altered circumstances. Fighting leaders were then left to get along as best they could.

Misunderstandings between tankers and infantry were also evident, because neither knew as much about the other's roles, strengths and weaknesses as they might have. Instead of being organized in integrated units, infantry battalions and tank squadrons lived apart in their own distinct military worlds, coming together only sporadically for training. In theory, tanks were supposed to take out enemy machine-guns, which devastated infantry, while infantry neutralized anti-tank guns that pulverized tanks. Theory, however, did not correspond with reality on the ground, as one report acknowledged:

> *The co-operation of infantry and armour envisaged as being a wall of steel followed by a wall of flesh or vice versa does not in fact exist. The armour in this flat country cannot possibly go flat out and survive against the well placed and concealed enemy anti-tank guns. Therefore they work their way forward on a flank usually supporting the infantry by fire.*

The "chicken and egg" problem over who would lead this deadly dance was not quickly settled. While infantry might deplore the tankers' reaction of stopping or working around a flank, for them it was a matter of survival, and finding a more effective way to do their job. Destroyed tanks provided little support. At the centre of the difficulty was the fact that tankers and infantrymen lacked effective and reliable communications with each other. Their radio sets were not fully compatible, and telephones fixed to the backs of tanks were difficult for infantrymen to use, particularly while under fire.

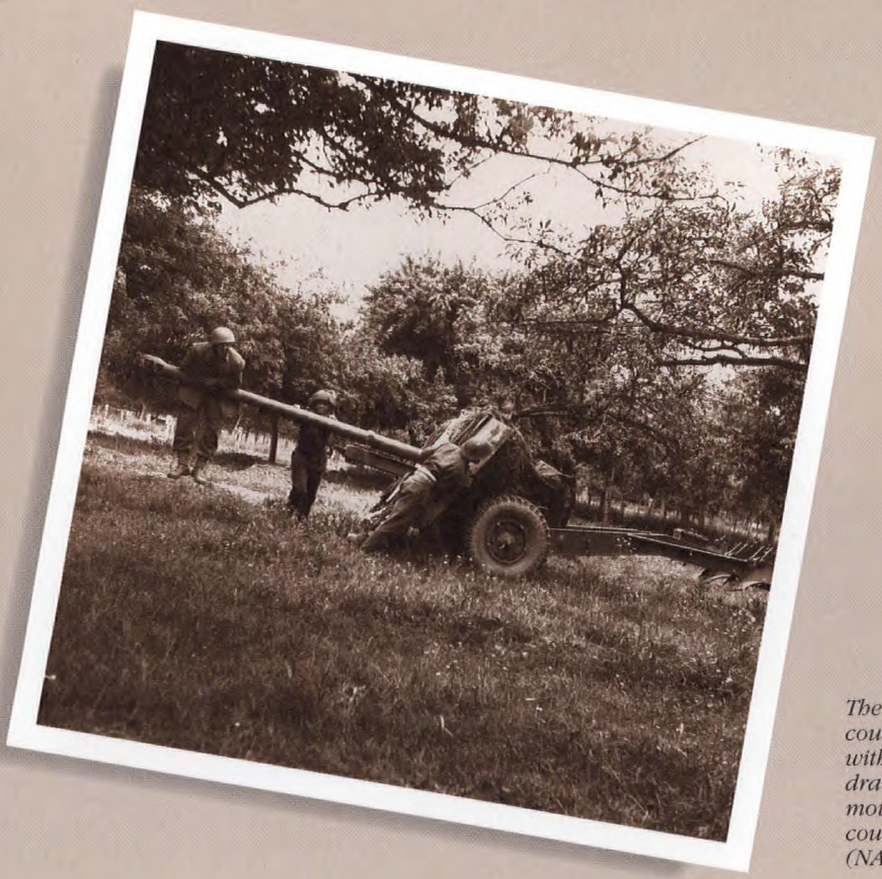
Many of these doctrinal, training and other difficulties were even more pronounced at Verrières Ridge when 2 Armoured Brigade units were sent from 3rd Division to operate with the untried 2nd Division, with whose brigades and battalions they were unfamiliar. Experienced tank crews were, by then, understandably wary about charging up open hillsides in their outmatched Shermans against long-range German guns. Taking on German tanks with the standard short-barrelled 75 mm Sherman gun was a risky business, requiring short range, careful aiming and very steady nerves. One crew commander described how to tackle the formidable Panther:

> *Two rounds hit the gun mantlet almost straight on and came nowhere near penetrating. This was a 75 mm gun at 450X [yards] range. It would seem that the Panther cannot be penetrated in front even at point blank range by a 75 mm Sherman tank gun. One round, which struck the lower half of the curved gun mantlet, and being deflected downwards went through the top decking (5/8th" thick) behind the driver. This exploded the ammunition. It appears that this can be done every time by hitting the lower part of the gun mantlet.*

Clearly, Panther hunting could use a measure of luck and good fortune, as well as skill, and only the Sherman Fireflies with their large 17-pounder guns battled them on even terms; that is, once crews solved that gun's teething problems. Armoured squadrons had not received their Fireflies until May, just days before having to put them on landing craft for the invasion, leaving gunners little time to familiarize themselves with the weapon. They had to learn in combat, for instance at Buron, that they had to drain oil from the gun's recoil mechanism before it would eject expended shells cleanly.

Tankers had also taken to fitting extra tank tracks on their hulls as added protection, and at least one crew commander was thankful that he had done so. While supporting the FMR at Troteval Farm his tank *"was hit by what [he believed] was 75 mm from the ground behind Verrières. The first shot hit the turret but was deflected"* by the track. Because it saved his men's lives, Major Radley-Walters was distinctly unimpressed when an armoured corps staff officer, visiting the front, upbraided him for having his tanks piled with extra treads. Added weight, the officer complained, would wear out tank engines prematurely. At that moment Radley-Walters was less concerned with driving to Berlin than he was with living long enough to climb to the top of Verrières Ridge.

Gunners seldom rested. When not supporting their usual affiliated battalions, their 25-pounders were on call to others. Effectively coordinating artillery fire with infantry movement was a persistent tactical challenge. (NAC, PA 115569)



The 17-pounder anti-tank gun could take on any German tank with confidence. Its only drawback was that, not being mounted on tracks, its cross-country capability was limited. (NAC, PA 128793)

There was also much to learn about coordinating ground and air battles, especially as the army and air force had fundamentally different conceptions of air power — the former wanting close fire support and the latter, with broader horizons, rejecting the notion that airplanes should perform the function of long-range artillery. Consequently, effective joint command and control arrangements were slow in coming. The air force insisted on retaining full control over its resources and the army, obsessed with the massive power of heavy bombing, possibly neglected for a time to exploit the full potential of the tactical air forces. The result was that in OVERLORD's early stages response times, even for urgent requests for close support, were seldom under two hours because of the many staff levels of approval that were required. By then, targets such as tanks would be long gone.

In time, better coordination improved response times, and soldiers grew particularly fond of rocket-firing Typhoons, whose fearsome weapons could be directed more accurately than bombs. But even these were more effective at boosting morale than as materiel weapons. Hitting small targets like bridges, tanks and bunkers from a fast-moving aircraft severely tested a pilot's skill for, as an air force report indicates:

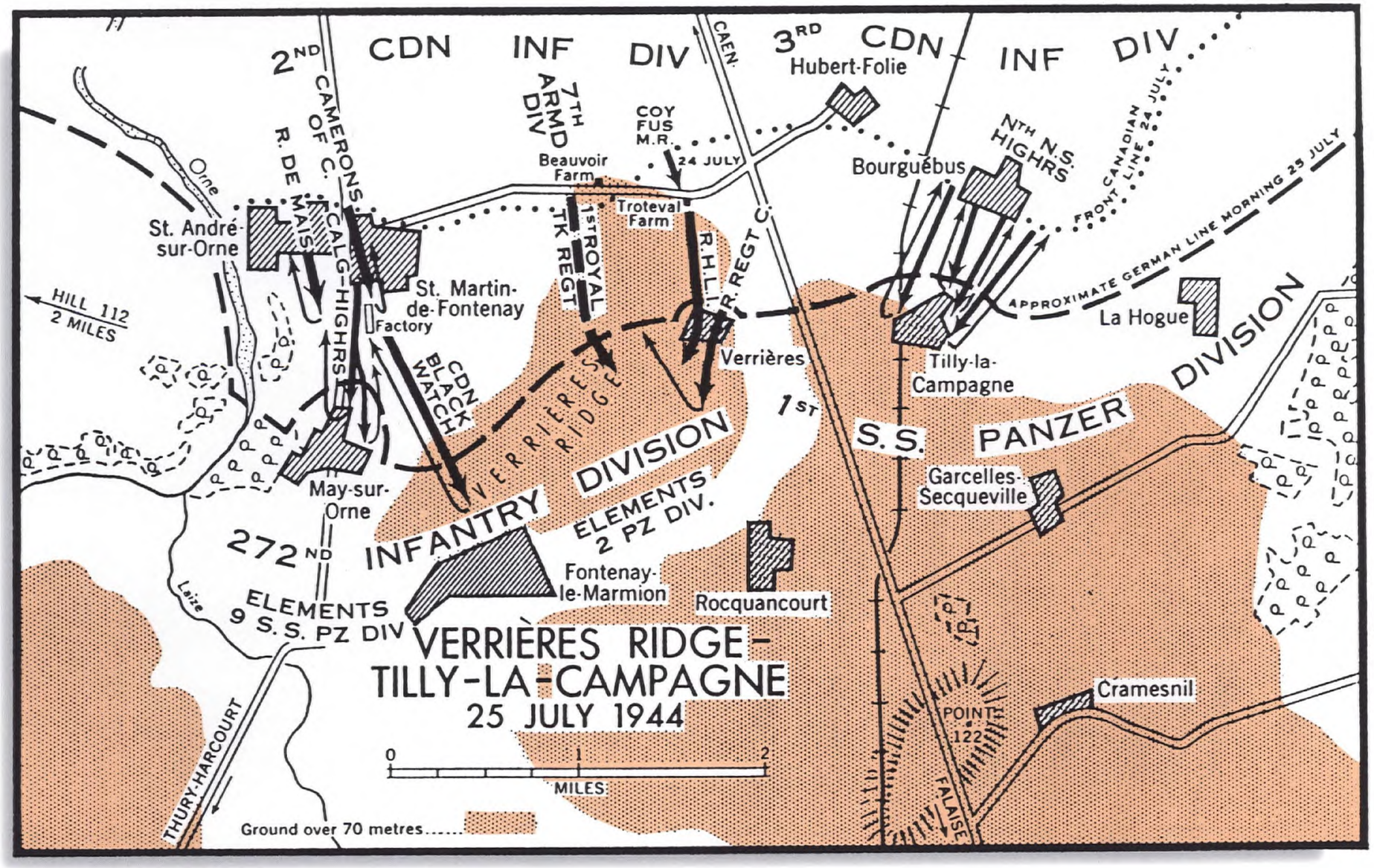
> *In order to hit a small target with RP [rocket projectile], the pilot must be at the right height and dive angle, have the correct speed, have his sight on the target and the right angular depression on his sight, make the correct wind allowances and be free from skid or 'g'; but in addition he must pull out the right amount for the right time.*

Technical flying problems were magnified considerably, of course, by intense flak.

Yet another reality that the hard school of combat in Normandy exposed was that individual soldiers reacted quite differently to the extreme stress of battle. By the summer of 1944, in the lengthier Italian campaign, battle exhaustion had become as expected a part of combat as bad weather, gunshot wounds and death, and infantry battle exhaustion casualties regularly numbered between 20 and 30 percent of physical casualties. Incidence in Normandy was initially half that but time, exposure and Verrières Ridge increased it dramatically. The open ground and powerful defences that produced crippling physical casualties also starkly demonstrated the variable limits of individual tolerance to the terror and chaos of a modern battlefield. The War Diary of No 1 Canadian Exhaustion Unit, a specialized medical facility, recorded the aftermath of ATLANTIC:

> 21 July 1944. Yesterday 59 patients were admitted. Today has been heavy. We have admitted over 80 patients and they are still coming in. Our routine sedative Sodium Amytal is exhausted and most of a bottle of Medinal which we borrowed is gone. However the day has been saved by the arrival of 2000 capsules of Sod. Amytal.
> 22 July 1944. One hundred and one cases of exhaustion were admitted . . . our convalescent ward and the 'morgues' are filled. Those in the morgue have had to sleep on blankets spread on the ground. The rain has been pouring down and the majority of the men are wet and muddy.
> 23 July 1944. Total bed state 175 . . . treatment will have to be limited to a one or two day period. Today has been spent in sorting and evacuating as many as possible.

Who were these people? Were they genuinely ill or malingering cowards? Was their reaction to combat normal or aberrant? Although it should not have surprised anyone familiar with the First World War, battle exhaustion unpleasantly shocked strongly held traditional attitudes about proper soldierly behaviour, that declined to acknowledge the vast no man's land between courage and cowardice. Commanders could not quite decide whether to call for doctors or military policemen to care for soldiers who broke down in combat. To General H.D.G. Crerar, commanding First Canadian Army, *"The general problem [concerned] the natural but, in the circumstances of war, reprehensible objection of a small proportion of other ranks . . . to risk death, or serious injury, for their country. The 'angles' [included] such things as desertion, self-inflicted wounds, attempts to be diagnosed as 'exhaustion cases,' VD re-infection and so on."* Concerned with a looming shortage of infantrymen, who took at least 75 percent of both physical and psychological casualties, Crerar applied a disciplinary tourniquet to stop the manpower bleeding. With the death penalty unavailable as a deterrent, three to five years' imprisonment with hard labour became standard


2ND CDN INF DIV
3RD CDN INF DIV
CAEN
Hubert-Folie
7TH ARMD DIV
COY FUS M.R.
24 JULY
Beauvoir Farm
Troteval Farm
1ST ROYAL TK REGT
R.H.L.I.
R. REGT C.
Bourguébus
NTH N.S. HIGHRS
FRONT CANADIAN LINE 24 JULY
APPROXIMATE GERMAN LINE MORNING 25 JULY
La Hogue
Tilly-la-Campagne
Verrières
1ST S.S. PANZER DIVISION
Garcelles-Secqueville
Cramesnil
POINT 122
FALAISE
Orne
R. DE MAIS
2ND CAMERONS OF C.
CALG-HIGHRS
St. André-sur-Orne
St. Martin-de-Fontenay
Factory
CDN BLACK WATCH
VERRIÈRES RIDGE
HILL 112
2 MILES
May-sur-Orne
272ND INFANTRY DIVISION
ELEMENTS 2 PZ DIV.
Fontenay-le-Marmion
Rocquancourt
ELEMENTS 9 S.S. PZ DIV
Laize
THURY-HARCOURT
VERRIÈRES RIDGE-TILLY-LA-CAMPAGNE
25 JULY 1944
0
1
2
MILES
Ground over 70 metres

punishment for a variety of offences committed in the face of the enemy.

