

The Royal Hamilton Light Infantry at Verrières

J.M. Rockingham, Brigadier

Major-General J.M. "Rocky" Rockingham wrote this letter to Colonel C.P. Stacey shortly after the appearance of The Canadian Army, 1939-1945. The tendency of Canadian historians to focus on what went wrong instead of what went right is a well-established tradition.

1290 Union Avenue,
Victoria, B.C.
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Col. C.P. Stacey, OBE, AM, PhD,
Director Historical Section,
General Staff,
Canadian Army Headquarters,
OTTAWA.

Dear Colonel Stacey:

I have only just had the opportunity of reading your book, "The Canadian Army 1939 - 1945", and have found it intensely interesting. There is, however, one part of the book which I read with some disappointment, and the feeling that credit had not been given to a unit where it was due.

You probably receive numerous letters of this kind, where members of units claim various credits for them, and I know you have an enormous and difficult task in trying to remain unbiased in such a book, as well as satisfying everyone. Nevertheless, I would feel that I were letting down the men who fought so gallantly under my command if I failed to draw this matter to your attention.

The passage to which I refer appears on pages 190, 191, 192, 193, and deals with "The Canadian Holding Attack on 25 July." At that time I was Commanding Officer, The Royal Hamilton Light Infantry. While the account of the battle is accurate as regards the facts as I knew them, I cannot help feeling that the RHLI receives very little credit for the job it did. Considerable space (about 60 lines) is allotted to the account of the unsuccessful attacks of the other units engaged in the battle, but only three lines to the RHLI (on page 192), describing the capture and holding of its objective, Verrières. Again reference is made to Verrières on page 193, where the tanks of the 7 Armd Div and RAF typhoons are credited with breaking up a formidable counter-attack, and probably saving Verrières.

I would like to go over the battle as I remember it. The start line assigned to RHLI was a road running East and West through Troteval Farm which, when the plan was made (about 23 July), was in enemy hands. We were promised that it would be cleared before dark on the night of 24 July. Feeling this was a bit risky and late, I asked to be given the task of securing the start line myself, but was not allowed to do this and was assured that it would be secured. Finally, at about 2130 hours on 24 July we were told that the start line was secure, so the scout platoon was ordered forward to tape it for the night attack. At approximately 2330 hours, the scout officer reported that he was unable to carry out his work there because the start line was still held by the enemy with infantry and at least one tank. Our reserve rifle company had to be passed through the assaulting companies and employed to clear the start line, with the result that the main attack of the RHLI was about 40 minutes late in crossing the start line, resulting in missing the timed barrage which was under Corps control. Notwithstanding, all the objectives were in our hands before noon, although the casualties were very heavy, particularly officers, ("D" company, on reaching the objective, was commanded by a Corporal). Counter-attacks began immediately, causing further casualties to troops and equipment. Four of our six 6-pounder anti-tank guns were destroyed by direct fire from enemy tanks. At one period, three enemy tanks were in a forward company area before one was knocked out with a PIAT and the others withdrew. I am not sure of the number of our casualties that evening, but have no doubt that you could find that out.

As for the counter-attack in the evening, by which time the tanks of the 7 Armoured Division had arrived, the artillery, mortar, bren, rifle, and even sten, grenade and PLAT fire was just as responsible for repelling the enemy as were the tanks and typhoons, which were, in any case, being directed by the RHLI. It may be of interest to you to know that one round of red smoke which fell short of the enemy tank it was intended to mark, landed on my HQ and caused three typhoons to fire their rockets on us. Counter-attacks continued throughout the night as well as dive-bombers, strafing and bombing in the area. It was in this position that the enemy first used robot tanks against the western European front. We were able to destroy all but one outside our battalion area with anti-tank guns and tank fire.

I have emphasised these points to show that the RHLI had quite as difficult conditions to overcome as the other units in that battle and displayed remarkable courage, determination and skill in capturing and holding the position, for the following reasons which were brought out in the accounts of the other units' fighting.

1. The start line was in enemy hands at H-hour.
2. RHLI had open, enemy-dominated ground to cross under intense small arms, mortar and artillery fire, without the benefit of the barrage which had passed on.
3. Counter-attacks of equal strength were directed against the RHLI as well as the other units involved, even before the arrival of the Armour.
4. Verrieres then became the almost sole recipient of enemy counter-attacks for the week the RHLI remained there.
5. Casualties were heavy both in the attack and in defeating enemy counter-attacks.
6. The battalion as it was then was inexperienced.

Moreover, in spite of all these conditions, equal to any other unit fighting in that battle, the RHLI was the only one who captured and held their objective, and is, in my opinion, entitled to more credit than it got. Verrieres was the only position on the front which provided observation over the Rocquancourt area so necessary for subsequent operations.

This information, I am sure, can be verified from the War Diaries of the RHLI, 4 Cdn Inf Bde, 2 Cdn Div, etc., and from General Foulkes, Brigadier Ganong, Colonel Clift and any Officer who was serving with the RHLI at that time.

I am sure that you understand the feeling which prompted the writing of this letter and know the value of crediting infantry units with actions in which they gained outstanding success. It is around these incidents that the esprit de corps and regimental traditions are built which sustain their fine fighting spirits. If an opportunity occurs later to recognise the action of the RHLI fully, I hope you will do so.

Yours truly,

(sgd) J.M. Rockingham

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Verrières