

The Capture of the Abbaye D'Ardenne by the Regina Rifles, 8 July 1944

Gordon Brown

The ancient Abbaye d'Ardenne is a monastery, several centuries old, surrounded by solid stone walls and having a number of out-buildings as part of the complex. It is located just beyond the northern outskirts of the city of Caen in Normandy. Our attack was to take place on the 8th of July after heavy bombers dropped tons of bombs on the city of Caen on the evening of 7 July. We would have about 1,000 artillery guns to provide creeping barrages and heavy stonks on German positions and the support of about 20 tanks, if they succeeded in avoiding the powerful anti-tank guns of the enemy. Our tanks had not had much luck to date in Normandy with the result that the infantry was becoming accustomed to attacking without them. We had heard First World War veterans describe the infantry as "cannon fodder." Now we were realizing what an apt description that was! The Regina Rifle plan, as set out by Lieutenant-Colonel Foster Matheson, the Battalion CO, was to attack with three companies, keeping the badly understrength "A" Company in reserve. When the North Nova Scotia Highlanders reached the village of Authie and reported it clear, probably about 1600 hours, Baker Company would go through the Novas and capture a number of small mounds about four hundred yards beyond the village. Then Charlie Company, under Major Stu Tubb, and Dog Company, under my command, would pass through Baker and attack across open fields, about 650 yards, to capture the ancient Abbey of Ardenne. On our left, the Canadian Scottish Regiment would attack and capture the hamlet of Cussy, a few hundred yards to the north east of the Abbey.

In preparation for the attack I had gone by bicycle with my friend Major Eric Syme, Baker Company Commander, to make a reconnaissance. We used bicycles in place of motorcycles to avoid making too much noise. However, we could not get a good look at the area and returned to our positions in Rots without much information. So, Major Stu Tubb and I went to a church north of Rots the next day where we were able to climb inside the steeple and get a good look across the open country. We didn't like what we saw. The fields between Authie and the Abbey were very flat with no buildings and very few trees for cover. The tall grain near the Abbey would be the only place that we could crawl and hide as we advanced. It was not a pleasant prospect! The SS would be dug-in and would have the advantage of cover and a strong fortress (the Abbey). The Can Scots would face a similar problem, although they would have a few clumps of trees here and there. The H-Hour for the attack was set for 1700 hours which meant there would still be more than five hours of daylight. We would be easy targets for German machine guns. However, it was not ours to wonder why. It was ours but to do or die. The words of an old poem kept running through my mind.

We were moved into position on the evening of 7 July, north of Gruchy. From there we had a good view of the bombing raid on Caen at about dusk. The city, already badly battered, was virtually destroyed. Only a small percentage of its citizens remained there, but it must have been a horrible experience for them and for the German troops occupying the city. I often



Captain Gordon Brown, March 1944, in London, England, three months before the invasion.

wonder why we are given warm welcomes when we come to Normandy, after all the damage that was inflicted on the people and towns there. I know that they are grateful to us for helping them regain their freedom from the Nazis, but it was bought at a terrible cost.