In 1914-18, shell shock was thought at first to be caused by physical damage to the brain. In time, psychological explanations, only very reluctantly received, came to supplant physiological ones. At first these concentrated on psychological screening to weed out the unfit and identify unacceptable personalities. With experience, field psychiatrists found that there was no practicable way to predict beforehand which individual would make an effective soldier, especially an infantryman whose peculiar job clearly lacks a socially acceptable civilian counterpart. They also concluded that, although timing and circumstances varied, virtually every soldier had his own breaking point, the defining features of which were the combat situation, motivation and morale.

The Canadian divisions at Verrières Ridge illustrated the two common streams of battle exhaustion incidence: soldiers new to combat who temporarily lost their self-control from fright, and older soldiers who burned out from lengthy exposure to intolerable stress. With intelligent handling and leadership, many of the former returned to their units as effective soldiers. Burnout cases had to be found non-combatant jobs or evacuated for more intensive medical treatment.

It takes time, of course, for hard-won battle wisdom to percolate into a fresh doctrinal brew, and there was hardly time to incorporate tactical lessons systematically in the few days before the next attempt to gain the ridge, Operation SPRING on 25 July. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of these same themes echoed in SPRING which, like GOODWOOD, was part of General Montgomery's greater operational scheme to break the Normandy stalemate. In the west, General Bradley's First US Army had fought hard to get through the worst of the bocage and, while the Canadians were taking Caen, the Americans reached a suitable start line beyond the wet ground at the base of the Cotentin Peninsula for a major offensive aimed at breaking through the defensive crust into Brittany. Originally timed to coincide with GOODWOOD, bad flying weather delayed the attack for a week. Then, preceded by massive bombing, Operation COBRA struck on 25 July.

Montgomery's operational plan to keep German armoured forces away from the American front greatly assisted Bradley's offensive. If GOODWOOD had not achieved all its promise of securing the Caen-Falaise plateau, it had caused the Germans to reinforce their defences there. Estimating that Montgomery had massed a thousand tanks around Caen to take full advantage of its good tank country, and concluding that Falaise remained his principal objective, they kept 21st Panzer along with 1st and 12th SS Panzer Divisions in the line; shifted 9th SS Panzer and elements of 10th SS and 2nd Panzer Divisions to the sector of the front east of the Orne; and brought 116 Panzer Division from the Pas de Calais. This left just two panzer divisions facing the Americans.

GOODWOOD's partial success, however, was obscured by an appalling breakdown of communications between the most senior Allied commanders. Montgomery had led Eisenhower to believe that GOODWOOD was more than a holding attack; that he intended breaking through to Falaise. When he failed to do so, critics seriously questioned the British commander's generalship, concluding that he was incapable of breaking the attritional stalemate. General George C. Marshall, the US Army Chief of Staff, pressured Eisenhower to take more direct charge and stop deferring to Montgomery. Angry because GOODWOOD had not secured the ground for his airfields, Eisenhower's deputy commander, Air Marshal A.W. Tedder, urged Eisenhower to sack Montgomery. Prime Minister Churchill berated General Alan Brooke, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, about Montgomery's over-cautiousness, and became even more upset when Montgomery tried to prevent him from visiting Normandy. Worsening an already sulphurous atmosphere, the American press was loudly comparing casualty numbers, and complaining that Americans were dying while Britons and Canadians loafed.

The result was enormous pressure, both to hold the German armoured divisions in place around Caen, and to deflect criticism from Second Army. This doomed the Canadians and British to more punishing holding attacks. On 21 July, Eisenhower directed Montgomery to assist COBRA by attacking in strength on the eastern flank, and Montgomery proposed a three-stage offensive plan to prevent the Germans from interfering with Bradley's offensive. First, the Canadians were to secure Verrières Ridge

(Operation SPRING); then British infantry would attack west of the Orne; and, finally, the massed armoured divisions were to strike once more towards Falaise.

Under great pressure himself, Montgomery naturally deflected it down the chain of command through General Simonds, the Canadian divisional and brigade commanders, and ultimately to corporals and riflemen who had to implement tidy map plans. This was the murky source from which bubbled Operation SPRING. Simonds began planning the operation on 21 July, timing it for four days later, in the bloody aftermath of 2nd Division's first try at the ridge. He had the same objectives as before, but the attack was on a much larger scale, and was to take place in three phases. In the first, 2nd Division right and 3rd Division left, would attack simultaneously at night across a six-kilometre front to take limited objectives about two kilometres distant: May-sur-Orne, Verrières, and Tilly-la-Campagne. In the second phase, at first light, both divisions would take objectives another two kilometres south — Fontenay-le-Marmion and Rocquancourt — while 7th Armoured Division drove further south along the plateau. Finally, the Guards Armoured Division was available to exploit gains, perhaps as far as the Laison River, or possibly even to Falaise.

Second Corps Headquarters planned the attack with intricate timings to coordinate artillery and air support, beginning in darkness and culminating just after first light. For reasons which remain unclear, but possibly stemming from faulty intelligence about the strength of the defences, Keller, on the left, chose to attack initially with just one battalion, and Foulkes on the right with two, all dispersed along the six-kilometre front.

The Germans were well entrenched along the ridge, following their standard practice of siting weapons in depth. Their outpost line was strung along Verrières Ridge and, behind that warning trigger, their main defence line centred on the fortified villages of Fontenay-le-Marmion and Rocquancourt. Still further back were their main counterattack formations. The technical and tactical advantages of the defence over the offence were even more pronounced because defenders outnumbered attackers, a situation not calculated to increase chances of success.

On the left flank, 3rd Division's objective, the village of Tilly-la-Campagne, was held by a reinforced company from the 1st SS Panzer Division, supported by tanks and anti-tank guns, some of them emplaced in the cellars of fortified farm buildings and others camouflaged as haystacks in fields. Forward Canadian positions were in the adjoining village of Bourguébus, about a kilometre away, where the North Novas assembled for their assault behind their fellow Maritimers of the North Shores.

The North Novas' attack began badly when the Luftwaffe arrived to inflict about 20 casualties with fragmentation bombs as they were getting ready. Divisional artillery fired concentrations ten minutes before the infantrymen moved out on either side of the road connecting the two villages. In order to help navigate, searchlights provided artificial moonlight by reflecting their beams off low clouds, but, instead of indicating the objective, they apparently silhouetted the infantrymen exposed in the fields. The unit history describes how:

> All at once a system of German slit trenches extended across their path and though the barrage had played on these they were filled by shouting survivors who shot and shouted and threw grenades like wild men. Major Matson [commanding D company] did not hesitate but shouted his men on and made a terrific assault.
>
> Soon the night was a bedlam of noise. Enemy guns began shooting from all angles. The dug-in tanks began shooting at fixed targets. Machine-gun fire came from emplacements concealed in haystacks, from the tin-roofed building, from the orchards, from everywhere. It seemed as if the artillery barrage had not harmed the enemy. The Germans shouted and yelled as if they were drunk or drugged, and the North Novas pitched into them with bomb and butt and bayonet in one of the wildest melees ever staged. . . . Soon voices were calling in many directions and most of them were groans or pleas for mercy.

In open ground without cover, the battalion was cut to pieces. Two companies left of the road were stopped and lost communications with Lieutenant Colonel Petch. Thinking that their leading platoons had got into Tilly, Petch committed his reserve company which was promptly pinned down as well. Three of the four company commanders were now casualties, radio contact and control lost. Petch asked B

Squadron of the Fort Garry tanks to follow a few bren-gun carriers towards Tilly but German anti-tank gunners shot out several in minutes, forcing the squadron to pull back to support the Novas from a flank. They could achieve little while losing 11 of their 16 tanks. Not knowing where his men were on the ground, Petch was reluctant to bring artillery fire down for fear of hitting them rather than the Germans. Individuals made their way back during the morning, and by afternoon Petch tried to get word to the others to pull out. Again, the regimental history paints the grisly scene:

> . . . all that hot dusty day of July 25th the men kept crawling back, with raw knees and arms and minor wounds. The whole affair had been more or less a nightmare. It was plain that the previous attacks on Tilly had given the enemy experience in the matter of defense, and the Germans seemed to know every move that was made. They had unusual fire power and their trenches were crammed with soldiers. The artificial lights had but added to the confusion and made the Novas targets for a strongly entrenched enemy. Those who escaped were they who crawled like snakes on the ground. It was one of the worst death traps soldiers had tried to cross, with practically every foot of ground taped [ranged] for machine-gun fire. In the darkness platoons had come apart at the seams, companies became mixed with each other and sections separated.

West of the road, Foulkes deployed 4 Brigade left and 5 Brigade right. Brigadier J.E. Ganong on the left ordered The Royal Hamilton Light Infantry (RHLI) to take his first objective, the village of Verrières. When it had been secured, The Royal Regiment, supported by C Squadron of the 1st Hussars, was to pass through and take Rocquancourt. Brigadier W.J. Megill, on the right, planned to have The Calgary Highlanders first take May-sur-Orne, where The Black Watch would form up for its assault up Verrières Ridge as far as Fontenay-le-Marmion. At the same time, tanks of 7th Armoured Division were to advance south between the two brigades. Before the attack could get underway the divisional start line along the St-André - Troteval Farm road had to be secured. This was the task of the FMR on the left and the Cameron Highlanders on the right. The badly bruised Fusiliers formed a composite company of 75 men under the command of Major J.A. Dextraze, to take Troteval Farm, where the Germans had a reinforced company. Dextraze moved off through the wheat fields behind supporting artillery and mortar fire, his two forward platoons going around each flank of the farm to give covering fire to the third, which assaulted the farm. When it went over the walls, the covering platoons sent sections to the rear to cut off any would-be escapers and, remarkably, the attack followed its script. Occupying the farm, the company took over the German slit trenches and drove off threatening tanks with PIATs until they were ordered to withdraw to avoid being caught in their own artillery fire.

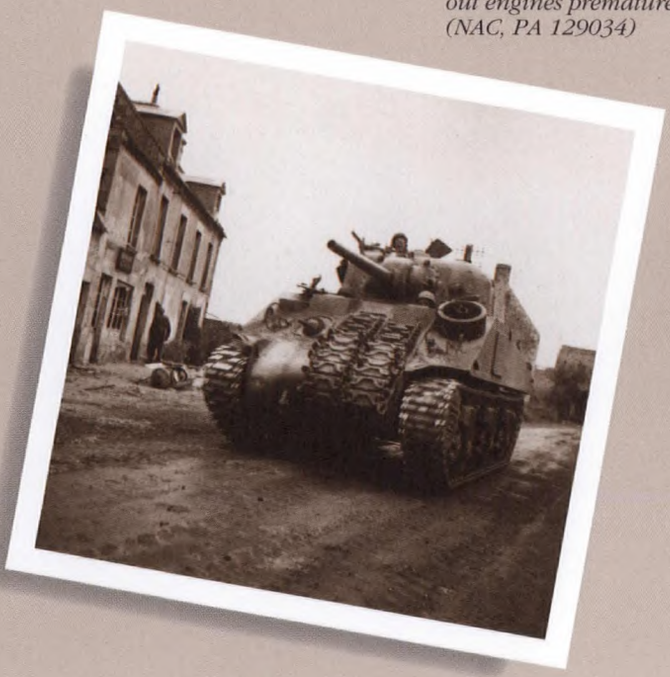
That gunfire was meant to harass German tanks around Troteval, and these soon caused difficulties for the RHLI, which was about to move over its start line at Troteval on its way to Verrières, just over a kilometre south. Sceptical that his start line would be secure, Lieutenant Colonel John Rockingham prudently sent his scout platoon up to mark it for the assault companies. When it reported finding several enemy tanks already there, Rockingham delayed his own move and sent his reserve company up to drive them off. They hit two of them with PIATs, which persuaded the others to withdraw. Despite losing its artillery support as a result of the delay, the battalion mounted a spirited assault and took the town of Verrières. The commander of A Company described the scene:

> *Before the first hedgerow was reached four MGs [machine guns] there opened fire on the company and an additional MG opened up from the grain fields to the right rear. . . . This caused a very great number of casualties but the company did push on though officers, platoon sergeants, and section leaders were gone. They got into the hedgerows and cleared the enemy from there. They killed about ten and took ten additional prisoners. This was just about dawn. By this time the plan had to be changed as 9 Platoon had only seven men left and could not be expected to clear the barnyards and barns up to the main road. Small groups under two corporals were organized, therefore, to go down the hedgerows leading to the main road and clean out the weapon slits which lined the hedges. The enemy did not hold the town at all but rather occupied the hedgerows and the fields around with an enormous amount of MGs. He*

Infantrymen, probably from 2nd Division, moving up in ack-ack formation – in file by sections, well spread to avoid presenting a compact target for mortars. (NAC, PA 129035)

"The co-operation of infantry and armour envisaged as being a wall of steel followed by a wall of flesh or vice versa does not in fact exist." Infantrymen and tankers each had to learn the other's strengths, and adapt to strange combat conditions. (DND, PMR93-366)

The Sherman with its 75 mm gun was badly outgunned by German tanks. Crews welded tank treads on their turrets as added protection, despite complaints that the additional weight would wear out engines prematurely. (NAC, PA 129034)



also had two 75 mm anti-tank guns in the first EAST-WEST hedgerow. The MGs in this hedge held their fire till the leading platoon was within 100 yards. Once our men reached the hedgerows they gave up easily.

The company commander added that the *"counterattacks came almost at once. The first within three to five minutes, comprised of about two tanks and 30 infantry, and the second in similar strength came about two hours later."* Units of two experienced panzer divisions continued pounding the position throughout the day, but Rockingham's men drove them off, assisted nobly by anti-tank guns of 2nd Anti Tank Regiment, British tankers from 1st Royal Tank Regiment, and close support rocket-firing Typhoons.

The RHLI's battle disrupted The Royal Regiment's start. It moved past Verrières late, on the way to Rocquancourt, but was pinned down a few hundred metres south by extremely heavy fire. Consequently, General Simonds delayed 7th Armoured Division's planned attack on the Royals' flank, apparently seeing no opening for them, but their absence, in turn, directly affected the Calgary-Black Watch attack on their right.

There, the Cameron Highlanders were attempting vainly to clear Germans from St-André and St-Martin, the connected villages in the Orne Valley that marked The Calgary Highlanders' start line for their attack on May-sur-Orne. For the previous four days the Camerons had been unable to secure the sector, and Germans remained in buildings, farms and cellars as well as in the connecting tunnels of a mine complex in St-Martin. From the mine tunnels, the enemy could easily follow the Camerons from underground, appearing at will from behind or on a flank, and they also made use of a sunken road across the Orne to maintain contact with their troops west of the river. When told that St-André was clear, Brigadier Megill, 5 Brigade commander, sent a reconnaissance party forward to set up his tactical headquarters in the village. They opened the door of a likely house but, on hearing German voices, quietly withdrew. Still trying to secure the villages as the main attack was about to begin, the Camerons' hold on the sector was tenuous at best; in the dark no one was sure where the Germans were.

