

4-16-2012

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### Recommended Citation

Edmondson, John S. and Edmondson, R.D. (2005) "The Pawns of War: A Personal Account of the Attack on Verrères Ridge by The South Saskatchewan Regiment, 20 July 1944," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 14: Iss. 4, Article 6.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol14/iss4/6>

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# **The Pawns of War**

## **A Personal Account of the Attack on Verrières Ridge by The South Saskatchewan Regiment, 20 July 1944**

**John S. Edmondson and R.D Edmondson**

### **Introduction**

**A** number of current books deal with Operations Goodwood and Atlantic, but scant attention has been paid to the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade and its three regiments, the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada (CAM), the Fusiliers Mont-Royal (FMR) and the South Saskatchewan Regiment (SSR), and to the Essex Scottish Regiment which was attached to 6th Brigade during this operation. When our role has been discussed at all, historians have inferred that the SSR fled or withdrew in panic in this action. My role was as Commander "B" Company of the SSR, and later as Acting Commanding Officer (A/CO) of the SSR during this operation. I wish to record my memories of the battle supplemented by historical documentation which I hope will cause historians to review the 6th Brigade action of 20 July 1944.

### **Before the Battle – 17-20 July 1944**

**O**n 17 July, our Commanding Officer (CO) Lieutenant-Colonel F.A. Clift held an Orders Group and presented a broad outline of the plan to the battalion. On 19 or 20 July, the 6th Brigade would take St. André-sur-Orne and Verrières with tanks in support in front of us, while 350 guns of the artillery would fire in support as the Brigade went in. Lieutenant-Colonel Clift informed his officers that he had insisted to Brigade HQ (Headquarters) that armour support was essential. The outcome was that the SSR were to be supported by a squadron of tanks.

To quote Lieutenant-Colonel F.A. Clift, "I had asked, and was granted, a tank squadron in direct support, because of the long assault, the rising ground at the objective, and the chances of a quick tank cum infantry attack by the enemy."<sup>1</sup> In fact, the length of the assault to the SSR "D" Company objective, a track T junction, was 4,500 yards or 4100 metres. By way of comparison, in our Regimental briefing on landing in France, we were told that one lesson of war was that attacks should be short, and no more than 1,000 yards in length.

On 18 July, our CO Lieutenant-Colonel Clift was called away temporarily to act as 4th Brigade Commander, and Major Reg Matthews acting commanding officer.

On 19 July, Major Matthews held an Orders Group and issued the movement orders which would place us in position for the attack. Our battalion completed our move through the rubble into our concentration area in Caen by 1500 hours on 19 July and departed from our position in the suburbs of Caen at 0200 hours 20 July, arriving into the Assembly Area beside Ifs on its west side at 1130 hours. We dug in, "A" and "D" Companies forward of the road leading into Ifs, and "C" and "B" Companies in reserve behind the road.

At the Forming-Up-Place (FUP) Major Matthews went over the plans giving details of the artillery barrage and air cover.<sup>2</sup> He informed us we would follow the original plan with the exception that there would be no tanks in direct support of us.



Photo supplied by authors

Captain John S. Edmondson photographed in March 1943 during Exercise "Spartan."

The only support we could count on was the indirect support of the Armour with the FMRs on our left flank and with the CAMs on our right flank. The reasoning given was that the enemy tank harbours at Rocquancourt and Fontenay-le-Marmion had been bombed so that the expected counterattacks would be light and from infantry.<sup>3</sup>

A map and overlay with our objectives on the high ground in map squares 0359 and 0459<sup>4</sup> had been provided to us. On the map, suspected enemy positions were indicated, but no accurately pinpointed positions. The intelligence was not up-to-date. Further, we were not allowed to observe the terrain. That is, company commanders were not allowed to go forward to see the lay of the land. And no reconnaissance (recce) patrols were permitted to go out.

Major Len Dickin, OC "D" Company, and I both questioned the A/CO regarding the lack of tank support and the suitability of the objective due to the high ground on our right flank from which we would be under enemy observation. Two features were Point 88 on our immediate right forward flank and Point 112 about 5 kilometres to the

west across the Odon River on our right flank. It spelled danger to us. I asked if this action was a must? And Major Matthews the A/CO replied that yes it was an order.

While we waited in the FUP to launch the attack, the H-Hour or time of attack was delayed from 1200 noon until 1500 hours.<sup>5</sup> During this time Nebelwerfer or Moaning Minnies as we called them fell on our right flank, but fortunately there were no casualties.

### The Plan

The plan called for a straightforward attack behind a creeping barrage. The barrage crept for 300 yards over 24 minutes, then lifted and skipped 300 yards and came down on the next 300 yards in depth for 24 minutes before lifting and skipping the next 300 yards again and then coming down again. There were 5 lifts in all on our front creating six box barrages which are indicated on the accompanying map.<sup>6</sup>

The battalion would advance behind the barrage with "A" Company on the left and "D" Company on the right, with "C" Company behind in reserve on the left and "B" on the right. Battalion HQ in the Command Post (CP) carrier advanced in the centre just behind the two forward companies. The line of advance once we reached Point 61 was south along a former railway bed to the St. Martin-de-Fontenay / Verrières crossroad where we turned southeast to our objectives. The company objectives as per map references (MR) have been indicated on the accompanying map.<sup>7</sup>

