

Confrontation in Normandy

The 3rd Canadian Anti-Tank Regiment on D-Day

Stan Medland

On D-Day, the 6th of June 1944, the 3rd Canadian Anti-Tank Regiment R.C.A. landed in France on Juno Beach as part of the Third Canadian Infantry Division.

The regiment consisted of four batteries: the 4th from Peterborough, Ontario, the 52nd from Weymouth, Nova Scotia, the 94th from Quebec City and the 105th from St. George, New Brunswick, along with a headquarters from Toronto.

Originally trained as field artillery, the regiment had been converted to anti-tank. Each battery had two troops of four 6-pounders anti-tank guns and one of four M10s, the latter being Sherman tanks with a 3-inch gun and an open turret with a 50-calibre machine gun mounted on the side. The troops were identified in the batteries as follows: 4th Battery, ABC; 52nd Battery, DEF; 94th Battery, GHI, 105th Battery, JKL; with C, F, I and L being the M10 troops.

The regiment was responsible for coordinating the anti-tank defences of the division, and the individual troops were generally assigned in support of an infantry battalion where they supplemented the battalion's own 6-pounders. The troop commander worked closely with the battalion commander and anti-tank platoon commander.

For D-Day the usual organization was changed to concentrate all four M10 troops under one battery commander. This provided a strong, mobile anti-tank force for the early stages of the invasion.

Some of the M10s got ashore early on D-Day, while most of the 6-pounders and the remainder of the M10s were held up until D+1 due to plugged beaches, the destruction of the rhino ferry to which they had been assigned, or rough water. For example, following an unsuccessful run-in, two of the LCMs (Landing Craft Mechanized) transporting "E" Troop capsized with the loss of two 6-pounders and two carriers. The crews were rescued. The rest were advised that it was too rough to land and they would have to wait for calmer seas.

In the absence of enemy tanks on D-Day and D+1, the M10s were employed in taking out stubborn enemy pillboxes and providing heavy covering fire for the attacking infantry. Later, while devoted mainly to their anti-tank role, they continued to give the infantry powerful fire support.

The role of the 6-pounders was unique. To be effective, they needed to be moved up quickly into each new area taken by the infantry to prepare for a counterattack. Thus, the troop commander usually did his reconnaissance while the attack was in

progress. Crews then brought their guns up into the infantry lines, often in view of the enemy. This tended to draw fire. Once placed in position by the officer, the sergeant and gun crew were on their own. In the ebb and flow of battle it was difficult for the officer to get back to each gun to post them on developments. Sometimes the infantry moved quickly leaving them behind, or worse, were forced back, leaving them out in front alone.

Most of the material which follows is the words of the men of the 3rd Anti-Tank Regiment. It is from the memories of members now living or notes left by the deceased. Some material from other sources is included.

Recollections on the Morning of D-Day: Getting to the Pillbox

The morning of June 6, 1944, we unloaded onto a Rhino ferry—had never seen one before—it had the biggest outboard motors I had ever seen—100-hp Johnsons on each corner at the rear. This ferry was a big sheet of steel on pontoons. About as near as I can remember, about 8:30 or 9:00 we touched down on the beach.

This first thing I saw was a German Messerschmidt which dropped a bomb about 25 feet in front of us. As I remember, there were lots of dead and wounded on the beach. When we got in about 60-100 yards, we met two Royal Marine Commandos which they dropped by air the night before—our first contact. They filled us in on what had to be done. We had a great troop officer—Bill Lee.

We went into a little field and were faced with a wall eight feet high and four feet thick. We cut the wall in two places with armour-piercing shells (more than 40 rounds of ammunition). The Marines had dynamite and Bill Lee and I dug a hole with infantry spades taken from the dead. We dug the hole under the wall, put a huge charge of dynamite in it, buried it, lit the fuse and ran to the tank, and when the charge went, it upset the wall and we were able to drive in.

As I recall, we fired a few bursts of machine gun fire down the hole of the pillbox and took 21 men and an officer as prisoners.

As far as I recall, we were the very first vehicles to make it in to that section of Juno Beach.