The Calgary Highlanders, consequently, moved into a very hostile environment when they set out in the dark for their objective, the village of May-sur-Orne. There was some inevitable confusion as the battalion moved in the dark, assuming the way was clear. Germans let them pass, then took them under fire from the rear and flanks. Small groups of Highlanders got into, or near, their objective, but found it too strongly held and pulled back. At first light May-sur-Orne, from which The Black Watch planned to assault the ridge, was still firmly held by Germans, who were also entrenched all along the approaches to it.

To reach their objective, The Black Watch had to march west to St-Martin, then south to May-sur-Orne, and finally shake out into an extended line assault formation before following its supporting barrage for the two-kilometre climb up the steep hillside and over the crest to Fontenay-le-Marmion. By then, tragically, almost none of the premises on which the plan had been based reflected the actual situation on the ground. Neither its forming-up place at St-Martin, nor its start line at May-sur-Orne, had been secured. The battalion's left flank was exposed, because the tanks of 7th Armoured Division had not advanced. When the commanding officer was killed, and the two leading company commanders wounded, the battalion was slowed down and lost the cover of darkness.

When 24-year-old Major Philip Griffin assumed command of the battalion and took stock, he quickly appreciated that he would have to delay his attack until he was able to read the local tactical situation and adjust the timing of his fire plan. Scattered groups of Calgary Highlanders dug in around St-Martin told him that the Germans held May, so Griffin sent a patrol to locate them. They were fired on by a single machine-gun sited to fire on the battalion's flank as it attacked. Griffin sent the patrol back to take it out, but they were unable to do so, and they later learned that the Germans held May in strength but had withheld their fire to mislead them.

Megill, who learned from his artillery adviser that Griffin had asked to have his fire plan retimed, came forward to confer with the young battalion commander. They met on the road to St-André and assessed the odds of proceeding, Griffin apparently being more confident than Megill. Whether Megill, himself being urged to hurry by the divisional and corps commanders,

Typhoons carrying bombs and rockets were the favoured close support aircraft, although cumbersome staff procedures delayed effective coordination between the army and air force until well into the Normandy campaign. (DND, PL 42818)

A Typhoon of No 440 Squadron RCAF being camouflaged on a temporary landing strip in Normandy. (DND, PL 31378)

Flying Officer J. Orr and, on the right, Captain Heck Jones of The Regina Rifles share their perspectives on army-air cooperation over a bottle of local spirits. (NAC, PA 132857)

pressed Griffin to get on with it, or Griffin persuaded Megill that he had a reasonable chance of succeeding, will never be known. We do know that The Black Watch set out and were promptly annihilated.

With 1st Hussar tanks trying vainly to assist from their right flank, the battalion went straight up into a killing ground overlooked not only from the front and flanks but also from behind by observers on the high ground west of the Orne. The battalion Scout Platoon Sergeant watched from May:

I saw some of the battalion as it moved forward. They had two companies up and two behind, "A" was leading and a party was forward to make a recce of the route they were to follow and to secure the start line. . . . As they started up the crest of the hill German mortar fire came down on them and they were under heavy fire for an hour. Jerry had Panther and Tiger tanks dug in on the crest of the hill and the guns firing from these soon began to wear down the actual crest. Our battalion was pinned down by this fire until our Shermans came forward and diverted the attention of the tanks from our infantry. Some few were able to escape to a quarry but only a very few got back.

A German tank commander described his view:

. . . we noticed that from the St-Martin area a body of infantry of considerable strength — I assume about 300 to 400 men — advanced south. This was most impressive and perplexing. The soldiers were marching upright holding their rifles across their breast in readiness, as if on the drill square. Despite the strong fire immediately initiated on them from MAY and the south scarcely anybody looked for cover. It looked like waves of men rolling steadily forward — no sign of panic despite their visible losses. They did not get forced into cover but kept on marching upright.

To us, soldiers with four or five years experience, this was a most unreal sight. I still know exactly that after the first rounds from our 75 mm guns had left, we actually got scruples about firing upon these Canadians lacking cover and defence weapons. As it was — I repeat, an unreal sight but thus is war. After a short while . . . Panther tanks, tank destroyers and APCs appeared. The attack of the Canadians faded out before the ridge as actually there was nobody left. It had been — you'd almost have to call it — sheer butchery. Until this moment the enemy artillery had fired three to four km to our rear.

Perhaps 60 of the 300 men who started up the hill reached the top: just 15 came back down, and the battalion's grisly totals that day were almost 400 killed, wounded, and prisoners of war. In all, both divisions suffered 1,500 casualties, almost one-third of them killed. Except for Dieppe it was the Army's costliest day of the war and, like Dieppe, it has been painfully dissected and analyzed since.

The two principal reasons why SPRING took the course it did were the Germans and the terrain. Almost all of the seven German panzer divisions facing Second British Army were east of the Orne on the Canadian front. First SS Panzer Division held the line from Cagny to Verrières. From there to the Orne, the 272nd Infantry Division was reinforced with tank, infantry, and reconnaissance battalions from tank divisions whose main bodies were just behind the front ready to counterattack. After SPRING, the II Canadian Corps war diarist wrote, "The events of the past 48 hours may perhaps mitigate any concern as to the whereabouts of the 'flower of the German Army in the West.'" All of these experienced troops were well located in fortified defensive positions on commanding ground.

The task of throwing the Germans off the hill was given to a mix of battle-weary troops from 3rd Division and 2 Armoured Brigade, and others in an untried 2nd Division whose units had just a week of combat experience. Verrières Ridge was an inordinately bloody classroom in which to learn the harsh lessons of operational soldiering, and command faults at all levels made matters worse. Information about the Germans was over-optimistic; the Corps plan was overly rigid; divisional commanders sent too few men against too strong objectives, and seem not to have informed themselves sufficiently of the actual conditions fighting units faced on the ground; and infantry, tanks and artillery were inadequately coordinated.

Behind these inadequacies lay confusion over SPRING's purpose. Generals Simonds and Foulkes later advanced quite different views about what the operation was meant to achieve. Foulkes thought that the purpose of his attack

Infrantymen in their natural habitat: slit trenches. (DND, PMR93-614)

was to pry open a gate in the defensive wall which the armoured divisions would exploit. Simonds stated that the attack was merely a holding operation designed to keep German armoured formations on his front, but added that *"The Corps plan actually legislated both for success and the lack of it."* SPRING, it seems, was to be a breakthrough if possible, but possibly not a breakthrough.

Clearly SPRING did not succeed as an exploitation. Nor, apparently, was it any more successful as a holding operation. Montgomery had already achieved his operational purpose of attracting German tanks to the Caen front with GOODWOOD, which brought them in swarms. The Germans expected another major British tank attack, with Falaise as its objective, but the Canadian attack was not large enough to concern them unduly. The war diary of Fifth Panzer Army commented on SPRING, "Panzer Group takes the view that the attack begun this morning against I SS Panzer Corps is not the anticipated major attack, as in the first place the enemy air arm has not yet appeared in sizeable dimensions. OB West [commander in chief, Normandy] shares this view." With tragic irony, it seems that it was the threat of an attack, not the attack itself, that achieved the operational aim of keeping the panzer divisions away from the American front while COBRA was uncoiling. Within a few days, those same German tank divisions left the Canadian front and mounted a momentous counter-offensive against General Bradley's American forces in the western sector which sealed the Germans' fate in Normandy.

CHAPTER VII

AUGUST: OPERATION TOTALIZE

"The poppies are now in bloom."
(An officer of The British Columbia Regiment)

In the first week of August 1944, the character of the campaign in Normandy began to change. Operation COBRA broke through the German defences and reached the important junctions of Avranches and Mortain, allowing American armoured columns to push into Brittany. General George S. Patton's newly-activated Third US Army then joined the advance and swept around the German western flank. His progress alarmed Hitler, who ordered Field Marshal Günther von Kluge to cut Patton off from his base. In response, the German commander withdrew his armoured formations from the Canadian front for an offensive meant to split the American front at Mortain. Six panzer and panzer grenadier divisions, regrouped as Fifth Panzer Army, attacked on 6 August, but, forewarned by ULTRA decrypts, the Americans stopped them after hard fighting that destroyed most of Kluge's tanks. With Patton rampaging in their rear, the German armies in western Normandy were now threatened with encirclement. Accordingly, Montgomery instructed the Canadians to attack down Route Nationale 158, the Caen-Falaise highway, to close the trap.

General H.D.G. Crerar, whose First Canadian Army became operational on 31 July, gave the task to General Simonds' II Corps. When Simonds briefed his senior officers that they could shortly expect orders for a major operation, he emphasized the importance of the overall Allied operational plan, and stressed that there must be *"no holding back, and that every division must press on, regardless of casualties."* He also warned that pressure still had to be maintained in the Canadian sector to prevent the enemy from moving additional forces to the American front. In Montgomery's words, the Germans were to be *"shot up, and attacked, and raided, whenever and wherever possible."* These attacks had the secondary objectives of inflicting casualties and gaining tactically important ground before the forthcoming offensive. As a result, during the last week of July and the first week of August, 2nd Canadian Infantry Division and 4th Canadian Armoured Division mounted several small-scale attacks over familiar ground on Verrières Ridge.

This was the newly-arrived 4th Division's introduction to battle, and it was not an easy one. To the men of the division, coming into position south of Caen in the last days of July, the sight of the wreckage of Operations GOODWOOD, SPRING and ATLANTIC — abandoned trenches, hastily-dug graves and the hulks of shattered armoured vehicles and heavy equipment — was a sobering one. Surveying the carnage of GOODWOOD — scores of burned-out British tanks — from the turret of his Sherman, 24-year-old Captain Jack Summers of The South Alberta Regiment *"began to question the wisdom of my decision to transfer from the engineers to the armoured corps."* Major Edward Amy, who had gained considerable fighting experience in Italy before joining The Canadian Grenadier Guards of the division, reacted differently, making *"a note never to willingly put [his] squadron in a position where this might happen."* Yet, remembered a British Columbia Regiment officer, the scene had *"a weird kind of beauty in it all"* adding, *"there is just the right amount of colour, for the poppies are now in bloom."*

Fourth Armoured was the last Canadian division to arrive in Normandy. Organized in Canada as an infantry formation in 1941, it had been converted to armour the following year and shipped to the United Kingdom. There it trained intensively, but was hampered by a shortage of tanks and constant organizational changes. Only in February 1944 did the division replace its old Ram tanks with Shermans. Then, many of the senior officers of the division including its commander, Major General F.F. Worthington, were replaced by veterans from Italy. The new divisional commander, 33-year-old Major General George Kitching, was dissatisfied with the division's state of readiness. Kitching felt that the individual units were good but, as he wrote in his memoir, *Mud and Green Fields*, the *"essential cooperation between armour, infantry and artillery had not been practised to the extent it should have been."* He was also concerned that his divisional and brigade staffs did not have *"enough experience of command."* But Kitching was not able to undertake full-scale divisional training and had to make do with map exercises to improve command and communication procedures. As he later acknowledged, these did not *"create the 'fog of war' that engulfs a unit in its first actions."* The "Green Patch" soldiers of 4th Armoured took over the positions south of Caen held by the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, which was withdrawn for a well-earned rest. They were introduced to the harsh realities of Verrières Ridge when ordered to attack German strongpoints, bitterly familiar to experienced battalions. German defenders fought off three attempts by The Calgary Highlanders to take Tilly-la-Campagne at the end of July, and then another by The Lincoln and Welland Regiment. As had happened before, the Germans were ready for the untried battalion. As companies approached the village, about 60 guns hit them with defensive fire and, for the first time, they experienced the infantryman's helplessness when under heavy shelling.

Several Lincoln and Welland veterans recalled this experience to a recent regimental chronicler.* *"It's something you can't fight back at,"* remembered one, *"It's not like the guy's 200 yards away and he's got a rifle in his hand. You can do something about that."* Another described how *"You're always visualizing the next one is going to drop on top of you in the slit trench."* As

* The recollections of Lincoln and Welland veterans on Verrières Ridge are in Geoffrey Hayes, *The Lincs: A History of the Lincoln and Welland Regiment at War* Alma, Ontario: 1986.

Lance Corporal Robert Ross later recorded, each man reacted in different ways to the horror:

> *. . . One guy got on his knees, I remember . . . and he was praying . . . I thought, "Gees, that guy's got courage." He was right on his knees at the bottom of that trench and he said, "I just don't want to die." I said, "Look . . . don't worry about it. If you get hit, you won't know it anyway. . . . Let's talk about chocolate sundaes or something like that, something important." We were just young guys. So I sat on the edge of this trench here, inside this old house, talking about chocolate sundaes: wouldn't they go down good now, and all this crap; and he was on his knees on the floor praying to the Lord.*

Two Lincoln platoons were pinned down by machine-gun fire near the village. A platoon commander, Lieutenant John Martin, remembered that his company commander crawled up to him and said *"Well, we've got to get up that hill [toward Tilly]."* Martin replied: *"You be my guest."* He concluded that *"If we hadn't known there was a war on, we sure as hell knew it after that night — it was just awful."* Like all the previous attacks on Tilly, this one got nowhere.

On the other flank, in 2nd Canadian Division's sector beside the Orne, the Maisonneuves tried twice to take the church in St-Martin that the Germans were using as an observation post. After flying over the area, Brigadier H.A. Young thought that the church could be seized by a single infantry company with artillery support. Before dawn on 31 July, Major J.A. Dextraze, who had captured Troteval Farm six days earlier, led a company of Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal in a spirited assault that secured the church. Young now planned to clear out the mine shafts to the south through which the Germans were still infiltrating the forward Canadian positions. During the night of 4/5 August, the Fusiliers, assisted by a company of The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, attacked the pit-head structures of the shafts so that field engineers could place demolitions to destroy them. Although the attack succeeded, the sappers were unable to blow up the shafts because they were still under sniper and machine-gun fire.

Simonds, meanwhile, had been planning his main attack, codenamed TOTALIZE. His task, as Montgomery defined it, was to *"break through the enemy positions to the south and south-east of Caen, and to gain such ground in the direction of Falaise as [would] cut off the enemy forces [then] facing Second Army and render their withdrawing eastwards difficult — if not impossible."* By then, the Canadians had been in the region south of Caen for almost a month, and well appreciated that its terrain favoured the defenders. Looking south, the Caen-Falaise highway climbed a gradually rising series of gentle slopes through open fields dotted with walled villages surrounded by orchards and small woods that provided excellent concealment. There was plenty of room for armoured formations to manoeuvre around these points — but what was good tank country was also good anti-tank country. The *"problem in this open country was the old one of desert fighting,"* recalled one British armoured officer, Lieutenant Colonel Alan Joly in *Blue Flash: "how to move in a conspicuous tank across the bare plain without being knocked out by the enemy tanks and anti-tank guns which were lying in wait."*

Nearly a decade earlier, as a young officer, Simonds had studied the mechanics of breaking into a strong defensive position, and now he had an opportunity to test his theory. Simonds had closely observed GOODWOOD, and realized that, although heavy bombers had pierced the first defence line, they had left the other lines, sited in depth, intact. He concluded that he would require bombers to support each phase of his attack. Obtaining heavy bomber support required lengthy negotiations with senior air officers but, against their preferred judgement, the latter reluctantly agreed. Bomber Command would bomb before the first phase, at night along the flanks, while the US Eighth Air Force would drop its bomb loads in front of the attackers before the second phase.