"A" Company Major Wells MR 048600 track crossroad

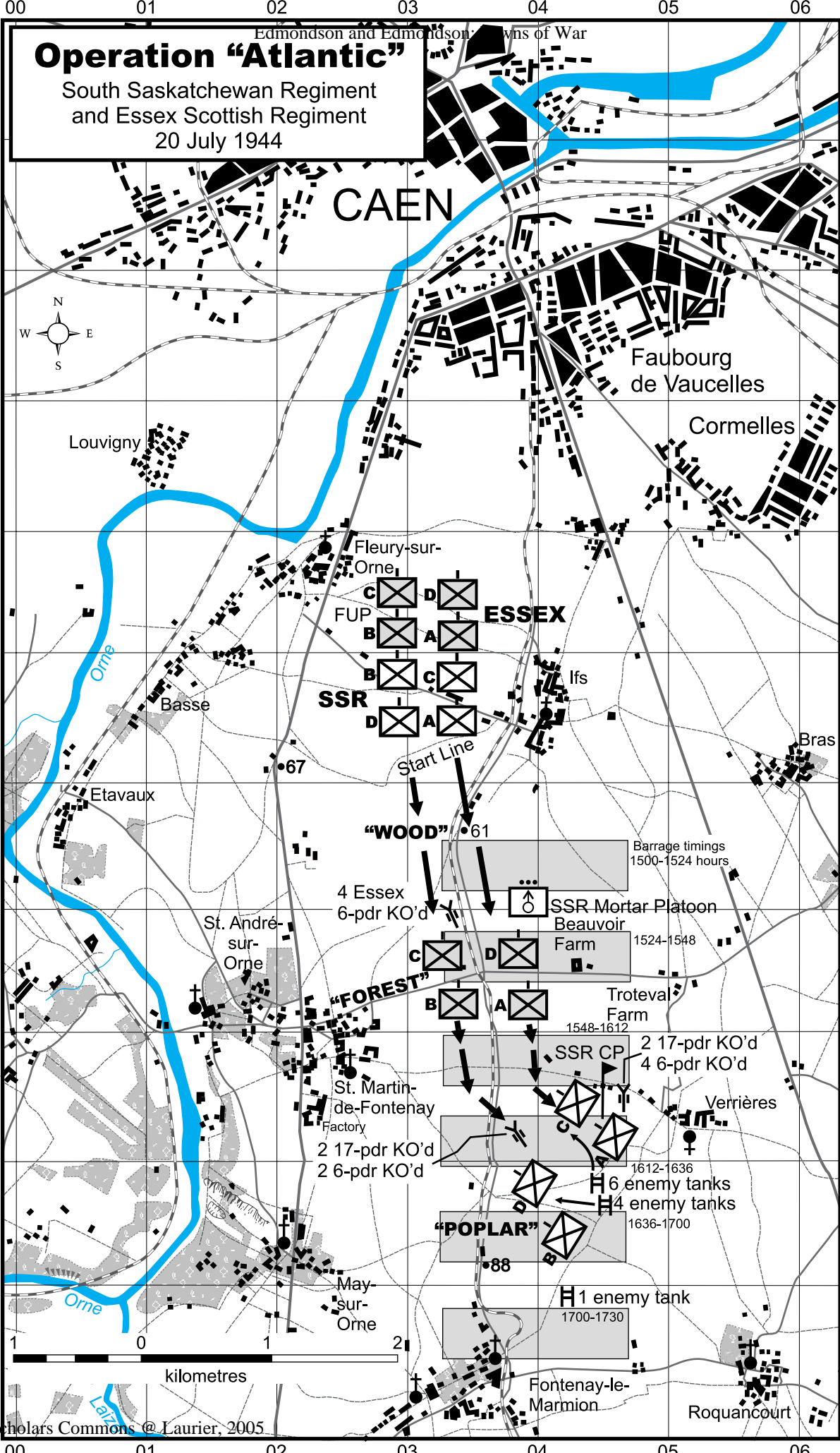
"B" Company Major Edmondson MR 039599

"C" Company Captain Doyle MR 042603

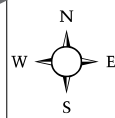
"D" Company Major Dickin MR 044594 track T junction

But it must be noted that during the operation itself, "B" Company and "D" Company objectives were traded by the A/CO, that is, "B" Company was given MR 044594 and "D" Company was given MR 039599 as an objective.

In our radio messages back to 6th Brigade via the Battalion Command Post (CP), we were



**Operation "Atlantic"**  
 South Saskatchewan Regiment  
 and Essex Scottish Regiment  
 20 July 1944



1 0 1 2  
 kilometres

Map drawn by Mike Bechthold ©2005

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to report "WOOD" when we reached intermediate objective Point 61, "FOREST" when we reached intermediate objective the St. André-sur-Orne/Beauvoir Farm crossroad, and "POPLAR" when we reached our final objectives.

Our own Battalion supporting arms were the Battalion Mortar Platoon, Captain W.G.A. Lane OC, and the six 6-pounder anti-tank guns, Captain G.E. Colgate, OC. To this were added 17-pounder anti-tank guns from the "K" Troop, 23rd Battery, 2nd Anti Tank Regiment.<sup>8</sup> These supporting arms were on call to be brought forward when companies reached their objectives. In addition, an artillery Forward Observation Officer (FOO) was to move up to the Battalion objectives so he could call down artillery support when and where needed.

Normally a FOO from the 6th Field Regiment who supported 6th Brigade would have been provided to us, but the fire programme was so extensive it involved all the field, medium and heavy guns of both the 2nd and 3rd Divisions and 2nd, 3rd and 8th Army Groups Royal Artillery (AGRAs). So in this instance, the FOOs were pooled and assigned to units irrespective of their normal attachments so it not known today which FOO came forward.<sup>9</sup>

Typhoons were to provide air cover, but the rainstorm during the operation grounded the aircraft.

The Essex Scottish from 4th Brigade was attached to the 6th Brigade for this operation. They were to form a firm base on the disused railway roadbed at the St. André-sur-Orne/Beauvoir Farm crossroad Map Square 0361, with the expectation they would leapfrog forward later if the SSR established a firm base on their objectives.

The CAMs were to capture St. André-sur-Orne on our right flank with the support of the tanks of "A" Squadron of the 27th Armoured Regiment (Sherbrooke Fusiliers), while the FMRs were to capture Beauvoir and Troteval farms and Verrières on our left flank supported by the tanks of "C" Squadron of the 27th Armoured Regiment. The tanks were not to move forward with the infantry, but were on call to come up and provide support when needed or to adopt positions from which to shoot the infantry onto their objectives.