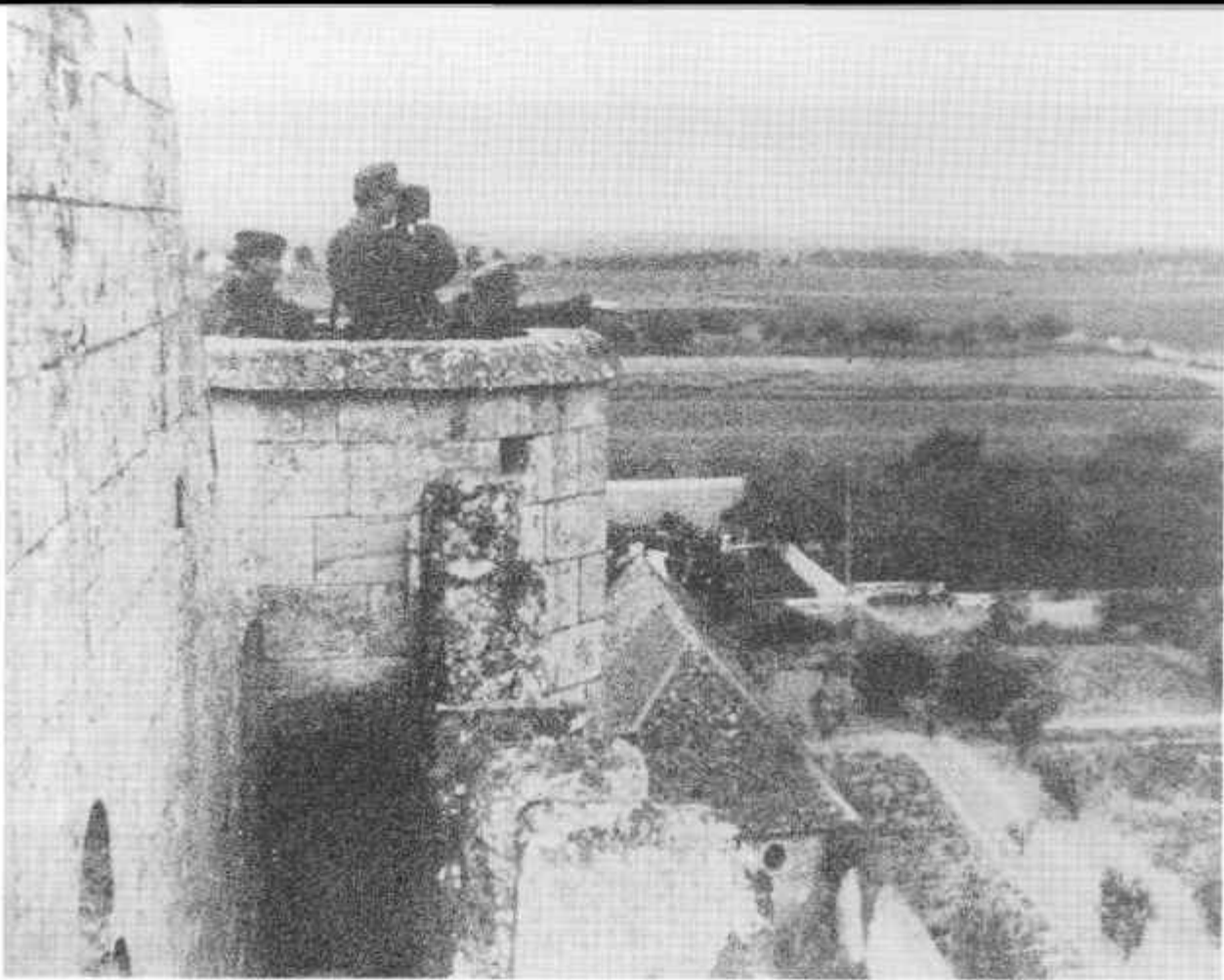
When July 8th dawned, the 9th Brigade and supporting tanks moved for the attack of Gruchy, then Buron and Authie, in that order. The Reginas and Can Scots followed, being heavily shelled by the Germans who reacted violently to every operation. We admired the 9th Brigade units as they stormed each of their objectives and in heavy fighting drove the SS out. The losses were the heaviest for any single day during the 3rd Division's combat in Europe. Each infantry battalion lost 200 or more killed and wounded. Tank losses were appalling as the 88s and the dug-in Panthers and Tigers had a field day. We all dug three or four slit trenches during the day in order to get some cover from the shelling.

After passing Gruchy, which was nothing but a pile of rubble, we followed the North Novas who would attack Authie after the Highland Light

Infantry captured Buron. We watched in awe as the HLI put on a gallant attack but our morale sagged because of the losses they took to achieve that goal. Good use was made of artillery barrages, but our tanks were destroyed by German guns. So the infantry ran into a hail of bullets as they advanced toward the buildings and the trenches occupied by the SS.

When the North Novas reported having reached Authie, Lieutenant-Colonel Matheson, Stu Tubb, Eric Syme and I were transported by Bren Gun carriers toward the village to make a reconnaissance and await the arrival of our companies, before beginning the attack. Somehow we missed the trail to Authie and wound up in the middle of a battle between the SS and one of the North Nova's companies. If I remember correctly, the Colonel's driver was killed and the rest of us bailed out of the carriers, only to be met by German grenades thrown from short range. The carriers turned around and how we got out of there I'll never know. I was the last to catch the final carrier, as I jumped on from behind while it was moving rapidly out of the field of fire.