Roland Johnston

We Land from a Rhino Raft

Our gun, HI, was to be the first towed gun of the regiment to land. We were to land on Mike sector of Juno and proceed to our Assembly area for a speedy de-waterproofing. Splash shields off carriers, breach blocks degreased, and condoms off the telescopic sights. This was the plan, but what action goes according to the plan? On our run in to the beaches about three miles from shore, we were ordered out of the landing order and fell back about five miles. Here we circled for hours, which seemed like days as the seas were rough and we weren't sailors. We had been told our beach exit was plugged and closed to vehicles. Finally, our turn came and in we went. The tide, however, was now not suitable for a direct landing (ie. ramp down, drive off) as we had rehearsed for many months. Major Ev Scott informed the gun sergeants we would be landing on a small "Rhino" raft. This was the first time we had heard about Rhino rafts and we sure weren't crazy about the word "raft." There were the usual derogatory remarks about the Canadian Brass. We were assured that four Bren gun carriers and guns could fit on these rafts, "if properly handled." Out from the beach pattered our raft, a low slung affair, with steel decking and no railings, powered by two outboard motors and crewed by two REs who looked about 40 years old! Needless to say, it was quite a feat for the RN and REs to get the LCT (Landing Craft Tank) ramp down and chained to this postage stamp-sized raft, with such a high surf running. How they did it without loss of life or limb, I'll never know, but they did. As we were HI we had the dubious honour of being the first to drive down a ramp that could be coming up, onto a pitching raft and hope the steel tracks of the carrier would hold on the slippery deck of the raft. With driver, Jack Kennedy, and myself, we drove on, quickly followed by H2, 3, and 4. "H" troop set sail for shore.

About five hundred yards from shore, one outboard quit and we proceeded to go round and round in slow erratic circles, much to our dismay and to the alarm and terror of all traffic near us. On examination of the motors I found they were "Johnsons" and manufactured about a mile from my home in Canada. A combination of my cursing the War Workers and the REs calling for the wrath of God, brought it to life. Once again, we headed for the beach. Our orders were to drive off with the gun crew running behind in the water, and not to stop on the beach. As we drove off, the gun crews' parting words were, "By J____, you'd better wait for us!" Once on the beach we slowed down and tried to pick up the crews, but because of the high splash shields they couldn't get in the carriers on the run. So we stopped. As soon as we stopped a Canadian Provo (military police) came roaring up on a motorcycle, yelling at

me to keep moving. As he went by us he drove right into a shell hole about 12 feet in diameter and so deep there was water in the bottom. As H2, 3, and 4 guns passed, they all offered free advice and comments to this hapless Provo. Once we got free of the sand, we poured it on and up the road to Graye-sur-Mer.

W.T. Jones

Our Driver Gets the LCM Moving Again

Our driver, Ray Burden, and Sgt. L.C. McDonald came across the channel in a small LCM. The carrier was waterproofed for 4' wading. The 6-pounder gun was put on the LCM and the carrier backed over the trail of the gun. On the way across the LCM stopped. The convoy signalled good luck to the two Marines on board and continued towards France. Ray was familiar with marine engines,

"D-Day - Normandy - Rhino Ferry" by Orville Norman Fisher

(CWM No. 12468)





*"M-10 (Self Propelled Gun, 3rd Anti-Tank Regiment, R.C.A.)" by Orville Norman Fisher
(CWM No. 12543)*

living all his life in Honey Harbour. He asked the Marines if he could look at the engine, to which they agreed. On his way to the engine, he tripped over something on the deck in the engine room. It turned out to be a switch to the auxiliary fuel tanks. When asked, the Marines shamefully admitted they had not turned them on. We proceeded on our way and took another LCM on tow, but it sank. We arrived on the British Beach. When proceeding down a road hoping to find our Canadian Beach, the French people came out and waved us back, crying "Boche! Boche!" Meanwhile, the rest of the gun crew had landed with just rifles. The NCOs and officers immediately tore off all stripes and pips because of sniper fire.

Dick Jones

Probing for Mines

While waiting for our gun, we were told to fix bayonets and probe a field which we blindly did, as no one told us why or what to look for. It seems that the field was mined. But due to our search, it was declared fit for

transport which drove onto the field. However, the mines were large artillery shells buried deep in the ground, with a large rod protruding to ground level. They were set so the rod would push down into the shell and detonate it. However, they were set to explode at random. The first push would not set off the shell. This allowed a vehicle to drive over a mine and contact with a following vehicle would detonate it.

Dick Jones

Assembly Area in a Minefield

With so little room for all the troops and equipment coming in, everyone had to go to their allotted area. Ours was a minefield and the engineers who were supposed to clear them had been killed. We were a walking party, and fortunately there were no anti-personnel mines. During the day several trucks were blown up and the drivers killed by mines.

Stan Medland



6-pounder Anti-tank Gun.