The balance of the tanks or "B" Squadron were held in reserve in a position of observation at MR 023634 west of Ifs until ordered 200 yards to the right behind "A" Squadron at 1800

A Medium 5.5-inch gun of the Royal Canadian Artillery in action south of Caen.



hours on the 20th to counter a reported enemy armoured threat. The 27th Regimental HQ tanks were located in the orchard on the west side of IIs alongside the 6th Brigade HQ.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Battle – 20 July 1944**

Precisely at 1500 hours we crossed the start line directly behind artillery fire. Very shortly afterward “D” Company met the first enemy near Point 61 in a light encounter. A/Sergeant P.T. Maule of 18 Platoon “D” Company described to me what happened on the approach to Point 61. He was advancing in line with his platoon when Lieutenant A. Frederickson who was in front began firing his rifle. Frederickson had just hit two enemies when there was a sudden burst of enemy machine gun (MG) fire from the wheat field in front of them. A/Sergeant Maule was left standing alone as the two men on his left and the two men on his right and Lieutenant Frederickson in front were struck down. He then told Corporal Bickerton to call for stretcher-bearers for the five casualties.<sup>11</sup>

A radio message from the SSR to Brigade at 1505 hours stated “WOOD” which meant we had arrived at Point 61.<sup>12</sup>

At the St. André-sur-Orne crossroad, the opposition was more serious, approximately platoon strength. Radio message to Brigade at 1602 hours: “S SASK R report FOREST area cleared.”

The opposition became heavier (company strength) at the St. Martin-de-Fontenay crossroad. Radio message to Brigade at 1707 hours: “Stubborn enemy pockets of resistance along axis. Mopping up continued.”

Major Len Dickin, OC “D” Company, in his account of the attack described the advance to the objective as a series of small actions through the wheat fields – section commanders sending men forward with rifles, Stens or Brens to wipe out a slit trench. Many grenades were needed for fighting in such areas.

At the St. Martin crossroad, Major Dickin reported to Major Matthews that he had lost two officers and 20 Other Ranks (ORs).<sup>13</sup> And because “D” Company had growing casualties,

Major Dickin requested to Major Matthews that he be relieved of his objective. Consequently Major Matthews in person ordered “B” Company to take over the “D” Company objective, and gave “B” Company objective to “D” Company.

“B” Company finished helping “D” Company in our original role, that is, in mopping up the enemy slit trenches near the St. Martin crossroad to see they were clear of enemy, ensuring the POWs moved down the centre line to the rear and marking the spot where the wounded lay with rifle and helmet so the stretcher bearers could find them.

At 1732 hours, the SSR CP reported to Brigade that “D” Company had reached POPLAR, their altered objective.

Well before this message was sent, “B” Company had pushed through “D” Company at the double to catch up to our barrage and had turned southeast toward our new objective. Shortly thereafter “A” Company on our left encountered the first of many enemy posts. We halted and I moved my reserve platoon to fill up the space between “A” Company and ourselves to be certain we would not be fired on from the rear while this opposition was overcome.

We then pushed off again through artillery and mortar fire, dashing forward after the shells hit so that the next set of shells, which were creeping toward us, would miss us. At one set of slit trenches (MR 041597) we took 5 prisoners and at a second set further on, 10 prisoners (MR 044596).<sup>14</sup> While mopping up one of these positions, we directed the Germans who had surrendered to go back down the centre line. I had just cleared one trench and was moving toward the next, when I glanced back and saw a German who had popped up from a trench about 10 yards to my rear. He was raising his rifle to shoot me when Lieutenant Bob Pulley, who was coming up from behind, saw what was about to happen. He shot the German thus saving my life. All the while Germans who weren’t captured were running back through the grain.

It had already started to rain and soon opened up as a downpour. We continued and just before our own final barrage, which was to the south of our objective ceased at 1730 hours, Lieutenant Treleven on our right stopped his platoon. I

demanded to know why? He pointed out that the Germans were dropping a line of shell fire like a stone being skipped on water behind our barrage and ahead of Treleven's platoon where the enemy expected us to be. In this position we were already on the forward slope and under observation from the high ground at Point 88 and Point 112.

When we arrived at our objective, the two forward platoons were in a pea field on the forward slope. The tracks and T junction shown on the maps could not be located. For a moment I had the strong impulse to go and capture Point 88 about 800 yards west of us. Sticking to the original orders, I ordered the men to commence digging in.

I turned toward my reserve platoon and saw that part of my Company HQ was moving toward the rear. I called to my Company Sergeant-Major who was supporting a man, and he held up his arm, which was dripping in blood. I motioned to them to continue moving back where they could seek medical help because there was no expectation that a wounded man stay and fight. It was then I noticed there were a large number, one to two dozen, of walking wounded who had been hit by shrapnel. They were heading back toward the crossroads in the direction of our Regimental Aid Post (RAP). At this moment the shelling on the objective was relatively light. More of it was falling at random behind us from where we had come. From this position I could see "D" Company positions behind us, but not "A" or "C" Company positions to our left where Battalion HQ had moved to because the ridge itself had crests or slight rolls in it.

Then I heard hollering from the platoon on my left – "tanks." I saw four tanks one of which was a Panzer Mark IV. Another was reported as a haystack at MR 042592 just south of us.<sup>15</sup> To use the colourful words in Dickin's account: "Tanks appeared over my left front in "B" Company area shooting all hell out of everything in their path." The tanks charged from our left rear continually firing High Explosive (HE) and machine gun directly at us as they moved in on us. All of this happened in less than a minute. No one had a chance to dig in more than a couple of spades full.

One tank came right into my left forward platoon driving right over top of people it didn't shoot. I

was hollering at the platoon sergeant when the tank fired a HE shell which struck him in the back. He disintegrated into pieces before my eyes. I hollered and used hand signals to order a withdrawal into the cover of the grain field in the direction of "D" Company behind which I expected to find the anti-tank screen. As I did so the muzzle of that tank gun turned on me. As the tracer fire started, I took a running dive out of the pea field and rolled into the wheat field and scrambled along on all fours as bullets skipped across my backside.