We found the village of Authie but the Novas had not secured the whole town and were, in fact, hanging on for dear life. Our tank support arrived; about 12 Shermans surrounded me in a field right behind the village where I lay waiting for my company to arrive. Why the tanks chose to remain exposed, I don't know, but one by one they were destroyed by 88 mm guns located near the Abbey. It was the most devastating display of German anti-tank power that I had seen to that date. Our tank crews bailed out of their burning Shermans and were machine gunned from the mounds beyond Authie. I could do nothing until our companies arrived. It was almost 1800 hours when Baker, Charlie, and Dog Companies reached us. The artillery programme had already been fired on the mounds and the Abbey with the result that we were now to make an infantry assault without immediate artillery preparation and without any tank support. Baker Company valiantly attacked the mounds while "C" and "D" Companies followed and prepared to launch the final phase, the capture of the headquarters of the 25th Panzer Regiment at the Abbaye d'Ardenne.



German observation post in the Abbaye d'Ardenne.

Baker lost more than half their hundred men in reaching the "mounds," and were under constant machine gun and mortar fire. We had a devil of a time getting beyond Baker as we were so exposed, running and crawling through the grass and weeds. Charlie Company was on our right and being driven onto our line of advance by machine gun fire from the direction of Franqueville to the west. Stu Tubb ran over to where I was with Dick Roberts' platoon and asked that we delay our advance until Charlie could move further to the right. As Roberts and I lay in some small scrub bushes, tracer bullets flashed past our faces. We rolled back and, as Roberts said, we could have lit our cigarettes on the tracers!

When we finally got going, the advance was awfully slow because of the relentless machine gun and rifle fire. The two forward platoons began to use fire and movement effectively, but it was heavy going. We had already lost several men and were forced to crawl and run in short bursts to avoid heavier losses. We had to limit our losses if we were to have anyone left for the final assault.

As we groped our way forward we lost touch with Charlie Company. My runner and I followed behind the two forward platoons and just ahead of Lieutenant Al Law and his reserve platoon. Unfortunately our fine Forward Observation Officer, Lieutenant Hooper of the 13th Field Regiment, had been forced to remain near Authie. He had been supplied with a tank for transportation on this occasion, but it was too vulnerable to 88s so he remained behind a building near Authie. I had also left my second-in-command, Captain Hec Jones, and our wireless set well behind us to avoid having Hec or the set damaged. I felt that it was important that either Hec or I survive this battle. Jones had just returned from about a month in hospital after suffering a leg wound on 7 June at Villeneuve.

I was in a quandary. We needed another artillery programme to be fired at the Abbey. Machine gun fire from the tower of the church and from other locations around it were holding us at bay. I sent my runner back to find Hec Jones and ask him to contact the artillery and have them fire a stonk on the Abbaye and surrounding

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Abbaye d'Ardenne

Cussy

Authie

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buildings. This turned out well as the shells hammered the buildings thoroughly and we were able to move more quickly. But it was already near 2100 hours and we were just over half way between the mounds and the Abbey. A runner from Roberts' platoon came to me and gave me a message. Dick, whose platoon was on the right, reported that Jack Mooney and his No. 16 platoon had made a left flanking assault towards the Abbey and had disappeared. He asked that I send Al Law's No. 18 platoon forward to replace the lost No. 16. I immediately asked Al to go forward and, if he and Dick were successful in reaching within 100 yards of the Abbey walls, they should make the final attack under the cover of 2-inch mortar smoke. Al, an excellent officer who had

joined us at Cardonville farm, led his platoon quickly into position.