(Photo by Ken Bell, NAC PA 131365)

An Unplanned Dry Landing

We did a lot of assault training in Scotland, Poole, etc. We were led to believe we would have to get very wet when we landed in Normandy. I was assigned to a walking party and put aboard an LST (Landing Ship Tank) at Tillbury in the Thames. This was crewed by American sailors and was carrying English armour. We were approaching the beach at good speed and felt the craft stop. As we were preparing to disembark, a second LST hit us dead astern and pushed us well up on the sand. I walked off the LST and was at least 20 feet from the water's edge. My first thought was "Typical army, all that training for nothing."

A.D. Rogers

Regimental Headquarters

Weather cool with occasional sunshine. Weighed anchor at 0700 hours, and in company with a vast armada of other shipping proceeded out of the Thames Estuary and down towards the Straits of Dover. A narrow squeak was encountered while passing the

traditional white cliffs just before noon, when German channel guns on the French Coast opened up and fired four rounds at the convoy. The ship ahead was hit and was very soon a mass of flames. The normal hazard was increased by constant explosions of ammunition, and great mushrooms of inky black smoke swirled skywards as petrol lorries ignited. The second round fell just off the bow of our vessel, while the remaining two fell short.

Regimental War Diary

When It's Washday, It's Washday

Gunner Ward, Gunner Patterson and I loaded our vehicles on an LCT somewhere near London. We were the only Canadians on the ship, all others were British except the ship's crew, who were Americans. Ward had STORES, Pat had the RATIONS and I had the AMMO. We were the first three vehicles to come off the ship when the ramp went down on JUNO Beach.

We were told that if we got lost (who didn't get lost?) to ask for a mustering place called ELBOW-EDDY. So the first thing we did was "get lost" and almost got killed in the bargain. I decided to pull off the road and let Pat and Ward go their way. I drove into a small field that was full of troops and started to dig-in. I had dug down about a foot when I heard (above the roar of battle) a cowbell tinkling. My thoughts went back home to that little cow pasture in Ashmore, Nova Scotia.

When I looked up I saw a donkey pulling a two-wheeled cart with a large barrel of water on it. Walking beside the cart was a little old French lady with a long black dress, a large white apron and her hair done up in a pug. She reminded me very much of my grandmother. She was urging the donkey on with a small switch. The bell was tied around the animal's neck.

That little old lady was going to do her washing and house work and no damn war was going to stop her, come hell or high water. I can still hear the little bell tinkering.

Vince Thibodeau

Laughter and Tears

I well remember the track from the beach, and turning onto a street, by a church in Courseulles. There were a few elderly men and women at the side of the road waving. We thought they were laughing until we passed them, and we saw they were crying as well.

Jack Beresford

The Mad Colonel

We loaded onto a Rhino ferry about noon on D-Day with only one of my M 10s. We beached several times while approaching the shore so that we did not actually land until about 4 p.m. We moved to the assembly area where we spent the first night. Jerry aircraft were very active over the beach, and the Ack

Ack put on a show that I shall never forget. Very early on D+1, the rest of my tanks arrived. At about 8:30 a.m., the CRABrigadier Todd (now fondly known as Uncle Stanley) ordered me to take two M10s to assist the 46th RN Commando to clear an enemy pillbox at Langrune-sur-Mer. The Lieutenant-Colonel commanding the Marines held a most impressive "O" Group detailing with great precision just how we would carry out the operation.

It involved destroying a road block so that his Centaur tanks could lead the Marines through the village to the pillbox on the waterfront or esplanade. As the "O" Group dispersed, I was approached by a Marine Captain who said to me, "Watch out for the Old Man (the Lieutenant-Colonel). He is really quite mad and will get you killed if you are not careful!!!"

This was a somewhat shattering preliminary to my first encounter with the foe as a green 21 year old! In fact, the operation went off exactly as the Old Man had ordered even though it was painstakingly slow and deliberate. It resulted in the capture of 1 officer and 40 other ranks with no casualties on our side.

Bill Lee

Stan Medland served with the 52nd Battery from D-Day to late July when he became the Regimental Intelligence Officer.

The author would like to thank the following people for submitting their recollections: Jack Rudd, Henry Moore, Roland Johnston, W.D. (Bill) Riddell, A.D. (Buck) Rogers, Howard J. Thorburn, William E. Lee, Dick Jones, Vince Thibodeau, Jack Rose, Gordon Knowles, Evans Cameron, W.T. Jones, W.E. (Ted) Wood, Lome Hanson, and Jack Beresford (deceased).