Once the men went to ground in the 3- to 4-foot-high wheat, control was almost impossible because we could not see them or they us. Our span of control was limited to voice which could be heard only by those in the immediate vicinity. And casualties were diminishing the number of men capable of fighting. Captain Johnny Gates, my second in command, or myself screamed on the radio to Battalion HQ trying to get artillery support or anything, but we couldn't get through. In fact we had no radio communications once the heavy rain set in. Captain George Lane, our Mortar Platoon officer, in his account of the action stated electrical storms hampered our 38 sets completely. Major Dickin noted that this wireless silence was due to the very sudden heavy rain which began about 1600 hours.<sup>16</sup>

I organized what defence I could in the wheat field while the others withdrew. The Bren guns were knocked out in the first five minutes. The PIAT (Projector Infantry Anti-Tank) ammunition carrier from 12 Platoon had been knocked out already. But I was able to leave the other two platoon commanders Lieutenants Pulley and Treleven with their PIAT teams. One tank was stopped with two rounds and another tank hit without known results. Lieutenant Pulley never withdrew. Later in August he was found dead at this position. The tanks, once they had no easy targets, sprayed the wheat fields with machine gun fire and turned in circles through the wheat in an effort to crush the men or flush them into the open so they could be fired upon. Lieutenant Cas Treleven lay in the field for an hour not more than 25 feet away from a tank before he was able to make his escape.<sup>17</sup>

I ordered a withdrawal to the reverse slope behind "D" Company area and crawled back through the wheat with Captain Gates and





Canadian soldiers ready a 6-pounder anti-tank gun for action.

remnants of Company HQ and 12 Platoon. The other two platoons also crawled back through the wet wheat. Yet many more men were cut down during the withdrawal.

When we got behind "D" Company area, I found no one except a few wounded. "D" Company had already moved toward the rear. Since we had no communications with Battalion HQ, I ordered Captain Gates to hold there and to reform the Company in this area as men crawled their way through, while I went to find Battalion HQ.

As I passed over the crest south of the St. Martin-de-Fontenay crossroad, I saw 17-pounder anti-tank guns being knocked out. As the first was being towed into position, it was hit by enemy fire and was aflame before it even stopped. On stopping, the crew bailed out and they were all

on fire. Besides artillery and mortar fire, German tanks were firing from the east.

As I continued to move north toward where I thought Battalion HQ might be, I found an artillery carrier just off the road, and roughly parallel to the "C" Company objective to the east of the road. The motor was still running and the wireless was on. I turned the dials and tried to make contact with the artillery in order to call down supporting fire. But I didn't know their call signs, and there was no response.

Then I met our Signal Officer, Lieutenant B.A. Smith, and he informed me Battalion HQ had suffered a direct hit killing the A/CO Reg Matthews and the Intelligence Officer (IO) Lieutenant Doug Pedlow, and knocking out all communications. Lieutenant Smith told me all companies were withdrawing. He moved along the original axis of





56 This air photo shows Verrières Ridge to the southwest of Verrières village. This is the area of "Poplar" - the objective of the South Saskatchewan Regiment during Operation "Atlantic," and is also the location where the German armoured counterattack hit the Canadians. The openness of the terrain is evident from this image as is the scarring of the battlefield due to shelling and the tracks of armoured vehicles.

<http://scholars.wlu.ca/olj/vol14/iss4/no56>

(WLU Air Photo Collection 59/3071)

advance while I returned to “D” Company area to bring back Captain Gates and the riflemen with him. The A/CO and IO must have been killed shortly after their last radio message to Brigade at 1755 hours: “We are being attacked by tanks. We need help from the tank counter attack coming from the SOUTH.” Lieutenant Frank Mathers recorded Major Matthews last actions in his account: “Maj. Matthews had been wounded before he arrived at the CP (Command Post carrier) but nevertheless stayed right at his job taking no cover and doing his best to get arty (artillery) and tk sp (support).”<sup>18</sup>

Once back over the crest I crawled most of the way back through the wet grain to find Captain Gates, only sticking my head up periodically to see where I was. It was miserable being soaked to the bone and muddy. Yet, if you stuck your head up too long, you would be shot at because the enemy were targeting any movement they saw. Enemy infantry weapons were firing from the southwest, and riflemen from the grain. When I arrived there, the slit trenches, which had been barely started, were just abandoned scrapes in the earth. I couldn’t find a sign of Captain Gates or the men with him. I assumed he and the men had sought cover elsewhere from the artillery and small arms fire. But a brief search failed to discover them. Later in August the bodies of Captain Gates and a few men were found in the green field not far away where they had sought shelter from the enemy fire.

I then decided to go to Brigade HQ to seek artillery and armoured support. I made my way to the St. Martin-de-Fontenay crossroad where I got one of our carriers to Ifs. When we set off, I noticed small figures far down the slope in front of the St. André crossroads stand up and converge for a moment as if to consult and then double to the rear. Some of the forward elements of the Essex Scottish were withdrawing. To me they were in a precarious position and had to seek cover from the intense enemy fire.

On arriving at Ifs at about 1900 hours,<sup>19</sup> I reported to the 6th Brigade Commander, Brigadier Hugh Young. I told him of the desperate situation, and that the A/CO was killed and communications cut, and that the area of our Battalion objective was now free for artillery fire. He said stop getting so excited. I said I’m just giving you the facts. Within minutes, Major

Dickin arrived and repeated what I had just said about the situation and the A/CO. On determining that between Dickin and myself, I was the senior officer, the Brigade Commander said you’re now the A/CO and ordered me to reform the Battalion and hold them together on the reverse slope, but without any specific place being mentioned. The Brigade headquarters was in a state of confusion because they did not know what was going on. They seemed to change their mind from moment to moment. I could get no further direction other than what I have just mentioned. And the Brigade Commander offered no help to alleviate the immediate desperate situation.

I proceeded to the St. André-sur-Orne crossroad where I found a few “B” Company men. There was no real possibility of digging in properly there under enemy fire, so I ordered them and the men from our other companies I could find to return and reform at the FUP. I stayed and supervised the removal of casualties by stretcher bearers and the carrier platoon. I directed Captain Lane, the platoon Mortar Officer, to remain and help the Essex.

But the truth is with the breakdown in communications between Brigade, Battalion HQ and the companies, and with heavy casualties, the situation was chaotic. The walking wounded had streamed back or had been picked up by carrier. For the remainder, the action once the Battalion had been over run by tanks, was one of small or larger groups who had to act on their own initiative under the senior person present. Several attempts were made to mount a defence. The Mortar Officer, Captain Lane, testified that when our men passed by his position near the Essex Scottish at the St. André-sur-Orne crossroad, they came through in small groups, sometimes under NCOs and sometimes alone.<sup>20</sup>

When I returned to the FUP I found a number of men already in position. As more men made their way in they were directed into their company groups. We dug in in our original company areas, then cleaned our weapons and replenished our ammunition. Food and hot tea were brought in. At 2030 hours there was one sergeant and 13 ORs (Other Ranks) from “B” Company.