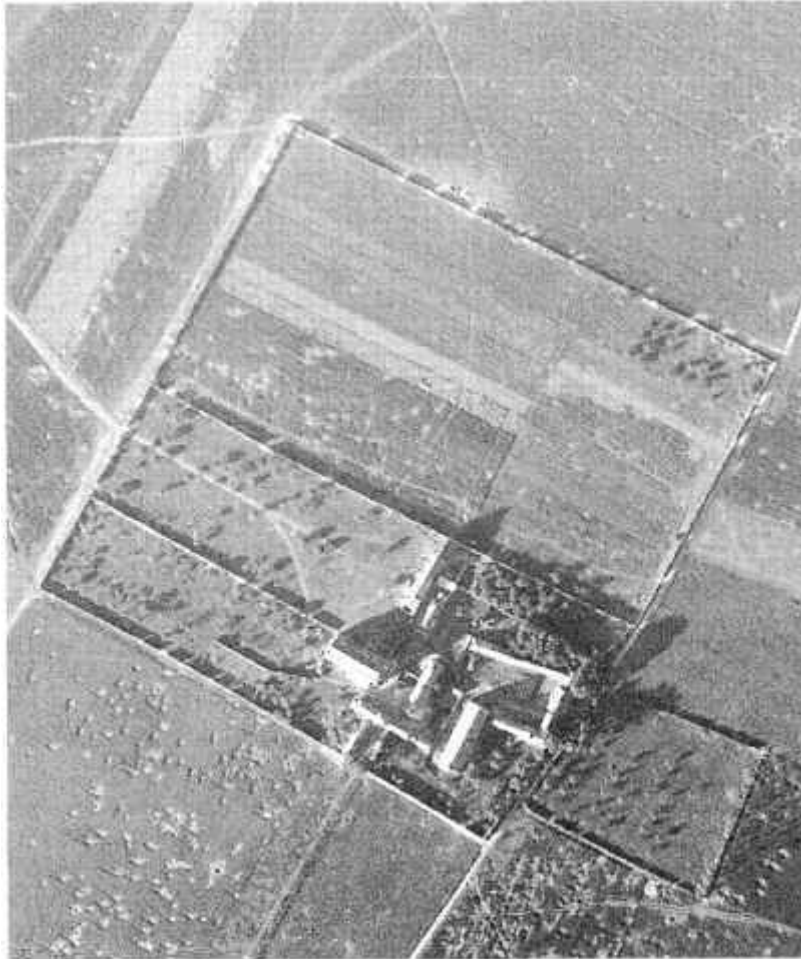
I decided that I would swing left in the hope of finding the remnants of Jack Mooney's platoon. It had taken enormous courage on the part of Lieutenant Mooney and his 30 men to make a left flanking move, but they may have paid dearly for it. I ran and crawled into a depression in the field that had a few scrub bushes around it. There I found about 25 men, all either dead or wounded, but they were a platoon of the Canadian Scottish who had strayed off their axis of advance and had been decimated by very accurate machine gun and mortar fire. The wounded Can Scots pleaded with me for help and I tried to bandage a couple of

serious cases. I gave them some of my water. What could I do about so many seriously wounded young men? Further, it was essential that I try to be with my company in the final assault. I promised to send help to the wounded and ran madly toward the Abbey, falling into the long wheat to avoid wild machine gun fire coming from an SS position in the corner of the field. I could see the German soldier but with only a pistol I could do nothing about it. I ran again, and again his bullets whispered around me but missed. Crawling through the wheat I felt that I was losing my mind and losing touch with reality, but suddenly I found myself scrambling among men of Al Law's and Dick Roberts' platoons. They had told me that they were about to make a run for the Abbey and its walls but were waiting for the 2-inch mortar man to lay the smoke screen.

Left: This air photo, taken two days before the Regina Rifles attack, shows how open the ground was between Authie and the Abbey. The problems faced by "C" Company, due to flanking machine gun fire from Franqueville, can also be seen.

Below: Close-up of the Abbaye d'Ardenne.

(WLU Air Photo Collection 310/3086)



I found myself with George as we prepared for the final dash. The mortar smoke was fired and created a perfect screen. The two platoons rose from the wheat and firing on the run, we all made the dash towards the walls. There were many slit trenches and dug-outs into which we threw



Jack Mooney, Dick Roberts and the author, Gordon Brown, photographed in Brussels, July 1945.

grenades. Some of our men fell but we overwhelmed the remaining dazed enemy troops. Dick Roberts and I patrolled down the wall to a place where a huge hole had been torn in it. There luck was with us again. We stood in the opening looking into a court yard where a German tank was slowly turning its turret towards us. I said "There's a tank," and Dick responded "Yeah, and it's a German tank." Machine gun fire missed us by very little as we jumped clear of the hole and lay there, puffing and fuming. The tank seemed immobile, for otherwise it wouldn't be sitting in an open yard like that.