GOODWOOD had also well illustrated the problems of infantry-tank cooperation; when tanks got well in front, moving faster cross-country than foot-bound infantrymen, they were left vulnerable to anti-tank weapons. Determined to find a means to carry infantrymen safely at tank speed, Simonds improvised armoured personnel carriers, or APCs. For the Normandy assault, the field artillery regiments of 3rd Division had been equipped with Priests (self-propelled 105 mm howitzers) borrowed from the United States Army. At the end of July they were

about to be returned to the Americans and Simonds recalled:

> *I was one day watching some of these vehicles and it occurred to me that, if the equipment was stripped, they would be sufficiently roomy and have adequate protection to provide the sort of vehicle I had in mind. I therefore asked General Crerar if he would intervene with the Americans to allow us to strip the equipments and use them for this particular operation.*

The Americans agreed and First Canadian Army's Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineer units mobilized all their resources to convert 76 Priests to APCs in a hectic week of work. Each of the new, "unfrocked" Priests could carry a ten-man infantry section in relative safety from mortar and machine-gun fire. Simonds had expected to have a month to familiarize the crews and passengers of the APCs with their new equipment but, in the end, most barely received two days. The last vehicles to be converted were only delivered to units 24 hours before the attack commenced.

TOTALIZE was originally planned on the assumption that the Germans would maintain the strong armoured forces between Caen and Falaise that had bloodied the Canadians over the previous weeks. Thus, Kluge's redeployment of German armour westward for the Mortain offensive affected the plan for TOTALIZE. On 6 August, one day before the operation was scheduled to begin, Simonds received intelligence that the panzer divisions opposite the Canadians had been replaced by the 89th Infantry Division, a less powerful opponent. He therefore decided to commit both his armoured divisions during the second phase of the operation. In the first phase, timed for midnight on 7/8 August, two infantry divisions — 51st Highland left and 2nd Canadian right, each with its leading infantry brigade in APCs, and supported by an armoured brigade — would advance astride the Caen-Falaise highway and breach the defences to a distance of seven to eight kilometres. The divisions' other infantry brigades would follow on foot to clear out positions bypassed by the lead units. In the second phase, 14 hours later, the 1st Polish Armoured Division left, and the 4th Canadian Armoured Division right, would pour through the breach and drive towards Falaise. Most simply put, TOTALIZE was a massive armoured fist that would punch a hole through the strongpoints that had frustrated the Canadians since they had reached Verrières Ridge.

The last-minute change of plan worried Generals George Kitching and Stanislaw Maczek, commanders of 4th Canadian and 1st Polish Armoured Divisions. On 7 August, they told Simonds that the Germans would be able to concentrate their anti-tank guns on the extremely narrow frontages to which they would be confined. Kitching's front, for example, was no more than 900 metres at its widest and, in places, restricted even further by obstacles and villages. The two generals also pointed out that the long interval between TOTALIZE's two phases would give the Germans time to regroup and occupy blocking positions to stop them. Simonds, however, declined to accept their advice, possibly because the cumbersome army-air force command structure made it difficult to alter the rigid bombing schedule, and possibly because the latest intelligence reports had placed units of the powerful 1st SS Panzer Division in the vicinity and it seemed that a second bombing assault would be needed to neutralize them. Preparing TOTALIZE presented a major challenge to First Canadian Army's support units. During the first week of August, Royal Canadian Army Service Corps drivers dumped more than 200,000 rounds of ammunition — 650 for each of the 700 guns in support — as well as 700,000 litres of gasoline and scores of thousands of rations in the forward positions. Supplies moved on roads and tracks hastily constructed by sappers, while signallers strung hundreds of kilometres of telephone wire to link various headquarters with their units.

Throughout the afternoon and early evening of 7 August, assault units assembled in forward concentration areas behind Verrières Ridge, safe from German observation. As Colonel Joly wrote, they were careful not to drive too fast as

> *. . . to travel fast meant raising tell-tale dust, with its swift retribution in the form of enemy shelling. There were frequent reminders of one's duty to one's neighbour in the form of notices such as "DUST TO DUST, ASHES TO ASHES: YOUR DUST — OUR ASHES," or the more direct exhortation: "MIND YOUR DUST: WE LIVE HERE — YOU DON'T."*

The assault units were organized in six columns, four from 2nd Canadian Infantry Division and 2 Canadian Armoured Brigade and

The "Priest," a self-propelled 105 mm howitzer used by the 3rd Canadian Division. Stripped of its gun and with armour plate attached, it became an Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC) during Operation TOTALIZE. (NAC, PA 114574)

The crew of a Priest gather around their vehicle. Note the additional armour plate riveted on the side to provide protection against small-arms fire. (NAC, PA 132886)

two from 51st Highland Division and 33 British Armoured Brigade. Each of the Canadian columns consisted of two troops of four Shermans, two troops of Flail mine-clearing tanks, a troop of AVREs, an infantry battalion mounted in APCs or, in one column, the 8th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment, as well as anti-tank, medium machine-gun and field-engineer detachments.

The 200 vehicles and tanks of each column formed up in compact files, with only a few metres separating each, both nose to tail and side to side, and with a column width of only 15 metres. They were packed so tight that Major Radley-Walters, commanding A Squadron of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers, remembered walking the length of his column by jumping from vehicle to vehicle. Despite all due precautions, the process of assembling thousands of vehicles did raise clouds of dense, choking dusk that many feared would surely alert the Germans. By 2100, however, when assembly was complete, there was no sign of enemy action.

Officers issued maps and air photos, and gave out their orders. Lieutenant Charles Williams of the Sherbrookes was briefing his crews when he was startled to see, among his listeners, the corps commander and the commander of 2 Armoured Brigade, Brigadier R.A. Wyman. Simonds listened for a few minutes and then came over and told Williams: *"Remember, the whole Canadian Army is behind you."*

There was nothing to do now but wait. *"It was a perfect evening, warm and still,"* Colonel Joly remembered:

> *We stood about near our tanks while the long summer twilight gradually turned to dusk. Some smoked; few talked. At a quarter to eleven, as the light was beginning to fail, the word was passed down the line: "Get mounted." Five minutes later the silence was shattered by the roar of tank engines starting up, and we began to move slowly to the Start Line, which was about a mile ahead.*

An hour before midnight, the roar of hundreds of powerful engines drowned out all other noise as Bomber Command aircraft unloaded their deadly cargoes on targets marked by flares dropped by pathfinder aircraft. Billowing clouds of dust raised hundreds of metres high by the explosion of thousands of bombs immediately obscured the horizon. Before the bombing had ceased, the artillery barrage began. Under cover of the guns, the Canadian assault columns crossed their start lines and approached the villages of Rocquancourt and Fontenay-le-Marmion, those same fortified villages that had been SPRING's objectives. Although the advance was guided by searchlights, radio beams and anti-aircraft guns firing tracer shells, one report told how the movement of

> . . . hundreds of vehicles raised dense clouds of dust blinding to drivers, already struggling with the general obscurity and the contrasted glare of the searchlights, and able to see only the nearest tail-light ahead of them, as the dim procession crawled in the lowest gear at 100 yards a minute towards their objectives 6,000 yards away. . . . It was not surprising that collisions occurred, that vehicles strayed from the column, even that some of the stragglers came to be fired on by their friends, much less that others were knocked out by the enemy's guns.

At the front of each column were Flail tanks to clear a path through the minefields and behind them came the AVRE tanks whose crews laid down white tape to mark the cleared area and threw out green and amber lights to indicate the correct course. The cleared path was rarely straight; Radley-Walters thought that *"it would have broken a snake's back to follow it."* Visibility was obscured when dirt from the barrage lifting continuously ahead of the columns was joined by dust raised by the vehicles and smoke fired by the defenders.

In this dimly-lit inferno, punctuated by explosions from artillery shells and burning vehicles, it was inevitable that some units strayed, causing confusion and slowing the advance. All three APC-borne infantry battalions of 4 Brigade — The Royal Regiment of Canada, The Royal Hamilton Light Infantry and The Essex Scottish Regiment — had difficulty moving around Rocquancourt.

Poor visibility also made it difficult to identify friend from foe. Captain Leonard Harvey, an artillery observer from 4th Field Regiment accompanying The Royal Regiment, had a particularly harrowing experience. Losing contact with the infantry company he had been following, his bren-gun carrier was moving through a narrow village street when Harvey saw a wall looming up on the left. He shouted to his driver to *"Keep right! Keep Right!"* but the

man protested, *"The carrier can't be scraping the wall on the left side, for [it] is already scraping the wall on his right."* Puzzled by the obstruction, Harvey put out his hand, feeling

> *. . . not cold, rough stone, but warm, smooth metal, vibrating under his hand! As he moves it back and forth, and peers intently through the gloom to try to distinguish what it is, a brief flicker of light from an airburst or a wavering beam of artificial moonlight momentarily penetrates the dust cloud. He is patting a German hash-mark cross on the side of a tank.*

Fortunately, the German tankers were just as bewildered and the gunner officer and his driver were able to *"slink off undetected into the swirling dust and smoke of the flashing, roaring night."* *

Confusion lessened as the sky lightened at about 0500. A few hours later, having suffered only light casualties, the three battalions of 4 Brigade had secured, or were close to, their objectives. East of the highway, 51st Highland Division units also took their first phase objectives, with one notable exception: Tilly-la-Campagne, whose defenders beat off yet another attack by an infantry battalion. When the strongpoint finally surrendered during the morning of 8 August, it was little more than a collection of rubble.

Mopping up on the right flank, 6 Brigade units had a hard fight to secure the strongpoints on the reverse slopes of Verrières Ridge. The South Saskatchewans seized Rocquancourt, but Les FMR and The Cameron Highlanders of Canada faced tougher opposition at May-sur-Orne and Fontenay-le-Marmion. The Highlanders, nearly blinded by ground mist, smoke and dust from the armoured attack on their left, were slowed by mines and enemy artillery and machine-gun fire. It took 12 hours of heavy fighting to clear May-sur-Orne.

Les FMR, rebuffed in a morning attack on Fontenay, returned in the afternoon, only 150 strong, and took the village, house by house, with the assistance of a troop of flame-throwing Churchill tanks. After the tanks blew holes through the walls of each building and set the interior alight with flame-throwers, the Fusiliers entered the burning structures and winkled out the defenders.

Despite pockets of enemy resistance, by 0630 TOTALIZE had succeeded in breaking through the German forward line. Lieutenant Colonel M.B. Gordon, commanding the Sherbrookes, was then with his leading squadrons on their objectives near the village of Cramesnil. When his commander, Brigadier Wyman, arrived half an hour later, Gordon asked for permission to continue advancing straight down the highway as it appeared to him that *"the road to Falaise was wide open."* Wyman refused as his brigade's orders were to establish a firm base for 4th Canadian Armoured Division's second phase attack. Minutes later, Wyman was wounded by sniper fire. Gordon waited, and waited.

The sheer weight of the assault had severely shaken the German 89th Infantry Division. Close by, however, was the Canadians' nemesis, Kurt Meyer's 12th SS Panzer Division, which had been withdrawn from the front line on 4 August as a first step before being moved west. These orders were cancelled at the request of the commander of I SS Panzer Corps who, certain that he faced a major attack south of Caen, placed the Hitler Youth division in reserve behind 89th Infantry Division.

On the morning of 8 August, Meyer's division was deployed in a number of battle groups. Its Panther tanks were with one fighting to stem Second British Army's BLUECOAT offensive to the west. In the immediate vicinity of TOTALIZE was another, a motorized infantry battalion supported by about 50 tanks, including ten Tigers. There was also a collection of miscellaneous tanks and assault guns at an armoured workshop in Cintheaux and 12th SS Division's 14 self-propelled 75 mm anti-tank guns. Meyer could also deploy his own and 89th Infantry Division's anti-tank guns and, finally, he could call on the field artillery of the two divisions, as well as two rocket-projector battalions, and a brigade of Luftwaffe 88 mm flak guns. He was able, in other words, to muster an impressive array of weapons — if given time to get them into firing positions along the obvious Canadian axis of advance.

The aerial and artillery bombardment warned Meyer that a major attack was underway and he reacted quickly. Receiving only confusing reports from the front, he drove north in the morning to encounter German soldiers fleeing

* Captain Harvey's experience is taken from George Blackburn's forthcoming book on the Royal Canadian Artillery in Normandy entitled *Thank God, the Guns*.

south in disarray — the Canadians had broken the front of the 89th Division. Meyer personally rallied some of the shaken men and then acted to stabilize the situation which, at this point, looked very serious. As he later recalled: *"I realized that if I failed now and I did not deploy my division correctly, the Allies would be through to Falaise and the German armies in the west trapped."*

Having trained there in 1943, Meyer knew the terrain south of Caen. He quickly issued a flurry of orders, recalling one battle group to occupy a blocking position near Potigny, and the other to counterattack in the area of St-Aignan around noon with the support of the divisional artillery and mortars. To the east of the Caen-Falaise highway, Meyer placed his self-propelled and towed anti-tank guns. Finally, he ordered all other anti-aircraft and anti-tank gun units to set up a defensive gun screen in the area of Bretteville-le-Rabet.

Local German commanders had already started to counterattack. Early in the morning four German tanks moved north up RN 158 and began systematically to destroy the bren-gun carriers of The Royal Regiment of Canada and the Toronto Scottish near Cramesnil. In a moment, the area was in turmoil as gunfire set the carriers alight. Captain William J. Waddell, a FOO with the Royals, pinpointed the German tanks and guided a troop of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers up to engage them, then directed their fire. Major Ralph Young, second-in-command of the Royals, remembered watching Waddell,

> *. . . standing out in the open all by his bloody self, pointing out a German tank here, another there—yelling at our tanks, "Hit the goddam thing!" or words to that effect. Those are his fire orders. Oh yes . . . incredible! With him pointing and the tanks shooting, they knock out three— maybe four of them— one or two SP's and a couple of tanks.**

Half an hour after Gordon of the Sherbrookes had requested permission to go on, Simonds ordered the second phase of TOTALIZE — by 4th Canadian and 1st Polish Armoured Divisions. It was not to begin for six hours after the second bombing attack. Throughout the night and into the early morning, the two divisions had been moving into the forward positions vacated by 2nd Canadian and 51st Highland Divisions, a movement marked by massive traffic jams, the ever-present clouds of dust and intermittent sniping and shelling from bypassed villages where isolated pockets of Germans were still holding out.

Some of the commanders of 4th Division's lead units were also confused about their tasks and roles. As happened not infrequently, careful battle procedure drills — that enabled units to conduct their reconnaissances, briefings, and administrative preparations simultaneously — faltered. In some units, elaborate plans developed at higher headquarters did not reach the junior commanders who had to implement them. This was the case in Halpenny Force, the spearhead of 4 Armoured Brigade, named after its commander, Lieutenant Colonel W.H. Halpenny, and which comprised his own Canadian Grenadier Guards, The Lake Superior Regiment (Motorized) and attached anti-tank and field-engineer units. Major Edward Amy, for instance, who was commanding the lead squadron of the Guards, did not receive any information beyond a warning order that the brigade would soon be going into action until 2200 on 7 August, when Halpenny summoned his officers to a briefing.

