

Two Days of My Six Year War

9-10 July 1944

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Early in July I was called back to Battery H.Q. and briefed on Operation "Charnwood," after which I went back to the troop and told the sergeants who in turn gave the information to the crews so that everyone knew what was intended and could carry on should he end up as senior man. The gist of the briefing was that an attack was to start by the English on our left at 0700 hours and would proceed south through Buron, Gruchy and Authie just north of Carpiquet airport by mid-morning, after which the Canadian 9th Brigade on the left and the 7th Brigade on the right would move east through their ground and drive to Caen. General FU with whom the division was very familiar and who had a large part in our training in England, was very much in evidence. The English advance was held up and 9th Brigade, according to my notes, moved in and took the villages and 7th Brigade went east to the Abbaye Ardenne and Caen.

My recollection of one 48-hour period with the most action of any is as follows.

The day opened clear and cloudless with hardly any breeze and by 0700 hours our field and medium guns began shelling the enemy. The four guns of "A" Troop were pulled out of position and formed in line on the road and at 1000 hours we set off for "Egg," the rendezvous area assigned to me. When we arrived, the guns were not unlimbered but the men were told to get cover which being a half mile from the woods and village meant digging in. Since we were exposed to the enemy no one needed to be told twice.

And there we stayed, watching the new potatoes, shell-dug, sun burn in the bright light.

From this position we had a grandstand seat as the infantry moved platoon by platoon southeastward across the rolling fields of grain. There were about 30 men in each group, in line, with about three yards spacing. They were all bent over as if facing a heavy rain and they were under constant enemy fire, both small arms and artillery. The hundred yard strings of men began to show gaps within a few minutes. I remember seeing a shell land near the line, but do not remember seeing anyone fall. After 10 or 15 minutes, the lines had been reduced to a scattered few. They soon disappeared over a rise of ground. I am not sure which of the 3rd Division regiments they were, but believe they were from 7th Brigade. Whoever they were, they were well trained and brave beyond comparison.

We stayed on this position while intermittent shelling fell all around us until 1500 hours after which it slackened somewhat. Chevillard, operating the Carrier #19 radio, gave me a message from Captain McCarthy, who was up forward with the infantry, ordering me to a map reference southwest of Buron. We got away almost immediately, my carrier in the lead, across the undulating field with the rest of the guns following the same track. As we came over a slight rise our dust must have been noticed and Jerry fired an air-burst, which usually is done to bring all of his guns on the same target. The burst was about 50 yards ahead and about the same height and normally would not have caused any alarm. However, a tiny fragment hit the radiator which was mounted between me and my driver and a stream of water about the size of a pencil lead shot out between us. This was not the time or place to stop and we soon found ourselves in a small hollow away from the marker area, and a couple hundred yards west of Buron.



Author (on right) with a friend, taken in holding pen in south of England prior to the invasion.

The map reference to rendezvous with Captain McCarthy was just south of an east-west line of trees and hedges and two of our tanks on the north side of the tree line were steadily firing towards Carpiquet, about three miles distant to the south. With about a hundred yards to go to the hedge and looking for a gate, I saw Captain McCarthy detach himself from a group huddled in the shade of the village wall to my left. He was waving his arms and the handkerchief he invariably chewed when things became stressful. It turned out that the map reference was about 100 yards wrong and would have put us right in the middle of a tank battle had the Captain been looking elsewhere.

Captain McCarthy told me that Authie had been cleared and the Reginas, who he was accompanying, were heading for the Abbaye Ardenne. I was to make my way to a take off point on the Buron-Authie road north of Authie and await further orders. The tanks disengaged

and I moved my guns to the west of Authie and we sited them to cover the ground to the south. Intermittent heavy mortar fire on the forming up area prevented counter-clockwise movement around the perimeter of the town. I left the troop sergeant in charge and with my rifle reconnoitred to find an alternate route through the town. Not a soul was in evidence until I got to the east wall where I found two English M-10s. One had lost a track to a mine and the crews were awaiting a recovery vehicle. Our "C" Troop of M-10s were also reported to be in the area and giving cover to the east so my guns were not needed and were better sited where they were. I continued my exploration through the deserted town with a few knocked out German vehicles and probably, though I do not remember for sure, a few bodies. I made my way to the southeast and soon found myself outside the village wall.