We retraced our steps back to where we had found the slit trenches and dug-outs. There, to my joy was Lieutenant Jack Mooney and the few remaining members of his platoon. Their story is the stuff of real heroes. They had left-flanked the east wall only to run into a battery of 88 mm guns. The battle had been ferocious but the battery had been put out of action. Mooney and his guys were very happy to find us again. There weren't many of them left. Al Law and his platoon had entered the Abbey grounds and advanced to the south wall. However, I called them back because it was very clear that, having been forced to withdraw, the SS would soon be shelling the Abbey with everything they had. Roberts agreed

that we should have the protection of the back wall against the shelling. It wasn't long before the wisdom of our decision became apparent. Kurt Meyer ordered a heavy barrage that continued for a long time.

It was almost dark when I suggested to Jack Mooney that he and I try to find Hec Jones and the signaller so as to report the Abbey as being in our hands. We had only about 70 men and we needed the reserve company (Able) to help us form an adequate defence in case the SS decided to counterattack. On the way back Jack and I were caught in a mortar shell attack. We lay flat on the ground and luckily escaped the 65 bombs that landed all around us. When it was over we found some members of Charlie Company who told us that their company had lost about 90 men, including all five officers. I asked about my friend Stu Tubb and breathed a great sigh of relief when told that he was alive and was just now being carried off the battlefield. He had been hit in a leg and would later have it amputated above the knee. We ran to see Major Tubb and talked to him briefly as he was being carried along. We then found Hec Jones and asked him to get in touch with Lieutenant-Colonel Matheson to advise him about our success in reaching the Abbey. As usual the wireless set did not function properly and we were



The Abbaye d'Ardenne photographed in 1946.

unable to communicate. I asked Hec to go forward to the Abbey while I went back to Battalion HQ at Authie. Jack Mooney returned with Jones, while I found my way in the dark to Matheson's command vehicle in a field near the village.

The Colonel seemed sure that no one had succeeded in capturing the Abbey and thought that Dog Company had suffered the same fate as Charlie Company. All he knew was that Baker Company had lost almost 60 men including Major Syme, and that Charlie Company had over 80 per cent killed and wounded, including all the officers. I asked the Colonel for the help of Able Company in strengthening the position. Matheson agreed, under the condition that I take the company to the Abbey. I could hardly wait for my

friend Captain Bill Grayson, who, in the absence of Ron Shawcross in hospital, was now commanding "A" Company. He and his troops soon arrived and we discussed the problem of finding our way in the dark, with enemy machine guns on the right still raking the fields with tracer fire. We opted for stringing the soldiers out in a single line so as not to present a large target, and off we went. We had been unable to contact Hec Jones by radio to tell him we were coming, so we had a problem as we approached Dog Company in the dark. We got into the position safely, but only after I had convinced Dick Roberts that I was who I said I was. We had been shouting to each other, with him threatening to shoot us, until I assured him that I really was Gordon Brown! Bill Grayson managed to get his company dug-in

in the black of the night, but he told me the next morning that his soldiers were pretty disorganized. Some had placed their trenches and weapons facing each other.

After the war Kurt Meyer, in recounting the story of the Abbey, said that he ordered the withdrawal personally just after dark and that he arranged for a heavy barrage beginning at midnight. He was right. We were heavily shelled for about an hour, but both companies were relatively safe behind the sturdy stone walls. About 0300 hours I fell asleep in a shallow slit trench, sitting erect with part of my helmet protruding above the ground. Dick Roberts had his men on alert for snipers who were still firing at us in the dark. There was still some machine gun fire from the right, so not all the Hitlerjugend had received the order to withdraw.

At about dawn, I made arrangements for both Able and Dog Companies to occupy the entire Abbey grounds and buildings and dig in. The ancient church and other buildings were badly battered and some fires were still smouldering. However, they provided some protection from the shelling that guns south of Carpiquet still subjected us to. The heavy calibre shells were, nonetheless, continuing to take their toll. Lieutenant Al Law and his batman were struck by a large shell, leaving the rifleman dead and Al unconscious. Hec Jones and I carried him into a building on a stretcher. Al Law remained unconscious for more than two weeks. At the Abbey we could do little for him, so he was quickly taken to our Medical Officer at Authie. He went to a field hospital near Reviere where I joined him the next day. He was flown to England where he finally regained consciousness.