Arriving at regimental headquarters, the Lake Superior history noted, the officers crowded into "the Intelligence room with its smoky, excited atmosphere, its dim light, and its small map tacked to the wall, all eager to learn what they could." It was hard to hear anything as an artillery regiment close by was firing hard in support of the first phase of the operation. Just as Halpenny started his briefing, aircraft flew overhead and someone turned off the lights:

> In the noisy darkness the Orders Group, already large and unwieldy, lost whatever sense of cohesion it might ever have had, and when the lights were finally turned on again, the place was in a state of the utmost confusion. As he returned to his own lines each officer possessed but the vaguest notion as to what was going to happen on the morrow.

Amy, leading 4 Armoured Brigade's attack, was not informed of the second bombing; he only knew that at first light he had to be ready to move into the attack. Noise and general confusion delayed Amy's return to his squadron and when he finally found his men in the dark, he was unable to brief them properly:

* In Blackburn, *Thank God, the Guns.*

Sherman tanks of a Canadian armoured regiment south of Caen, August 1944. While no match for its German counterparts, the Sherman was a robust vehicle, easy to maintain, and available in large numbers. (NAC, PA 132904)

"Mind Your Dust!" "Dust is Death!" The movement of large numbers of tanks and vehicles raised clouds of dust as is evident in this photograph of a Canadian armoured unit south of Caen in August 1944. Dust gave away positions and attracted German artillery fire. (DND, PMR93-379)

We had but one small flash light and the din of gun fire was deafening. This combination made it impossible for them to either study the map or hear what I said.
Since we had to move under a rigidly controlled movement plan and cross the start point at precisely 0030 hrs., my orders to the troop leaders were limited to an order of march and mount up and follow me. None of the supporting troops had found us and God alone knew where they were.

This was an inauspicious way to begin a major operation, particularly one so important, and things got worse. Amy lost one tank to a mine, and rumbled through an irate infantry unit while moving up in the dark; but he was on his start line in time *"waiting for the order to move."* They were still waiting nearly eight hours later when the artillery fired red smoke shells to mark the targets for bombers.

Tragically, some aircraft dropped short, hitting units of the Polish and 3rd Canadian Division moving up. Father Raymond Hickey recalled that the aircraft *"approached in the afternoon sun, they were American bombers and our lads greeted them with a cheer— but a yell went up and men started leaping from the lorries . . . our convoy was changed into a scene of horror."* It happened very fast; Major J.E. Anderson told the North Shore historian that he remembered seeing *" a wall of fire and smoke coming toward [them]."* He went on:

For a second we were too surprised to move, then made a dive for a shallow trench where we piled in one on top of the other. The concussion from the explosions was severe and literally beat us into the ground. We were dazed at what happened, as the only planes we could see were American Forts flying toward the coast. We were sure that the Germans were using captured American planes as a new secret weapon.

Allied bombs inflicted more than 300 Canadian and Polish casualties, while largely missing their intended targets. When Meyer saw a pathfinder aircraft circling overhead at midday, he astutely concluded that it was a flying command post waiting for a stream of bombers to direct. Immediately advancing the timing of his own counterattack, he moved a battle group forward which placed them inside the bomb line (that line on maps meant to protect Allied troops from their own aircraft) and most of the bombs fell behind them. The long pause between the two phases of TOTALIZE puzzled the German commander: he thought that halting an armoured offensive in mid-course was *"like stopping to water the horses in the middle of a cavalry charge."* Nonetheless, at 1355, the two armoured divisions crossed the start line, marked by the villages of Bretteville-sur-Laize and St-Aignan-de-Cramesnil. Meyer's self-propelled anti-tank guns firing from the protection of woods across clear, open fields of shimmering wheat, immediately brought the Polish advance to a halt.

By the time Amy's squadron of the Grenadier Guards crossed the start line, he hadn't slept for 33 hours. The perfunctory briefing, appalling approach march, and the general confusion, in his view, was *"unnecessary and something was very wrong when troops were being committed to their first battle in this fashion."* This was particularly important as 4 Brigade was attacking *"on a squadron frontage."* His tanks were now emerging from the very small end of a funnel in the face of German anti-tank guns with twice the range of his own. *"With an open flank and no information on enemy locations,"* he decided, *"a bold charge was not an option."*

As soon as he started out, Amy continued, he ordered his attached Lake Superior company to move:

. . . down the road [the Caen-Falaise highway] (our center line) which provided them better cover and provided protection on our right flank. I deployed the squadron east of the road with Lt. Craig Smith's troop in the lead. Without any knowledge of where the enemy might be, my focus was instinctively drawn to the open ground left of our center line where I expected to see elements of the Polish Armoured Division but they were not visible. While we had good observation across this area, there was adequate cover to conceal both tanks and anti-tank guns and with this flank wide open, I was reluctant to push forward without further information on not only the enemy but where our own troops were located as well. . . .
I kept scanning the area to our left and left front but could see no sign of friend or foe and about this time calls started coming in "to get cracking." These calls became more frequent and Major Snuffy Smith (3 Squadron) was sent forward to let me know how impatient the

various Sunrays [superior commanders] were becoming. I recall telling him what I thought the Sunrays might do.
Under the circumstances and with no information on either enemy or friendly locations, these persistent exhortations that Big, then Big Big and finally Big Big Big Sunray [Brigade, Divisional and Corps Commanders] said "to get cracking" had no positive effect on me whatsoever. In spite of my lack of response to these proddings, I never did have a visit from any of my Sunrays from the CO to the Corps Commander.

Amy's leading troop commander, Lieutenant Craig Smith, lost two of his four tanks to mines shortly after crossing the start line. Listening on his radio to the exhortations from senior commanders to get moving, Smith charged over a hill supported by the surviving tank of his troop and was immediately hit by an anti-tank gun. When it took over the lead shortly afterward, No 3 Squadron of the Guards fared no better. As Kitching had feared, Halpenny Force was now constricted by the narrow corridor running between the highway and the railway embankment to the west. Hampered by mines, and hit by anti-tank fire from woods and orchards on the flanks, they advanced cautiously. Despite unending exhortations from the brigade and divisional commander to "Push on, push on" and "Maintain the momentum," by mid-afternoon, Halpenny Force was still five kilometres short of Bretteville-le-Rabet, its first objective.

Although Halpenny Force moved deliberately, some tank crews found worthwhile targets. As the lead troop of 3 Squadron, commanded by Lieutenant Ivan P. Phelan, neared Cintheaux in late afternoon, it was fired on by a German anti-tank gun hidden in orchards around the village. Not stopping, Phelan drove right over it, firing all the way, and in a few minutes, the troop destroyed or captured 11 more enemy heavy weapons in a brave and audacious action.

As evening was approaching, Halpenny pulled his tanks back to replenish fuel and ammunition. His disappointingly slow progress had not pleased his superiors, and Simonds told Kitching to keep his division on the move during the night to take both Bretteville-le-Rabet and Point 195, the high ground dominating the town of Potigny. Kitching formed two battle groups to secure these objectives. A reorganized Halpenny Force was to secure Bretteville, while the second group, consisting of The British Columbia Regiment's tanks and three companies of The Algonquin Regiment, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel D.G. Worthington, would occupy Point 195. Halpenny Force took Bretteville next day, but the other column met with disaster.

Moving through the open fields immediately east of the Caen-Falaise highway in the dark was confusing and dangerous. Major L.C. Monk of the Algonquins recalled that the column moved in *"waist-high wheat."* But, he continued, *"because of static [on the radios] and the noise of the engines we could not figure out what was going on ahead."* The tanks, which were in front, attracted fire and soon *"houses and haystacks were burning on all sides, making us feel conspicuous and skylined."* The historian of The British Columbia Regiment, who was present, describes a tanker's view of the night movement:

Hello all stations Able one, Sunray calling, push on. On to Hill 195. We must be half way there now. We must be through the German defence ring. We must be getting close, we see their soft-skinned vehicles. 75 traverse left . . . steady . . . on. Enemy half-track . . . fire. There's a flash, a roar, a burning wreckage strewn with bodies and one of our gunners claims a hit. Co-ax traverse right . . . steady . . .

Just before first light, the column was near Bretteville-le-Rabet. When it came under fire, Worthington turned east to skirt the village but the speed of the advance and the confusion of sporadic shooting caused the infantry companies to fall behind the tanks. Even worse, the column lost its way; instead of turning west again to cross the main highway toward Point 195, Worthington mistook a secondary road and swung ever farther to the east.

At 0755, he reached a field edged by trees on sloping high ground and radioed that he was on his objective. The two tank squadrons, and the two infantry companies that had managed to keep up, were actually near Point 140, in front of the Poles and seven kilometres northeast of their real objective, Point 195. Thinking that they were on the right hill, Worthington and Lieutenant Colonel A.J. Hay of the Algonquins were determined to secure it until reinforced. Although he could not know it, Worthington had penetrated the front line of 12th SS Panzer

Division, whose units had spent much of the night shifting to new positions.

A 12th SS officer, Lieutenant Bernhard Meitzel, reconnoitring in a captured armoured car, came under fire near Point 140. He withdrew, informed Meyer and then went back for further information. Shellfire knocked out his vehicle and he joined Worthington Force as a prisoner. Meyer, however, brought Point 140 under fire by all available weapons and then launched the inevitable counterattacks. The British Columbia Regiment's historian described their effect:

> The whole area shakes with blast, 88's fire from all angles. The air is streaked with tracer, smoke rises, tanks brew, crews bale out. Orders are shouted over the wireless, crew commanders straining their eye through binoculars.

An hour after reaching the hill, Worthington radioed for artillery support, which was duly fired against Point 195, but a request by the gunners to verify the accuracy of the fire met with silence. Thereafter, communication with Worthington was broken despite frantic attempts throughout the day by 4th Division headquarters to locate him.

By mid-morning the Canadians were under attack from three sides. *"The enemy fire,"* a witness remembered,

> *. . . increased in intensity as the morning wore on. It came in from all directions, but chiefly from the south and east flanks. By 1030 hours, half of our tanks were in flames; the remainder found it difficult to locate and reply to enemy fire. No targets were offered to the infantry, so we just kept our heads down and took a bad beating from enemy shells and mortar fire which would explode in the hedges and trees above, sending shrapnel showers into the slits.*

Alarmed by the threat to his defences, Meyer committed his heavy tanks — Panthers and Tigers — to wipe out the Canadians, and gradually whittled them away. At one point, Sherman tanks, believed to be Polish, approached the Canadian position from the south but were driven back by fierce enemy fire. Two British Typhoons, attracted by the smoke pyres from the burning vehicles, arrived over Point 140 only to *"let fly"* at the Canadians with rockets and machine-guns. Major Monk of the Algonquins remembered that his soldiers

> *. . . quickly got out [their] recognition signals and burned yellow smoke. The planes rocked their wings in acknowledgement. They returned at half-hour intervals all day long, rocketing and strafing the enemy around us. They were heartily cheered many times. . . .*

Late in the morning, some of the wounded were piled into half-tracks that made a high-speed run under fire to the Polish lines. A few hours later, the eight remaining Shermans also got away.

By late afternoon, the situation was desperate. There were no tanks left in action;

> *In fact most of them were burning furiously, many with their dead crews still in them. The exploding ammunition in the burning tanks added to the noise and danger. Our mortar detachments were out of action. The field was a mass of shell holes. The trees and scrub were cut to pieces from shrapnel. The smell of burning human flesh, the odour of exploding H.E. mingled to make most of us nauseated. The continuous crash of exploding shells and mortar bombs began to have its effect, first among the wounded and then the rest of us began to get "battle wacky." We had run out of morphine and bandages. Many of the wounded men were delirious, shouting and screaming — jumping out of their slits, having to be pulled forcibly to cover again. Things looked pretty grim.*

Worthington was killed in the early evening and a few hours later, as the Germans formed up for yet another attack, the survivors slipped out of their positions and attempted to make their way, singly and in groups, back to the Canadian lines. Meitzel convinced one group that their best chance of survival lay in surrendering and he guided them to the German positions. "The German attackers were within 50 yards when the last few left," wrote the Algonquins' historian, but many still managed to escape. Among them was Monk who, according to the same account, while

> . . . covering the last withdrawal with a Bren, managed to crawl away with his small group at the last minute. An unexpected ally at this juncture was one of the prisoners, who, claiming that he was Polish and wanted to fight his former enforced comrades, fired a Bren gun as the attack came in, and was killed in doing so. C.S.M. Fraser's first inkling of the proximity of the enemy was when a

Gun detachment "pulls through" the bore of their 5.5-inch gun. The 5.5, an accurate weapon with good range, equipped the medium artillery regiments of the Canadian army in Normandy. (NAC, PA 131382)

A Canadian Medium Regiment firing on German positions while a column of TCVs (Troop Carrying Vehicles) passes in the foreground. To counter superior German armour, and break through well-sited enemy defensive lines, First Canadian Army relied heavily on the support of its gunners. Ten field and six medium regiments of the RCA served in Normandy. (NAC, PA 116516)

figure suddenly loomed up in front of his slit, and, saying in perfect English, "This is my land, you cannot take it from me," stood over him with levelled rifle and caused him to surrender.

Thus ended a brave but hopeless action that cost 47 tanks and at least 200 casualties. Ironically, Worthington's force had unexpectedly broken through Meyer's position, and it was unfortunate that communications and language difficulties combined to thwart its exploitation.

Kitching did not learn of the full scale of the disaster until the evening of 9 August. He had tried to assist Worthington in every way possible, including sending The Governor General's Foot Guards, together with a company of the Algonquins and support troops, forward to Point 195 late in the morning but, of course, the British Columbians were fighting their own battle several kilometres away. As the Guards neared Quesnay Wood, which lay astride the highway south of Grainville-Langannerie, they turned west across country. Suddenly, the lead troop reported sighting Germans and opened fire. Although the wood was thought to be only lightly held, Meyer had posted a strong anti-tank gun screen among the trees. As the Foot Guards approached, the unit historian recorded that they came under accurate fire and,

> . . . in a few minutes Lieutenant Westheuser's tank was knocked out by two shots through the right track. His crew of Guardsmen McAfee, Magee, Draper and Marwick continued to engage the enemy while, under fire, Lieutenant Westheuser dismounted and attempted to repair the track. In quick succession a tank of No. 1 Troop commanded by Cpl Pecore was holed through the engine. Conducting themselves as if on a scheme, the crew hoisted an out of action flag before dismounting. As well as 88 fire the air was now thick with airburst and machine-gun fire.

Fighting until dark, the Foot Guards lost 26 tanks, half the unit's strength, and were brought to a halt. They called down artillery fire on the German positions and then, as the sun was setting, formed a defensive position for the night.