Men continued to come in during the night, some unscathed, some walking wounded and others who were wounded being carried back.

A/Sgt. P.T. Maule of "D" Company described the situation at the St. André crossroads after his movement back from the objective. He, with the seven remaining men of 18 platoon, found 30 to 40 Essex men in the wheat field and north ditch of the St. André crossroad. He noticed that the deepest slit trenches they had managed to dig were about 18 inches deep. He had just asked the Essex sergeant with these men his plans, when at that moment heavy machine gun fire sprayed their position causing a number of casualties. Also red hot armour-piercing 88 mm shells passed over them, exploding in what appeared to him to be the rear area of our original FUP. Enemy tanks could be heard rumbling further south on the ridge.

A/Sgt. Maule then in an effort to find more of his platoon went alone about 300 yards north along the main axis of the sunken roadway and came across 6-pounder guns on the road and in the adjacent field with all of the remaining crew dead. Finding none of his men, he decided to return to the St. André crossroads. As he crawled his way south on hands and knees, and on his stomach, while trying to keep his Sten gun clear of mud and ready for action, he saw German infantry advancing from the west along the St. André road. At the crossroads, he reported this to the Essex sergeant.



Corporal Peter T. Maule, 18 Platoon, "D" Company, South Saskatchewan Regiment, photographed after crossing the Seine River near Rouen, 31 August 1944. Corporal Maule was wounded in action three times – 21 July 1944, 16 September 1944 & 13 December 1944.

As the fire had become extremely heavy, A/Sgt. Maule and his men then sought refuge in the wheat field to the northeast where they had caught sight of men they thought might be "A" Company. On arriving there they found the men were from the Essex. As they were in a slight depression in the ground, they started to dig in. They stayed there through some heavy downpours of rain.

After a time they decided to try to get back to the sunken road so they could make their way back to the FUP, but any movement in the grain brought small arms fire on them. He lay there with this small group of men, some of them wounded and with little ammo, through the night. Just before daylight, they moved further to the rear because 3-inch mortar, which was being fired from lfs, was falling only two to three hundred yards south of them to their front. While moving north something struck him because he later woke up in hospital. He was told he had been found unconscious, suffering from concussion. He had 11 stitches in the area of his right temple and returned to the SSR from hospital on 25 July. He was initially reported missing in action, however, and his mother received this news by telegram.

(Source: P.T. Maule letter to John S. Edmondson, 14 March 1996)

Lieutenant Henderson of "C" Company reported back at 2200 hours and said that fighting was still going on in front of the Essex Scottish and thought our chaps were fighting in front of and with the Essex Scottish.<sup>21</sup> Some men had been pinned down for hours by the mere presence of tanks. Others had lain in the fields surrounded by enemy infantry until an opportunity to escape came. Everyone made their way back as best they could, considering they had to run the gauntlet of artillery, mortar, tank and machine gun and small arms fire. By 0800 hours the following morning, of about 95 men from "B" Company who went into the action, there was one officer, Lieutenant Treleven, and 27 men present.<sup>22</sup> The Battalion lost 13 officers and 209 ORs either killed, wounded or missing.<sup>23</sup>

Because this is my personal account of the battle, rather than a regimental or battalion account, I will only provide brief highlights of what happened to the other three companies. In general they had much the same experience as "B" Company. They were over run by tanks. Moreover, the anti-tank guns called up in support were knocked out when they arrived.

Lieutenant S.M. Carter of "D" Company, which was in reserve behind us on the objective, testified they were attacked by about a half dozen tanks. He said our Battalion 6-pounder anti-guns were knocked out immediately. Lieutenant Carter then gave the order to withdraw, and "D" Company withdrew by stages back to the FUP.<sup>24</sup>

Lieutenant Frank Mathers of "A" Company reported that on reaching the objective, the Company was subjected to heavy machine gun fire from trees on the south side of Verrières. Then four enemy tanks came in and knocked out four 6-pounder anti-guns and two 17-pounders and the Battalion CP carrier before sniping at the infantry. The FOO who had come forward into this area left after A/CO Reg Matthews and the IO Lieutenant Doug Pedlow had been killed in the Command carrier. Major Wells OC "A" Company went over to 9 Platoon and never returned. (He was reported missing, and in August confirmed killed.) Then Lieutenant Mathers ordered his 8 Platoon section leaders to withdraw. Of the 95 men who went into the action, 34 were casualties - 2 killed, 7 missing, 25 in hospital.<sup>25</sup>



Company Sergeant-Major J.A. Smith of "C" Company, which was in reserve behind "A" Company, testified that at their objective they were counter attacked. Captain Doyle OC "C" Company gave the order for the company to withdraw. (Captain Doyle was reported missing and confirmed killed in August.) At 0200 hours on 21 July, CSM Smith had only Sergeant Cunningham and 28 ORs with him at the FUP.<sup>26</sup>

Our Ant-Tank Platoon Officer, Captain Ted Colgate, reported the loss of all six 6-pounder guns, four carriers and 13 personnel. The attached "K" Troop, 23rd Battery 2nd Anti-Tank Regiment reported their four 17-pounder guns lost, and 7 personnel killed and some missing. The "some missing" as it turned out were 7 personnel who were found to be in hospital on

31 July. Before that date, the unit did not know if they were killed, in hospital or POWs.<sup>27</sup>

On our Battalion right flank, the Camerons captured St. André-sur-Orne but had to fight off four counter attacks in the following day in order to hold on. The CAMs had the support of the 27th Armoured Regiment "A" Squadron whose normal complement was reduced from 19 to 6 tanks either destroyed or damaged by the end of 21 July.