Despite the periodic shelling, we had a chance to look around the Abbey. We found a number of interesting items. There was a large telephone exchange (military) that had been badly smashed by a direct hit. Several dead SS were there, and in other places throughout the grounds. We found *two* Regina Rifle motorcycles in a garage. They had been captured from us at Bretteville a month earlier. There were a number of civilian vehicles which had no doubt been expropriated by Kurt Meyer's men. We were unaware then, of course, of the murdered North Nova Scotia Highlanders who were buried somewhere below our feet.

Hec Jones led me to a liquor cache, a room where he had found a German Shepherd guarding the door. Hec had killed the dog and found an enormous supply of wines, champagne and liquor. He also took me to a room which I assume had been Kurt Meyer's bedroom. A bed was nicely made up and there was a basket of cherries beside it. We drank some champagne and ate the cherries before I dozed off. Hec left, permitting me to get some much needed sleep. I make no apologies for my behaviour. Perhaps I should not have yielded to drink and sleep at this time. However, I must admit that I was on the brink of mental and physical exhaustion, after over a month of sheer hell. The whole of Dog Company needed time to rest and restore the strength necessary to pursue the battles in France, Belgium, Holland and Germany.

I had not been asleep for more than an hour when I was awakened and told that some VIPs were upstairs and wanted to see me. I was hardly in the mood for VIPs but I stumbled up the stairs into a room facing the city of Caen. There it lay in ruins, the victim of last night's heavy bomber raid, or was it two nights ago? A British major-general, flashing lots of red bands, and several staff officers were gazing out of the open windows. The General turned and looked at my unshaven, fatigued and drawn face and my shabby, muddy uniform. He demanded, "Are you in command here?"

I nodded and said, "Yes Sir. This is "D" Company of the Regina Rifle Regiment and I am the Company Commander. We just captured this place last night."

"Good man," he responded, "but you should now be exploiting success. There lies Caen like a plum to be plucked. Go after it man."

I gaped at him with my mouth wide open. "Look," I said, "We lost a hell of a lot of good men yesterday, about half of those that took part in the attack, over 200 killed and wounded. We are not in good shape. We've been in action for over a month! I don't decide to attack and capture the city of Caen with my 70 men. My commanding officer tells me when to attack, so that we can be coordinated with the rest of the Battalion and with the rest of the Brigade."

The General was not impressed and grunted, "Where's General Foster?"

I replied, "He's probably back at his Headquarters where he belongs! In any case, I'd prefer that the Germans not see you and your group looking out our window!" The General and his group stomped out of the building, into their armoured cars and left. I went back to bed.

Shortly after, I was awakened and told to report to a room upstairs for an "O" Group. When I walked in Foster Matheson was at a large map explaining our next operation. He bowed to me and said, "Major Brown, I believe." I smiled, saluted and replied, "I don't see any crown on my shoulders."

"You will," he laughed.

Looking back at the Abbey of Ardenne, there were several people who should have received awards for their actions. Major Tubb was awarded

the Distinguished Service Order, which was well deserved. In Dog Company, all three platoon commanders could have been recommended. Several non-commissioned officers and men deserved decorations. I remember that either Sergeant Soucy or Corporal Dumont directed machine gun fire into the open window of the church tower. The SS had been firing from there and holding us at bay with accurate machine gun fire. Unfortunately we were all in such a dazed and shocked condition that we had neither the inclination or the time to sit down and write up commendations. The battalion had suffered over 200 casualties on 8 July. That was roughly 50 per cent of the strength of the companies that took part in the assault. Both Charlie and Baker Companies were now non-operational. Our Dog Company had lost over 30 men during the attack and Able Company had not fully recovered since D-Day. The Regina Johns were almost a spent force. We would need a lot of good reinforcements to get us going again.



On June 4, 1994 a large crowd attended a ceremony at the Abbaye D'Ardenne where Mayor Maillard of St. Germain la Blanche Herbe presented Gordon Brown with a commemorative medal for Colonel Foster Matheson.

Gordon Brown landed with the Regina Rifles in Normandy on the morning of D-Day. On 8 June he was promoted to command "D" Company. He remained with the regiment for the entire campaign in Northwest Europe except for two short periods when he was wounded. Major Brown commanded the Reginas in their last attack of the war. He retired at the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel and now lives in Red Deer with his wife Jean.