By then TOTALIZE had advanced the front about five kilometres, and Simonds ordered Kitching to keep pushing on to Point 195. Kitching committed his one remaining infantry battalion, The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders of Canada, in a night attack. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel J.D. Stewart, chose to approach his objective silently, without preliminary bombardment, and thoroughly briefed his battalion before moving out. According to the regimental historian, Stewart showed no "uncertainty" when describing the hazardous task facing his men but, on the contrary, "convinced all about him that the sheer audacity, the bold elan of the stroke would bring success." Led by their commanding officer, the Argylls

> . . . left Langannerie at midnight and followed the picket line to the point at which they ended up near the hill, whence the Colonel led on up the slopes. It seems too bad that some imaginative artist could not paint a picture of this winding, heavy laden column, as it warily and wearily trudged up through the wheat behind its indomitable tam-o-shantered leader (even on this occasion he disdained the steel helmet) towards what no man could say. For that matter no man would probably have had breath to say anything; the column carried the maximum on their backs and fatigue was beginning to take its toll.

Meeting little resistance, by dawn the battalion had occupied most of Point 195 in a noteworthy example of what innovation and initiative could achieve. The Argylls, however, were not lulled into a false sense of security, and the terse order that went round to "Dig, chum" was obeyed with alacrity.

They were right as the Germans, disturbed at the loss of this key feature, reacted swiftly and violently, and The Grenadier Guards, who moved their tanks forward to support the Argylls at first light, took much of the fire. A ground mist masked the Guards as they moved out but by mid-morning it had burned off, and when Colonel Halpenny gathered his squadron commanders for an Orders Group at noon, they came under sudden heavy fire. Their unit historian recorded how fire came in from all directions, "spattering against our armour" followed by "anti-tank guns [that] holed eight of our tanks in as many minutes."

Then, from the direction of Potigny "three strange tracked vehicles, like undersized carriers and having a white flag fluttering at the tip of the aerial, came beetling up the slope at 15 or 20 miles an hour." These objects were radio-controlled demolition vehicles which,

fortunately, had little effect as they "exploded their 800 lbs. of TNT with spectacular but vertical and harmless detonation."

The damage was done by heavy and accurate enemy anti-tank fire. When Lieutenant Hill of the regiment moved to investigate the demolition vehicles,

> His tank had not gone 100 yards when it burst into flame. From this point, everything happened at once. Two more tanks on the left flank were set ablaze. . . . The Squadron Leaders' tanks, which had been grouped around the C.O.'s dispersed, but not before Major Williamson's had suffered a fiery fate.

The Grenadier Guards lost 16 tanks and could make no headway. Brigadier Booth therefore ordered up the Foot Guards to support the Argylls and they were later joined by The Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders of 3rd Division, which now joined the battle. Together, they held the position against a series of German artillery and infantry attacks of varying intensity throughout the day.

During the morning, Simonds conferred with his divisional commanders. The 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, which had just come into position west of the Caen-Falaise highway, was ordered to continue the advance as far as the commanding ground southwest of Épancy. In their path was the Quesnay Wood which 8 Brigade was told to clear.

After a long approach march under fire, it was not until late in the evening that the two assault battalions, The Queen's Own Rifles and The North Shore Regiment, approached the northeast section of the wood. As they neared the tree line, the watching Germans hit the Queen's Own with artillery and machine-gun fire. In the growing darkness, it was impossible to distinguish attackers from defenders and the Canadian artillery had to cease firing.

Of the three Queen's Own companies in the lead, two were pinned down by murderous German fire. Sergeant Major Charles Martin of A Company managed to get close to the wood with three men when they spotted German tanks. Martin was not unduly bothered, because *"being up so close to a tank is not so bad; they can't see what's under them, only what's fairly far in front"* but he was concerned that they were almost out of ammunition. Sending a man back with information about the German positions and a request for ammunition, he *"prepared to hold on."* Extraordinarily, the rifleman made it back with ammunition, and also an order to withdraw.

The North Shore Regiment fared no better, although a few men managed to get into the wood. Heavy casualties, including the battalion commander and two company commanders, made control difficult, and the battalion was unable to advance in the face of heavy mortar, machine-gun and artillery fire. Sergeant Albanie Drapeau of the mortar platoon had a particularly harrowing experience. As he told the North Shore historian, he had just finished bandaging a wounded man and was moving forward. Then, he said,

> *. . . over came all they had and down I went among the wheat. Then they began shooting each time I disturbed the grain and I had to stay quiet. Next they threw over some smoke shells which ignited the dry grain and at once flames licked through it and I knew I would roast alive if I stayed there and die quickly if I stood up. In all the eleven months I served in action this was the only time that courage left me and as the glowing redness crept near I prayed to God to help me, and make quick whatever was to come. It was like an answer to my prayer when I saw the burning wheat was sending up a thick black cloud of smoke about a man's height, and it was rolling towards the woods, clinging to the ground as it went. In a second I was up and going fast.*

Pinned down by vicious fire, the North Shores went to ground, and a few hours later both units were withdrawn.

That night Charles Martin accompanied a party of volunteers that went out to bring in the wounded. They *"had to be very quiet,"* he remembered, as *"at night, noise carries farther"* and when the party found a man, *"he'd get a shot of morphine immediately"* not only for the pain but *"to ensure his silence because they were still laying down mortars, artillery and machine guns at the slightest sound."*

Operation TOTALIZE ground to a halt at Quesnay Wood. Simonds concluded that he would have to orchestrate another deliberate attack to secure the high ground dominating Falaise and, accordingly, he sent infantry to replace his armoured divisions and instructed the latter to regroup, replenish and prepare for a new offensive.

TOTALIZE was a mixed success. It had pushed the Canadian front 13 kilometres closer to Falaise, and inflicted heavy and irreplaceable losses on the Germans, but it had not achieved its objectives and the gap between the Canadians and Americans was still open. Simonds had crafted a complex operation using all the many resources available to an Allied commander at this late stage of the war. By imaginatively combining the power of aircraft, massive numbers of tanks and artillery, and armoured personnel carriers, in a nighttime attack, TOTALIZE demonstrated that German defences could be breached and fortified villages taken. Yet, the operation was a victim of its sheer size and the detailed planning required to stage it. Rigid timings left junior commanders with little opportunity to adapt rapidly to evolving battle situations, and that inflexibility allowed the Germans to exercise their notable capacity for swift reaction.

CHAPTER VIII

AUGUST: THE END IN NORMANDY

"A sort of 'draw swords and charge' affair"
(An anonymous officer)

While Operation TOTALIZE stalled, Patton began to drive east. The speed of his advance caused Montgomery to issue new directions to First Canadian and Second British armies. The Canadian task was now to swing east around Falaise and link up with the Americans who were nearing Argentan. Consequently, General Simonds planned a new operation, codenamed TRACTABLE, whose objective was the high ground north of Falaise.

Between the Canadians and their objective was the Laison River valley, a deeply cut and wooded feature whose north side formed the first German line of defence, with a second line on the wooded slopes of the ridge to the south. Attacking here enabled Simonds to avoid the German strongpoint at Quesnay Wood, and the gently rolling but open ground provided space for his tanks to manoeuvre.

Like TOTALIZE, Operation TRACTABLE was to be a massive armoured thrust to reach into the depths of the German defence lines. Leading on the right was 2 Armoured Brigade, with 3rd Division's 9 Infantry Brigade mounted in APCs and 7 Brigade following on foot; on the left, 4 Armoured Brigade, with 8 Brigade also in APCs and 10 Brigade on foot. Unlike TOTALIZE, the attack would be launched in daylight, using smoke to mask movement. In order to achieve

surprise, there was to be no lengthy preliminary bombardment, but immediately before H-hour all available guns as well as medium and heavy bombers would strike known positions. At H-hour, noon on 14 August, tanks and armoured infantry would blast a way through and other units would move up to consolidate. There was little subtlety in the method; as one officer drily observed, it was to be *"a sort of 'draw swords and charge' affair."*

It took three days for II Corps to regroup for the attack — time to replace destroyed and damaged tanks, and integrate reinforcements into companies and platoons — but by the evening of 13 August all was ready. At an Orders Group earlier that day Simonds bitterly criticized his armoured commanders for their performance on TOTALIZE, and made clear that he demanded more. Stressing the need for speed and *"pushing armour to the very limits of its endurance,"* he warned that *"there was to be no excuse for non-success."*

Facing the Canadians was the newly-arrived German 85th Infantry Division. While not a strong formation it was supported by 12th SS Panzer Division, still formidable though reduced to the size of a battle group with about 35 tanks. There were also ten Tigers available and, as well, 85th Division had call on its own and the Hitler Youth's divisional anti-tank, flak and artillery units, and additional flak and mortar battalions of the Luftwaffe and army.

The day of the assault, 14 August, was a beautiful, sunny summer day that one soldier remembered as being *"hotter than hades."* The assault units, which were in their concentration areas behind ridges north of the Laison River by mid-morning, presented an impressive sight. A South Alberta officer thought that a *"formation of approximately 250 tanks almost touching each other"* was *"more reminiscent of a magazine advertisement for General Motors than warfare as we got to know it."* By 1100, the tension was palpable as men counted the minutes off until the guns opened fire. Twenty-five minutes later, the artillery began to fire red smoke markers for the bombers that roared in to hit the German forward positions. As wave after wave of aircraft flew over, hundreds of heavy, medium and field guns opened up to drown out all other sounds. Smoke added to the dust of the bombing now obscured the valley. At 1140 came the command "Move now!" Then, as The Grenadier Guards' historian wrote, "all hell broke loose" as:

> The whole earth trembled with the rattle of a thousand speeding vehicles and the shock of gun recoil and discharge. The acrid air throbbed with the hum of engines and the explosion of all manner of screaming missiles. An incomprehensible range of reverberating vibrations struck upon the senses with confused and bewildering beat. The eyes were dimmed by dust and smoke until only the sights of the gun and the red disc of the sun could be seen through the quivering misty veil.

Moving in formations eight tanks abreast, the armoured brigades drove straight through the German defences which, although they shot out some, could not hit them all. As the tanks rolled forward, "drivers found it impossible to keep direction; they could merely press on into the sun with accelerator pedals to the floor."

Behind came the infantry. The Lake Superior Regiment advanced in grand style with its intelligence officer playing the regimental march, "Light Afoot," on a trumpet. There was great jollity in the vehicles of 8 Field Squadron, RCE, which accompanied the infantry to deal with mines and obstacles. The squadron historian wrote that they had just received their first rum ration and, as one sapper remembered:

> *Away we went, cheering and shouting and waving hilariously to our neighbouring vehicles. The rum was really potent. Never did troops go so gaily into battle. Through the fields and hedges, helter-skelter, a mad race. One could visualize knights in armour in such a wild charge with pennons flying. Here and there a tank would get into difficulty in a hedge or ditch. Then the ominous whine and whack of mortars and 88's. The cheering and shouting died and we pressed ourselves flatter, if possible, below the sides of the half-tracks.*

Due to poor visibility and sheer numbers, the tank columns became disorganized and

> . . . degenerated into a heterogenous mass pouring down into the smoke-filled valley against a current of prisoners streaming to the rear. In spite of the dust which obliterated landmarks and made visibility poor, obstacles were surmounted, minefields marked and bypassed, and after each brief halt to check direction, the lumbering vehicles lurched forth again to disappear with a roar into the

British and Canadian armour forms up for the mad dash – Operation TRACTABLE, 14 August 1944. In the foreground is a camouflaged M-10 Tank Destroyer, while moving up on the road behind is a Crocodile flame-throwing tank. On the horizon can be seen the smoke that resulted from the Allied bomber attack. (NAC, PA 116525)

Forming up for TRACTABLE. In the forefront is a Sherman Flail tank. Note the dust raised by the column of Shermans in the background. (NAC, PA 116539)

mistlike smoke, acrid with the stink of overworked engines and cordite.

Although they were under fire the entire way, casualties were light and both armoured brigades advanced four to five kilometres to the Laison River in the first two hours.

Though little more than a meandering creek, the Laison's muddy bottom and steep banks gave the Germans a ready anti-tank ditch that, unaccountably, planners had discounted when they prepared TRACTABLE. The result was a mass of confusion as scores of tanks milled around on the north bank, trying to find crossing places under enemy fire. Many bogged down or threw tracks in the soft ground — A Squadron of The First Hussars, for example, lost 11 of its 19 tanks trying to find a way across. Movement was slowed or stopped for several hours until sappers caught in the traffic jam could get forward to bulldoze the banks.

Once over the Laison, armoured commanders had to reorganize and regain control of their units before moving on, causing further delay. The British Columbia Regiment had a particularly hard time. It had received new tanks after the disaster of 9 August but had not had time to paint tactical signs on the vehicles so that crews could recognize each other. As the regimental historian recorded, even finding one another was difficult:

> *Hello Baker two. I am at RV now. Which is your vehicle? . . . "I am waving my arm from the turret." "Hello Baker two, are you the one waving his right arm or left arm? Are you the one beside the tree or over at the fence?*

When 12th SS tanks intervened, they were delayed further.

On the right, 2 Canadian Armoured Brigade was, by late afternoon, close to its objectives. Behind them, battalions of 9 Brigade dismounted from their APCs, mopped up bypassed enemy positions, and then moved on. By nightfall, the two assault brigades were on the high ground west of Olendon, four kilometres south of the Laison, and 7 Brigade came forward on foot to consolidate.