On our Battalion left flank, the FMRs captured their intermediate objectives, the Beauvoir and Troteval Farms. "C" Squadron sent seven tanks from two troops to support them. Four of these tanks were destroyed or damaged with the balance withdrawing before nightfall. On the

Three soldiers from the South Sasks examine a captured German "Schwimmwagen" amphibious scout car at Rocquancourt on 11 August 1944. From left to right: Private T. Schwartz, Major John Edmondson and Captain Neville Hadley. Captain Hadley was killed in action on 28 August 1944.



Photo supplied by author



Officers from the South Saskatchewan Regiment photographed in May or June 1944 at Broome Park, England (north of Dover) just prior to the invasion.

**“A” Company**

Front row, left to right: Major R.S. “Bob” Wells [WIA 19 August 1942; KIA 20 July 1944], Captain W.S. “Bill” Edmondson (John’s brother) [LOB 20 July 1944; WIA 8 August 1944]; Back row: ?, Lieutenant Frank Mathers [WIA 27 July 1944], Lieutenant James F. McGeough [WIA 20 July 1944; WIA 20 December 1944].

morning of 21 July, “C” Squadron had only six tanks remaining, three from the attack on 20 July and their three HQ tanks. In regard to the infantry, the two forward companies of the FMRs who attempted to move on to the final objective of Verrières were cut off by the enemy from behind and entirely overcome. Only a few got back to our own lines. The two reserve companies held onto Beauvoir and Troteval farms as long as possible but were finally compelled to withdraw by enemy counterattacks.

**After the Battle – 21-25 July 1944**

On 21 July, we stayed in position at the FUP until about noon while artillery and mortar fell on our positions and the surrounding area. Then we were ordered to withdraw to an area north of Fleury-sur-Orne where we were picked up by TCVs (Troop Carrying Vehicles) and taken to la Villeneuve just west of Carpiquet.

On the 22nd, we took a roll call to verify who was present and who to the best of our knowledge



Photos supplied by authors

**“B” Company**

Front row, left to right: Captain John L. Gates [KIA 20 July 1944], Major John S. Edmondson [WIA 19 August 1942; WIA 17 August 1944]; Back row: Lieutenant R.J. “Bob” Pulley [KIA 20 July 1944], Lieutenant D.C. “Cas” Treleven [WIA 20 July 1944].

(WIA - wounded in action; KIA - killed in action; LOB - left out of battle)

were killed or missing. In addition, we took a weapons count. I spoke to the men of “B” Company. I reviewed the battle with them, and assured them we had nothing to be ashamed of. I said given that we were unable to obtain either artillery or tank support, they had done their best under the circumstances. The men had a good grasp of the events and were subdued yet in relatively good spirits considering what had happened, showing no signs of undue combat stress.

In the morning, reinforcements started to arrive, and the LOB (left out of battle) personnel joined us. Major Pat Adams who was the senior officer then became A/CO while I became second-in-command of the Battalion while at the same time Major Adams expected me in the confusion of reorganization to continue to fill the role as OC “B” Company.

Major-General Charles Foulkes, GOC 2 Division, visited the Battalion. Because I had become A/CO during the operation he spoke with me. He was clearly unhappy with the results of the operation.

He said who gave you the authority to withdraw? Why didn't you stay and dig in on your objective? Why have you lost all of your automatic weapons and other equipment? I received quite a grilling, and General Foulkes' tone was very accusatory. I simply replied that we were caught in an open field the moment we arrived at the objective. Enemy tanks came in and rolled right over top of my men. There was no time to dig in. Within minutes our automatic weapons were knocked out and we had no communications of any kind. There was no tank support, no artillery support and what anti-tank guns we had were knocked out behind us. With the tanks running over top of my men, I had but one duty left, to save as many lives as possible. That was why I ordered them to withdraw into the wheat field. He had no answer to my response. But he obviously was not satisfied because he ordered a Court of Enquiry in the Field to report on the losses of weapons and equipment by the SSR and Essex Scottish.

The other SSR Company Commanders had also given orders to withdraw. From my personal knowledge of events, I can state Major Dickin and Major Wells did. The records of the Court of Enquiry in the Field of 2 August 1944 show that Captain Doyle did also, and confirms what I know about Major Wells.<sup>28</sup>

On 23 July, the Battalion received replacement vehicles and other equipment. Major Adams issued a warning order to be prepared to move to our former positions beside Ifs by 1800 hours. The reorganization and re-equipment of the Battalion had its moments of confusion and poor coordination. The TCVs we were to climb into for the move were ready when the vehicles delivering our new Bren guns and PIATs arrived alongside. So we had to break open the crates and issue the weapons directly to the platoons before climbing aboard. The weapons were not even degreased and fired to make them ready for action. And at this point we climbed into the TCVs and went.

During the move the convoy got split up. The rear section, I was in, was halted by a British sentry as we approached the British zone in Caen.

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Sergeant T. Harrison and men of the South Saskatchewan Regiment riding in a Bren carrier lead German prisoners into captivity, 8 August 1944.

Photo by Ken Bell, LAC C 68957







Photo by Ken Bell, LAC PA 169328

Three members of the South Sasks look at the bombed Church in Rocquancourt. The church tower was used by German snipers during the South Sask capture of the town. The man standing at the left is believed to be John Edmondson.

them cowering in their slit trenches, and I tried to find out from the IO what on Earth was going on? Just then Brigadier Hugh Young, GOC 6th Brigade, arrived, and Major Adams went over, saluted and asked the Brigadier to relieve him of his command. Brigadier Young called him the worst names I have heard a man called in all my life. He then turned to me and said, you're in command, carry on.

On the following day, 25 July,<sup>29</sup> Major Adams reported to hospital and in the evening Lieutenant-Colonel Clift returned to resume command of the SSR. To me the situation in Battalion HQ illustrated that sometimes the fear of what you haven't experienced is worse than the fear of what you have had to face. In other words the fear that gripped some of the men who were LOB was worse than the fear of those who had been in combat. I was as scared as anyone. Yet as a professional soldier, it is your job to get on in any case.

On ascertaining the problem, I had the convoy rerouted and led them to the FUP at Ifs. The lead section had arrived at 0300 hours on the 24th, but the rear section arrived just before first light. We drove in right along the road leading into Ifs on its west side and in full view of the enemy as first light was dawning. We dug into our old positions temporarily. After a recce was made, the Battalion dug into positions in front of Ifs ensuring that each slit trench had a roof because of the periodic and frequent artillery and mortar shelling of our positions. The Battalion was back in the line.