The treeless fields were gently undulating to the east rising gradually to the Abbey about a mile distant. Just south of the Abbey I could see the flash of a German tank firing at about four or five minute intervals. To my immediate left were three of our tanks just clear of the village wall. Dusk had fallen and I climbed up on the deck of the nearest tank whose commander was looking through field glasses toward the Abbey. When I touched him on the shoulder I am sure his heart skipped a beat. I hastened to tell him why I was there and pointed out the location of the gun flashes. The tank commander, however, was unable to catch the gun flashes and finally asked me if I could take it on with my guns. They might have reached halfway if the gun aimer could see it at ground level which he could not. On analysis I suppose that after fighting their way to this point since morning and with the loss of who knows how many tanks, he could hardly be blamed for not engaging the target. This was probably the best course of action as the target turned out to be a Panther tank, located hull down in a swale with only the heavy turret as a target. At any rate, the Panther was knocked out sometime during the night when small arms fire ricocheted through the driver's slot killing him and causing the rest of the crew to bail out and abandon the tank.

I made my way back to my guns where radio instructions were waiting for me to meet Captain McCarthy at the town hall in the centre of the village. He showed up some time after midnight

and, after gathering the guns, led us to a small orchard just west of the Abbey. There was a burning building in the compound surrounding the Abbey with a large portion of the west wall in ruins. I asked where the Germans were and he pointed to the west wall of the Abbey complex 200 yards distant and said, "Beyond the wall." However, there was no gunfire and the burning buildings revealed no movement on the ground. (We later discovered that the SS had fled during the night leaving one sick German in the field hospital, a bunch of maps and one perfectly good Panther tank with a dead driver a couple hundred yards south of the Abbey.)

The first priority was to establish a defence against a German armoured counterattack. One gun was placed at each corner of the orchard where it was hidden by a hedge and camouflage nets. With two guns facing east and two west, the flanks of the defended zone were covered. The Abbey buildings would be defended by infantry PIATs should armour seek that approach. All was in readiness for the German counterattack expected at daylight.

As the dawn gave way to a bright sunny morning and the expected counterattack failed to materialize, there was a general relaxing of tension. There were a few guns firing far to the south, directed at distant targets and not a single round fell within a mile of the Abbey. Hunger replaced the all-pervading stomach tightness which accompanies battle and the 14-man packs were opened and the one burner stoves fired up for breakfast. Front line training was noticeable as the artillerymen stayed close to their guns and the protection of their trenches. The infantry were prowling the orchard checking the lay of the land and gradually expanding their base into the Abbey grounds where some of the buildings were still burning. The entire encampment was busy with the first hot meal in 24 hours.

One of the Reginas passing the gun sited at the northwest corner of the orchard noticed an opening in the ground about 15 feet from the gun trail and checking it out reported, "There's a machine gun down there." I was eating breakfast sitting on the trail of the gun and replied, "It may be booby trapped, you better hook a wire around it and give it a pull first."

Hardly had the warning been given when the soldier jumped back and, unslinging and cocking his sten gun in one motion, fired a burst into the hole. We all stopped what we were doing and looked accusingly at the gun-happy infantryman.

He was one of the "Black Devils," still on strength after a month of action and his explanation to our questioning was, "Something moved."

Before he could say more there was a wail and cry from the hole. Two young German soldiers came tumbling out of the covered gun position yelling, "Kamarad, Kamarad." They were 12th SS Hitler Youth machine gunners who, with others, had caused so many casualties to the Reginas the night before and, in their covered "L" shaped slit trench, were not seen when the Reginas took the ground. They had lain silently waiting for a chance to escape but were unable to do so because of the close proximity of the anti-tank gun and crew. The youth closest to the entrance had been wounded in the legs. We called for a stretcher bearer who, in my experience, always seemed to be available. After bandaging his wounds, the kid was placed on the stretcher to be taken back to brigade with the unwounded German carrying the front end and the stretcher bearer the rear. I detailed a Regina with a rifle to accompany the party.

When the two bearers raised the stretcher, the wounded German kid raised himself to a sitting position, extended his right arm fully and slightly above horizontal and loudly declared, "Heil Hitler." For a second there was silence and then a spontaneous and universal burst of laughter and several jocular and unprintable comments. The troop sergeant, chuckling, summed it up for the group when he said, "Cheeky bastard."

The stretcher party moved off and the war went on.

J. Robert Cameron served with the 3rd Canadian Anti-Tank Regiment, RCA during the Second World War. This is an excerpt from a longer piece he wrote for his family describing his wartime experiences.