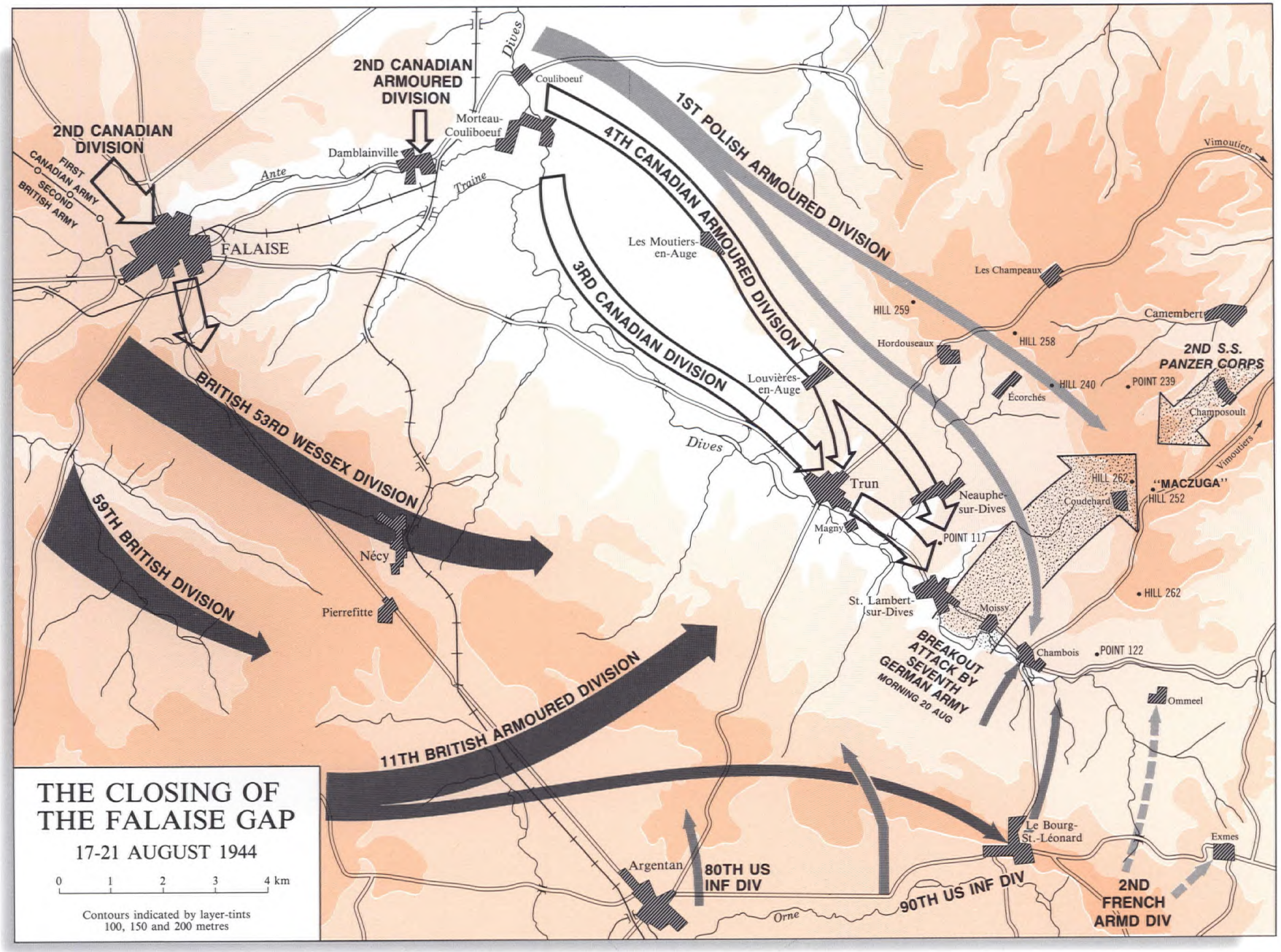
In 4th Division's sector on the left, the going was more difficult. The traffic jam and the Laison were bad enough, but things got worse when Brigadier E.L. Booth, commander of 4 Armoured Brigade, was killed and most of his headquarters vehicles and their radios were knocked out just as they reached the Laison. Due to confusion and the breakdown in communications, Kitching did not learn of Booth's death until late that afternoon, when he ordered Lieutenant Colonel M.J. Scott of the Foot Guards to assume command of the brigade. But Scott, himself injured, was south of the Laison fighting with his unit and could not take over for several hours. In the meantime, the three armoured regiments battled separately toward their objectives. For nearly six hours, no one was effectively commanding 4 Armoured Brigade and it swung considerably east of its planned route. By the time Scott took over the brigade it was nearly dark; he decided to reorganize and it was not until first light next day that 4th Division took its objectives.

Some who participated in TRACTABLE remembered it as an exciting business, marked by dust and thirst with occasional interludes of hard but confused fighting. It was extremely difficult to identify friends from the enemy as German and Canadian units became mixed up. In one case, four M-10 tank destroyers of 14 Anti-Tank Battery were destroyed in quick succession when they mistakenly approached too close to German positions near Quesnay Wood.

Tragically, the day was marred when a number of the aircraft supporting the operation dropped their bombs short in error. After TOTALIZE, several navigation and target-marking devices had been adopted to prevent such incidents, but even the most detailed preparations cannot ensure success. Some air crews chose to drop their bomb loads on yellow target markers rather than time their approach from the Channel on stopwatches that crews had been given. Unfortunately, while Bomber Command used yellow smoke to mark targets, ground troops used the same smoke to mark their forward positions. The failure of army and air force commands to communicate clearly with each other led to disastrous, if predictable, results as men hugged the ground under a storm of high explosives.

One of the units hit was 7 Medium Regiment, RCA. *"It is one of the most awful things that any man can see,"* recorded their historian, who was present,

> *. . . to look up and see a whole squadron of Halifaxes, flying very low, heading your way; and suddenly they start to change shape and you realize with horror that it is the bomb*


THE CLOSING OF THE FALAISE GAP
17-21 AUGUST 1944
0 1 2 3 4 km
Contours indicated by layer-tints 100, 150 and 200 metres
2ND CANADIAN DIVISION
FIRST CANADIAN ARMY
SECOND BRITISH ARMY
2ND CANADIAN ARMOURED DIVISION
FALAISE
Ante
Traine
Dives
Damblainville
Morteau-Couliboeuf
Couliboeuf
1ST POLISH ARMOURED DIVISION
4TH CANADIAN ARMOURED DIVISION
3RD CANADIAN DIVISION
Les Moutiers-en-Auge
Louvières-en-Auge
BRITISH 53RD WESSEX DIVISION
59TH BRITISH DIVISION
Nécy
Pierrefitte
11TH BRITISH ARMOURED DIVISION
Trun
Magny
Neauphe-sur-Dives
POINT 117
St. Lambert-sur-Dives
Moissy
Chambois
POINT 122
BREAKOUT ATTACK BY SEVENTH GERMAN ARMY
MORNING 20 AUG
Argentan
80TH US INF DIV
90TH US INF DIV
Orne
Le Bourg-St.-Léonard
2ND FRENCH ARMD DIV
Exmes
Ommeel
HILL 262
Coudehard
"MACZUGA"
HILL 252
HILL 262
Vimoutiers
Les Champeaux
HILL 259
Hordouseaux
HILL 258
Écorchés
HILL 240
POINT 239
Camembert
2ND S.S. PANZER CORPS
Champosoult

doors opening, and the next minute you see the bombs coming your way, getting larger and larger, and you fling yourself down on the ground, and start burrowing until your fingers hurt. All hell breaks loose around you and dust and smoke and the acrid smell of burning explosives all get together to do their best to choke you, while all the time earth and rocks and stones are falling down on to your back, every one feeling as if it weighs a ton. And then the smoke clears away and you think that you have been lucky, and getting up you look around you and see just how lucky. You look to see if there are any more planes in the sky, and find to your horror that another squadron is just opening its bomb doors, and that behind them again is another, and another.

In desperation, artillery observation pilots flew their small Auster aircraft in front of the bombers trying to lead them away, but their efforts were ignored. An angry Lieutenant Colonel G.D. Wotherspoon of the South Albertas was about to order his 20 mm AA troop to open fire on the aircraft flying overhead but, at the last moment, was dissuaded by the regimental chaplain, Captain Philip Silcox, who ran into an open field and spread out a Union Jack in a futile attempt to stop the bombing.

The result of this sad business was 500 Polish and Canadian casualties, disarray in II Corps' rear areas, and a deep and abiding scepticism among soldiers about some forms of air support. Ironically, among the many men embracing the ground under the roar of aircraft engines on 14 August was Air Vice Marshal M. Coningham, commander of 2nd Tactical Air Force, who was observing the bombing with Simonds at the time.

Units resumed their advance at first light on 15 August but, almost immediately, the armoured forces encountered a strong German anti-tank gun screen that slowed 4th Division as it tried to take the eastern sector of the long ridge overlooking Falaise. Late in the afternoon, The Grenadier Guards and The British Columbia Regiment reached the southern part of this feature near Versainville but were driven back by heavy and accurate fire.

To the west, 3rd Division also met determined resistance. The Canadian Scottish Regiment, which had come forward during the night to secure the gains of the previous day, was ordered to secure a hill three kilometres northeast of Falaise. Under Major R.M. Lendrum, the battalion moved out with a few tanks and M-10 tank destroyers, but with little artillery support as the Scottish were beyond the range of all but medium guns, which promptly dropped their shells among the advancing Canadians.

The battalion pushed on regardless against German infantry supported by artillery, mortars, machine guns and tanks. Radios were lost or destroyed and communications disrupted. One company commander told the regimental historian how, when he was requesting tank support, he was startled to receive, by some atmospheric fluke, a BBC musical program entitled "Music While You Work" over his headset. The Scottish secured their objective but took 127 casualities doing it, their worst single day's losses during the war. The other units of 7 Brigade did not fare any better. The Winnipeg Rifles were beaten back from Soulangy while The Regina Rifles, ordered up to support the Scottish, abandoned their attack when they could not find their supporting tanks.

By this time, the German forces in Normandy were being caged. Two armies, Seventh and Fifth Panzer, the remnants of 21 divisions, were almost surrounded but despite his repeated requests Field Marshal Von Kluge could not get permission from Hitler's headquarters to withdraw. In any case, Kluge did not have much longer to command; under suspicion for complicity in the 22 July bomb plot against Hitler, he was replaced by Field Marshal Walter Model. Fortunately for the Germans, the commander of Fifth Panzer Army, General Heinrich Eberbach, stalled the Americans near Argentan. Before they could get going again, in a controversial decision, Bradley ordered Patton to halt at the boundary separating American and Commonwealth forces. If the trap was to be sprung, it would have to be from the north.

Now the battle for Normandy entered a very fluid stage, with Simonds' II Corps threatening the north shoulder of the German front and American forces the south. On the 14th, Simonds issued new orders: Foulkes's 2nd Division, which had been guarding TRACTABLE's right flank, was to take Falaise while 4th Division cut off the city from the east. At the same time, 1st Polish Division would seize a crossing over the Laison even further east, at Jort, with a view to

A Canadian anti-tank detachment pulls its 6-pounder gun, part of the massive phalanx that constituted Operation TRACTABLE. (NAC, PA 116536)

Clearing Falaise, 16-17 August 1944. An infantry section of Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal follows a tank of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers down a street in the birthplace of William the Conqueror. It took two days of hard fighting to secure Falaise. (NAC, 115568)

advancing on Trun. Then, next morning, the rapidly changing tactical picture caused Simonds to order 4th Division to sideslip yet further east and also move on Trun.

It took both divisions some time to regroup and get moving. First Polish was not ready to go until the evening of 16 August when it crossed the Laison, but it was delayed until sappers rebuilt bridges. Fourth Armoured took the entire day to get into position above Damblainville, before attacking the town. In the meantime, 2nd Division, finding that the Germans on its front had withdrawn, approached the outskirts of Falaise.

The town was held by a small garrison of 200 men from 12th SS Division with anti-tank guns and two Tiger tanks. Ordered to buy time, they entrenched themselves in the ruins of William the Conqueror's birthplace, which had been nearly destroyed by heavy bombing on 14 August. The task of eliminating them fell to Brigadier H. Young's 6 Brigade, supported by the Sherbrooke Fusiliers. During the late afternoon of 16 August, The South Saskatchewan Regiment and The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders pushed into the outlying suburbs, but they were held up by bomb craters and wreckage in the streets. By evening, the South Saskatchewans were on the bridge over the Ante River that bisects the town. Here, their supporting Sherbrooke tanks were stopped by a well-sited anti-tank gun. Lieutenant Colonel Fred Clift of the Saskatchewans went forward, borrowed a rifle, sniped three members of the gun detachment, and the Sherbrookes then drove their tanks over the bridge. By evening, 6 Brigade was in the town itself.

They then faced the unenviable task of clearing Falaise, street by street, house by house. As usual, the grenadiers of 12th SS Division fought hard but, late on 17 August, the Canadians had pushed them back into their last strongpoint, a girls' school located in a collection of thick-walled buildings in the southern part of the town that dominated one of the main streets. It took Les FMR all day to clear them out, and they paid a heavy price, one company losing 12 of 40 men. As darkness fell, the Fusiliers were planning another assault when a German medical corpsman accompanied by a captured Canadian emerged under a flag of truce and reported that a group of 21 Germans, some wounded, some not, were ready to surrender. A Fusilier officer accompanied the two men into the building which by then was partly on fire, and managed to arrange the evacuation of seven wounded; the rest refused to surrender. As he was leaving, the Luftwaffe made a rare appearance, bombing the unhappy town and setting the school ablaze.

Intending to move into the building at first light on 18 August, the Fusiliers settled down for the night. It passed quietly until one SS officer *"tried to make a break-through with an automatic and succeeded in shooting several of our t[roo]ps in vehicles."* His escape blocked, the German *"made a dash for a nearby shed and was seriously wounded when a grenade was thrown at him."* When morning came, the Fusiliers combed the smoking ruins of the school but found no live Germans. Falaise was in Canadian hands.

The loss of the town was a devastating blow to the Germans. On 16 August, when Field Marshal Model, the German commander in Normandy, at last received permission to retreat, about 100,000 men were compressed into a pocket around Falaise that was 30 kilometres long and 20 wide. Their only escape route was along the valley of the meandering Dives River through an opening between Trun and Chambois. Viewed from the air or from the heights on either side — the Canadians north and the Americans south — the valley appeared to be a shallow depression dotted with villages. Its floor, however, was a maze of hedgerows, small woods and enclosed fields traversed by sunken country lanes and paths that provided excellent cover.

As this massive military migration began, the roads and byways through the Dives became crowded with transport, including "trains" of tanks and other heavy vehicles towing smaller trucks and cars. Allied air forces quickly found targets that pilots had previously only dreamed about, and fighters and fighter-bombers attacked the German columns with rockets and automatic weapons. Flying over the packed roads, the airmen could hardly believe what they saw. As the unit historian of 35 Reconnaissance Wing, RAF, recorded:

> Pilots reported on the R/T [radio] in language which, if somewhat picturesque and, therefore, not strictly G.S. [general service] was the only adequate descriptive medium. Such phrases as these delighted our ears —

St-Lambert-sur-Dives, 19 August 1944. A Sherman of The South Alberta Regiment passes close beside one of its knocked-out counterparts. For three days, the sleepy little village was the scene of some of the hardest fighting of the Normandy campaign. (NAC, PA 132192)

Scant minutes before this picture was taken, a German motorized column had driven into the Canadian position and was "put in the bag"; scant minutes after this picture was taken, a German attack commenced. For his leadership and courage during this action, Major David Currie of The South Alberta Regiment, seen here on the left holding a pistol, was awarded the Victoria Cross. (DND, PMR93-394)

A shambles with stuff going in all directions, Great confused movement — Huge jams and even White flags waved — this last from a reconnaissance pilot whose lasting regret it is that he could not accept the surrender.

There were plenty of targets. In his memoir, *Wing Leader*, J.E. Johnson, commanding the RCAF's 127 Wing of Spitfires, described how the favoured tactic of Typhoon pilots against the German vehicle columns was to

> *. . . seal off the front and rear . . . by accurately dropping a few bombs. This technique imprisoned the desperate enemy on a narrow stretch of dusty lane, and since the transports were sometimes jammed together four abreast, it made the subsequent rocket and cannon attacks a comparatively easy business against stationary targets. Some of the armoured cars and tanks attempted to escape their fate by making detours across the fields and wooded country, but these were soon spotted by the Typhoon pilots and were accorded the same treatment as their comrades on the highways and lanes.*

When the Typhoons had finished their grisly work, Johnson's Spitfires descended to finish the job by strafing the soft-skinned vehicles with 20 mm cannon fire. Ammunition expended, they returned to their airfields where ground crews rearmed and refuelled them in the shortest possible time for another sortie.