I gave the order that as soon as the slit trenches were dug, all rifles and automatic weapons were to be cleaned and fired to ensure they were ready for action. We were all firing when the A/CO Pat Adams or his Adjutant came on the phone and said stop that firing. I refused, saying I'm responsible for "B" Company and I'm supposed to be ready for operations. Firing continued and then Major Adams got on the phone and hollered, come over to Battalion HQ, I want to talk to you. When I got to Battalion HQ, I found

### Later Post-Battle Events

On 9 August 1944, the day after the capture of Rocquancourt by the SSR as part of Operation Totalize, I became A/CO again while Lieutenant-Colonel Clift went to hospital to have a piece of shrapnel removed from his back. I went out with Captain Neville Hadley, our IO, to survey the battlefield of 20 July. It was a grim task because there were pieces of people and bloated bodies with blackened skin. Nevertheless I remember I was able to identify Bob Pulley by the shape of his forehead and clothing. We marked the positions and identified the bodies we could in preparation for the burial parties who were to go out the next day to complete the task. Among those we identified were Major Reg Matthews, Major Bob Wells, Captain Charlie Doyle, Captain John Gates, Lieutenant Doug Pedlow and Lieutenant C.D. "Sonny" Grayson.<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, just to the west of where we fought, we found a wave of the Black Watch whose bodies, wireless and weapons were all piled up there on the ground where they had fallen on 25

July. In the past weeks, when the wind blew the wrong way, the stench of death over our positions was nauseating. Flies on the front lines multiplied by the millions, and food contamination caused dysentery among the men. You could not shoo the flies fast enough to keep them off your food.

During the morning of the 10th of August, both Brigadier Young and General Foulkes came to our Battalion CP. Brigadier Young came to warn us of our next move and General Foulkes to ascertain the current situation there on our front.<sup>31</sup>

During my conversation with General Foulkes, I said to him, you asked me all those embarrassing questions a couple of weeks back. I invite you to go with me to take a look at the battlefield. You will find all the bodies still lying there unburied along with their weapons. He declined to go. Yet the proof was there; the weapons, which had been deemed an excessive loss by the Court of Enquiry, still lay there.

### **The Question of Panicking, Breaking, Scattering, Fleeing, Retreating in a Disorganized manner after Throwing Away Weapons**

A number of historians infer the SSR and Essex Scottish either panicked, broke, scattered, fled or retreated or threw away their weapons in the face of enemy opposition. An example of this is contained in David Bercuson's *Maple Leaf Against the Axis: Canada's Second World War*: "In danger of being encircled and losing men by the minute, the Canadian troops in the centre broke; they threw away their weapons and ran back, chased by the advancing Germans."<sup>32</sup>

Did the SSR and Essex panic, break, flee, scatter or retreat in a disorganized manner, and throw away their weapons? In my mind, there are two elements to be considered here. The first is the wounded, and second is the men who were still fit for action.

There is no doubt that many of the wounded who streamed back, the walking wounded and those who were carried back in relays by carrier or jeep, were in a state of fright or shock. George G. Blackburn in his book *The Guns of Normandy*

records one SSR who yelled to the Essex: "It's bloody suicide to go up there."<sup>33</sup> But I wish to point out that this was the wounded. To me the stream of wounded seems to have coloured the views of those who witnessed this procession of injured soldiers. These witnesses have influenced some historians to interpret the stream of wounded as a general South Saskatchewan Regiment retreat or flight. However, the action accounts of the South Sask officers and testimony at the Court of Inquiry on 2 August 1944, which have been largely overlooked, paint a different picture.

It is evident that because we had no radio communications to Brigade or internally within the Battalion, the command and control structure of the SSR was broken. But that is different from breaking and running. I agree we were disorganized in that the Battalion was unable to act any longer in a coordinated manner or as a whole. Lieutenant Carter stated at the Court of Enquiry:

It was not an orderly withdrawal....We endeavoured to organize it without success.... We withdrew by stages back to the FUP.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the inability to organize the withdrawal under fire, the withdrawal was still by stages. This is not the action of fleeing soldiers.

Lieutenant Carter further testified that in the first stage of withdrawal: "Our own 6 pdr guns moved in but were knocked out immediately. I then moved the remainder of "D" Company around the A/Tk guns to try and help them get into action but met with no success owing to the guns drawing all the German fire."

Captain Clifford Smith was OC Support Company during the attack. It was his job while located just to the south of the St. Martin crossroads to direct the anti-tank guns into the company areas they were allotted to support. He had this to say about the reason and manner of SSR withdrawal:

The regiment moved back after taking the objective for one reason, that they would have been annihilated to do otherwise.

The companies were unable to withdraw by the usual fire and movement since they had no effective fire plan available to them. The companies therefore infiltrated, using available

cover and arrived back at the ridge in varying sized groups and compositions. Baker and Charlie Companies arrived and soon organized a defence on the north side of the ridge. Capt. Smith (author) remained atop the ridge and directed troops to the new defence positions during the withdrawal, our forces remained generally calm and disciplined.<sup>35</sup>

I will reiterate here that in the final analysis, once our anti-tank guns were knocked out, we had only the infantry weapons we carried with us, while the enemy was able to employ infantry, mortar, artillery and tank guns in their counterattack. What effective fire plan could we mount! But nonetheless, attempts at a defence were mounted. Examples follow.

Captain Alex Matheson, OC Carrier Platoon, said in his account of the action written on 23 July 44 that,

Just south of the second x rds [St. Martin] they found the road blocked. MMGs were firing from both the right and left flanks by the time we moved fwd (forward), and one pl (platoon) of "D" Company was moving backwards across the road. In a few mins Maj. Dickin came up and ordered us to go just north of the x rds and to stay there. He then went to the Brigade comd and I organized "D" Company in the area until he returned.

Major Dickin related that in his withdrawal "I planned to take them back to an area with some dead ground in it and dig in there. The area I planned to use was the area NW of the X rds 0360 [St. Martin], but it proved unsuitable as there was no cover. I then planned to retire behind the guns of the Essex Scottish. I went personally to the comd of the Essex Scottish so as to be sure he knew the posn (position). I found our 3 in. mortar pl there."