The major highway east from Falaise ran through Trun to Vimoutiers outside the pocket. On 17 August, Simonds directed his two armoured divisions to cut this route at Trun. The Poles were stopped by a battle group of 21st Panzer Division, but 4 Armoured Division took Damblainville. However, remnants of 12th SS Panzer withdrew to high ground to the south and east of the village, where they dominated the bridges over the Ante with artillery and mortar fire and brought all attempts to cross the river up short. With his direct route to Trun blocked, Simonds ordered Kitching to sidestep his division three kilometres to the east and take it by last light. It took prodigious traffic control to switch hundreds of vehicles to another axis of advance but, by dark, forward elements of the division were three kilometres north of Trun.

Not at all pleased with the Canadians' progress, Montgomery, stating that it was *"absolutely essential"* for the two armoured divisions to *"close the gap between First Cdn Army and Third US Army,"* ordered the Polish Armoured Division to *"thrust on past TRUN to CHAMBOIS . . . at all costs, and as quickly as is possible."* The Poles moved out that night but, unfortunately, language difficulties with local guides caused the commander of the lead regiment to confuse his objectives and he moved off at night in the wrong direction. The Poles did not discover their mistake until the next morning and throughout the day made slow headway in the face of heavy opposition. They were also hampered by a shortage of ammunition, gasoline and supplies, and were not helped when Allied aircraft destroyed one of their supply columns in the late afternoon. In 4th Armoured's sector, Trun fell quickly to the Lake Superiors and Grenadier Guards at first light on 18 August and, by midday, the tanks of 4 Armoured Brigade cut the highway to Vimoutiers.

As commanders tried to keep pace with the fluid situation, orders and objectives kept changing. In the afternoon of 18 August, Simonds ordered Kitching to advance on Chambois from the west while the Poles were to take both that village and the high ground, Point 262, north of it. As the Americans were expected to attack toward Chambois from the south, the two armies would meet in town and seal the gap.

Organized in tank/infantry battle groups, 1st Polish Division struggled southward against a desperate enemy throughout 19 August. By mid-afternoon, some troops had reached Coudehard north of Chambois, but were halted by an armoured counterattack. Another group could get no further than Point 262. That evening, the 10th Polish Dragoons took Chambois and contacted troops of the US 90th Division.

The gap was now sealed. The encirclement, however, was only lightly held and the Germans continued to seep through and around Allied positions. Trying to stop them, Captain Jack Summers thought, was *"like trying to stop a buffalo herd in full stampede."* Over the next three days there was confused, piecemeal fighting throughout the Dives valley as the Canadians and Poles struggled to keep a despairing but unbeaten enemy, fighting like a trapped animal, within the pocket.

An action that exemplifies this fighting occurred at St-Lambert-sur-Dives. On the evening of 18 August, 4th Armoured Division dispatched a small battle group down the Trun-

St-Lambert-sur-Dives, 19 August 1944. German prisoners of war, disarmed a few minutes earlier, begin their march into captivity. (NAC, PA 116586)

The end in Normandy. A long column of German prisoners, most of whom do not appear too displeased about entering captivity, begin the long march to a prisoner-of-war cage. Although the German army fought hard in Normandy, in the end it was broken by superior Allied material strength. (NAC, PA 113654)

Chambois road. Major David Currie of the South Albertas had with him his own C Squadron, a company of the Argylls and a troop of 17-pounder anti-tank guns. By late evening, Currie had reached the little village of St-Lambert where several secondary roads and farm lanes converged to cross bridges over the Dives. When he lost two tanks trying to enter the town, Currie pulled back for the night intending to send in his infantry the following morning.

Unable to obtain artillery support, as the divisional guns were out of range, Currie led his tanks and the Argylls into St-Lambert at daylight. A confused melee erupted as tanks and infantry from both sides hunted each other through the streets. Spotting a German tank, Lieutenant Armour of the Argylls stalked it through the streets. An after-action report described how he then:

> . . . climbed on top of the tank with a No. 36 grenade in his hand. Just as he was about to drop the grenade in the turret, a Jerry officer looked out. Lt. Armour was the first to recover from their common shock. He forced the Jerry to come out. But the Jerry was armed with an automatic pistol and closed with him. Lt. Armour knocked him off the tank but in doing so lost his balance. Pte. La Forrest shot and seriously wounded the Jerry. By now the tank had closed its turret and had started up the motor. It backed up about 25 ft. and stopped to get a clear view of the wounded Jerry. The small turret to the left of the gun opened and a head emerged. Cpl. Hannivan [who] was observing from the corner of a building about 30 ft. away . . . shot the unfortunate Jerry through the forehead. Lt. Armour immediately seized this opportunity; he ran up and dropped the grenade into the open turret.

As its engine was still running, the trio watched over the tank until they found a PIAT to finish it off.

At noon, Currie decided to consolidate on the high ground north of the village. That afternoon, two additional infantry companies joined him. This was fortunate because St-Lambert was a choke point in the German escape route and they launched a series of attacks on his position that continued through the night of 19 August and into the following day. With his supporting artillery now in range, Currie directed it onto the crowded German formations, breaking up attack after attack. At one point, "rounds were falling within fifteen yards of his own tank" but the indomitable Currie ordered the gunners to keep shooting because of the "devastating effect" their fire was having "upon the attacking infantry in his immediate area."

Still the Germans kept coming and Currie was soon the only unwounded officer in his command. Tireless, this tall, quiet officer from Saskatchewan inspired his men to hold out:

> On one occasion he personally directed the fire of his command tank onto a Tiger tank which had been harassing his position and succeeded in knocking it out. During another attack, while the guns of his command tank were taking on other targets at longer ranges, he used a rifle from the turret to deal with an individual sniper who had infiltrated to within 50 yards of his headquarters. On the one occasion when reinforcements were able to get through to his force, he led the 40 men forward into their positions and explained the importance of their task as part of the defence. When, during the next attack, these reinforcements withdrew . . . he personally collected them and led them forward into position again.

When he was finally relieved at midday on 21 August, Currie had gone without sleep for three days. Having satisfied himself that the turnover of his position was complete, he "fell asleep on his feet and collapsed." For his courage and outstanding leadership David Currie was awarded the Victoria Cross.

By this time, the divisional artillery of 2nd, 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions had come into action on the heights overlooking the Dives. From their positions in the hills around St-Lambert, the men of the South Albertas watched as the gunners imitated the fighter-bombers. The unit historian described how

> Long lines of enemy trucks, tanks, wagons, carts and vehicles of all kinds could be seen approaching down the roads from the west. The slaughter was enormous. The . . . gunners would pick off the lead and the tail vehicles and then systematically shoot up the whole convoy. The casualties were reckoned, not by so many vehicles, but by so many hundreds of yards of vehicles. In spite of this they continued to stream up and some were successful in getting through.

The carnage continued into the dark as German columns, trying either to escape or surrender, blundered into Canadian and Polish positions. A Canadian officer, taken prisoner by one of these groups of desperate enemy, later reported that:

> *The party appeared to be lost. The vehicles started up several roads but turned around three times. The tank at one place did a skid turn on the bodies of three dead Germans. Maps were consulted and prisoners questioned about the area. Finally the party moved along a road in an easterly direction.*
>
> *We were treated well by the Germans. We were searched by several men each of them taking what he wanted. They seemed to want money, watches and cigarette lighters. Much Canadian equipment was carried by the enemy especially revolvers, binoculars and watches. Many of them had Canadian cigarettes.*

Not all the German units in the pocket were demoralized. Some, particularly the SS, panzer and parachute units, maintained their integrity and marched and fought in small battle groups built around their surviving armoured vehicles. The major headquarters staff inside the pocket was that of 12th SS Panzer Division and, as might be expected, Kurt Meyer was still fighting hard. On the night of 19 August, he was able to make contact with General Paul Hausser, the commander of Seventh German Army, who had escaped from the pocket, and coordinate plans for a breakout. While II SS Panzer Corps attacked the Polish positions at Point 262 and Chambois from outside, the remnants of the parachute, SS and panzer units in the pocket formed three columns to break through between Chambois and Point 262.

Rainy weather that kept Allied aircraft on the ground helped the Germans as they surged around Currie's blocking force at St-Lambert and crossed the Trun-Chambois highway to hit the Poles at Point 262. Under attack from two sides, the Poles had to fight desperately to maintain their position. Because the 90th US Division, struggling to hold on south of Chambois, could not reach the Poles, Simonds ordered Kitching to send 4 Armoured Brigade to reinforce them early in the morning of 20 August. They made little progress, however, and, by evening, were still several kilometres away.

On the grey, wet morning of 21 August, frantic groups of Germans continued to escape the trap. The Algonquins' regimental history records the fate of one such group:

> When daylight came we were all standing-to, shivering with the cold and soaked to the skin with the rain. Gradually, as the mist dissipated, things became visible in the valley below, first a tree or two, then a roof, and finally hundreds of marching men! They were moving slowly in a long line, with vehicles, some of them horsedrawn, along the road at the base of our hill. They stretched as far as one could see in either direction. Who were they? Friends or enemy? We strained our eyes at them through our binoculars. Finally we were certain. They were Germans all right! Right in front of our position — range 500 — enemy on road — commence firing! Everything opened up. Revenge, if you like — revenge for the trapped companies on the hill ten days ago! The set-up was perfect. The firing kept up until nothing moved on the road but a few white flags. "Cease fire!"

The slaughter continued until the end. The historian of The Grenadier Guards wrote that "the carnage and destruction in the 20 square miles of the green valley and the wooded heights of the Trun-Chambois-Vermoutiers area could hardly be believed even by those who saw it with their own eyes." In his memoir, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Forbes* of the Maisonneuves graphically described the

> *. . . cataclysmic graveyard of tanks, guns and corpses that our bulldozers simply pushed to each side of the road. What a grisly sight! Over here was an overturned 40-ton tank completely on its back, the turret sheared off and the gunbarrel twisted. Here lay the half-buried corpse of a soldier with his feet sticking out of the ground. His grave had been desecrated — someone had stolen his boots. His papers blew about in the wind near a wallet lying beside his grave. Over there was a white cross on which no name had yet been inscribed. And what more? A rifle driven bayonet-first into the ground, near a mound of earth. Everywhere there was devastation, decay, corpses, vehicles of every description destroyed or burnt out, skeletons at the wheel*

* Forbes, Charles. *Souvenirs de guerre* (Working title). Québec: Les Éditions du Septentrion, 1994.

whose eyes were empty sockets and whose charred mouths were contorted and frozen in a bowl of pain or a peal of satanic laughter.

The Canadians later counted the wreckage of more than 3,000 tanks and other armoured vehicles, trucks and guns in the pocket area. Even worse was the smell of thousands of human corpses and animal carcasses in the hot August sun, an odour so strong that Wing Commander Johnson could smell it while flying 2,000 metres above the area with the canopy of his Spitfire closed. Sergeant Major Charles Martin recalled simply that the *"stench made us sick"* and Forbes remembered that it *"forced us to wear our gas masks."*

Many of the local inhabitants of the valley had been caught up in the fighting. Forbes saw the body of one *"peasant sitting upright like a post, stone dead, still holding in his charred hands the reins of his old nag, crawling with worms and rotting in the sun."* Despite their own losses, Martin later wrote, the *"French were friendly and kind to us"* although *"it was clear they had to try very hard to smile and wave at their Canadian liberators."*

On the morning of 21 August, 4 Brigade resumed its efforts to reach Point 262. Despite stubborn opposition, the armoured regiments, with The Grenadier Guards in the lead, advanced slowly but steadily throughout the day. By early evening, two squadrons with a company of the Lake Superiors on their decks were ready for the final dash. After a short pause to regroup, the regimental history informs us, they moved

> . . . up the hill into the woods where another Mark IV was set on fire in the middle of the road before firing a shot. Turning off to avoid it, our leading tanks, crashing their way through the bordering trees, were suddenly confronted with two advancing Stuarts. Recognition was immediate: these were the last remaining Polish tanks making a final dash for help, and here we were.

The Poles were overjoyed. "Almost the first question" they asked, recorded the Guards' historian, was: "Have you a cigarette?"

It was an inspiring scene as "Everything, even snipers, was forgotten in the relief of the moment."

The campaign in Normandy was over.

Charles Martin

EPILOGUE

After 76 days of fighting and more than 18,000 casualties, almost a third of them fatal, Canadians had made an extraordinary contribution to the liberation of Normandy. With the Falaise Gap closed, First Canadian Army joined with British and American forces to pursue the Germans across France and into Belgium. Their role was to protect the Allied left flank and secure the chain of coastal ports required to sustain further operations. Buoyant optimism that the war would soon be over was dashed, however, when the Germans recovered and extended the fighting for several more bitter months. More Canadians died fighting battles at sea, in the air, on the ground — in the Scheldt, Holland, the Rhineland, and Germany — before the end came in May 1945.

Despite being grievously wounded two months before that end, Sergeant Major Charles Martin of The Queen's Own Rifles survived the war and returned to his Ontario farm. Between D-Day and then he had been awarded both the Distinguished Conduct and Military Medals; suitable, even if barely adequate, recognition for his leadership and bravery. What did it all mean to this Canadian soldier? In Normandy, he later wrote,

> *We had come to learn the full meaning of total war. Violence begets violence. In this war, in just over two months, we had already seen too much of it, learning in the cruelest way that to survive, and to carry the day, meant total war and all that came of it.*

Jacques Dextraze was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his exceptional leadership in Normandy, and another after taking command of Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal at the age of 23 years. He left the army at war's end, but enlisted once more in 1950 to take command of the 2nd Battalion of the Royal 22^{e} Regiment for service in Korea. General Dextraze retired from the Canadian Forces in 1977 following five years as Chief of the Defence Staff.

Father Hickey also survived the war. King George VI presented him with the Military Cross before the padre went home to New Brunswick where, in due course, his church made him a Domestic Prelate with the title of Monsignor. When he returned to Normandy in 1979, Hickey again met with Captain J.C. Stewart and both veterans were astounded to be greeted by Madame Constant, the badly wounded woman they had last seen near death in St-Aubin-sur-Mer on 6 June, and whose children Hickey had calmed with chocolate bars. Father Hickey died eight years later, possibly as he would have wished, at Carpiquet near the outskirts of Caen, while attending a reunion of North Shore veterans who had travelled to Normandy to erect a memorial to their fallen comrades.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

This book is based primarily on documents located in the collections of the History Division, Department of National Defence, and the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa. These collections include original operational plans, orders, reports and correspondence; unit war diaries; ship and signal logs; naval reports of proceedings; and translations of German documents. During the war, Historical Officers conducted interviews with participants which, with other material, formed the basis of detailed narratives of operations. These primary sources, in turn, provided the foundation on which the histories of the three military services involved in the Normandy campaign were constructed. Any Canadian account willingly stands on the shoulders of C.P. Stacey, whose official army histories set the highest standards of research and writing.

Normandy operations have generated an almost limitless range and variety of printed works and the select bibliography that follows merely touches the surface. For this book, the authors have relied on memoirs and unit histories containing personal experiences. We are grateful to the writers, and to the many authors of regimental, corps and unit histories who have been liberally quoted. The sources of excerpts from these and other printed books are identified in the text, and their full publication details follow.

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