Capt. Murray Stewart recorded that "A general movement of withdrawal took place to the area of the St. André-sur-Orne—Troteval X rds took place and the bn was to dig in on that as they could not withstand the armour on their objective. The plan was that the Essex would hold the reverse slope of the objective directly to our south while we dug in at the res (reserve) posn. This was not successful as the Essex also got shot up and began to pull back."

In respect to "B" Company, prior to the withdrawal behind the "D" Company area, I had ensured that on the objective "All PIATs

remained under their crews and in two cases platoon commanders were left to deal with the tanks." I then left Capt. Gates to consolidate "B" Company behind the "D" Company area while I attempted to find Battalion HQ. When I returned to the place where I had left Capt. Gates to reform the Company, I found no one and that "The area where my Company should have been was under fire from riflemen in the grain." Then I went to Brigade to obtain artillery or tank support but to no avail. Then I found that "When I returned, my Company had moved back to the Essex Scottish front, I could not see the other Companies. ... I stopped the mortar offr and told him to remain to help the Essex when they got to this X rds."

The Mortar Officer, Captain George Lane, in his account stated that "OC "B" Company passed by and told us to set up our plates which we did just behind a crest...300 yds north of the [St. André] rd junc. I went to Col Macdonald of the Essex Scottish to see if we should fire. He did not know either what the situation of our fwd tps (troops) was; only a few of our own tps had come back and we felt there must be more fwd. We could not fire because we did not know the posn of our fwd tps....When the tk alarm was on, Capt. Colgate took one of my PIATs to protect our left. He helped the Essex put in their 6 pdr as all his own were knocked out."<sup>36</sup>

What this evidence illustrates is that even with no central command or control of the Battalion, the different groups at different times on their own initiative attempted to organize a defence. We were not fleeing or running away from the enemy. We withdrew to what we hoped were more favourable positions for defence. And we were not retreating either in my mind, because the connotation in retreat is to draw back from a superior force following or during a defeat. Although we were taking a horrendous beating, we had not conceded defeat, or we would not have attempted a defence in the face of superior firepower.

My view of what happened then is that the SSR were compelled to withdraw in a manner dictated by the circumstances of superior enemy firepower, and that we continued to mount our defence and fight as the conditions permitted. I consider the notion that we panicked, fled or ran, a misrepresentation of our actions, and a notion which I hope I have put to rest.



Personnel of the South Saskatchewan Regiment relax in Rocquancourt, 11 August 1944.  
Left to right: Lance Corporal M.H. Krushelinski, Private J.A. Balogh and Lance Corporal P. Kotyk.

### Conclusion

To conclude, given the deeply flawed plan devised by Higher Command, the battle of the 20th of July should never have been fought by the SSR or Essex Scottish. That it was fought made us the pawns of war.

I hope by this account and study to give historians pause for thought. It is my view that historians should not always depend on the opinions of Brigade, Division or even Corp Commanders who sometimes wrote reports or wrote memoirs to disguise their own lack of judgment in action, of which Operation Atlantic is a good example. The tendency has been for the

blame to be shifted downward to the Battalion level: they broke, they fled, they scattered in the face of the enemy due to some tactical error or lack of control at their level. In the cases of failed actions, not enough attention seems to be given to the reports of Battalion officers, who often well understood the flaws in tactical plans and orders from Higher Command that they were expected to carry out. The quality of leadership given by Higher Command needs to be as carefully scrutinized as the actions of those charged with carrying out their orders. In the case of 6th Brigade and Operation Atlantic, I don't feel this has been properly done, and it has been one of the reasons for undertaking this study.

## Notes

Note: This personal account of the South Saskatchewan Regiment is an extract from a larger study of the battle of 20 July 1944.

I express here my thanks to my son R. Douglas Edmondson without whose energy and help this project would not have been completed. I am also grateful to my comrades from the South Saskatchewan Regiment, Peter T. Maule, Clifford E. Smith and Frederick A. Cliff and to Sydney Radley-Walters from a supporting arm who expressed their experiences and observations in letters. And I thank George G. Blackburn for sharing his knowledge with me at our meeting.

My gratitude is also due to Dr. C. Christie who kindly provided photocopies of maps of France and to Col. J.S. Labbé, Commandant, and Serge Champion, Chief Librarian, of the Canadian Land Forces Command and Staff College in Kingston who provided copies of the accounts of South Saskatchewan Regiment Officers given at la Villeneuve, Normandy on 23 July 1944 concerning 20 July 1944.

1. Fred Cliff, letter to John Edmondson, 8 March 1996.
2. War Diary (WD) South Saskatchewan Regiment (SSR) July 1944, p.11.
3. Accounts of the attack by the S Sask R on the High Ground 0459 in the afternoon of 20 July 1944 given at la Villeneuve 23 July 1944 by Major L.L. Dickin, "D" Company (Dickin Account).
4. WD SSR July 1944, p.11.
5. WD SSR pre-battle dates and times as per July 1944, pp.9-11.
6. Dickin Account; WD 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade, Appendix VI map overlay.
7. Map references found in WD SSR July 1944 p.11; Dickin Account.
8. WD 6th Brigade, Appendix 7(i) Confirmatory notes Comds Conference 20 0200B hours; WD 2nd Canadian Anti-Tank Regiment, RCA, 20 July 1944.
9. George G. Blackburn, Meeting/conversation with John Edmondson, Ottawa, Ontario, 21 May 1997.
10. WD 27th Canadian Armoured Regiment (Sherbrooke Fusiliers) 20 July 1944 and Appendix 2 Part III Narrative 20 July 1944; WD 6th Brigade, Appendix 7(i) Confirmatory Notes Comds Conference 20 0200B hours.
11. Peter T. Maule, letter to John Edmondson, 14 March 1996.
12. WD 6th Brigade Intelligence Log, Exercise Atlantic, 20 July 44. This radio message and subsequent messages quoted are from this message log.
13. Dickin Account.
14. WD SSR July 1944, p.12.
15. Accounts of the attack by the S Sask R on the High Ground 0459 in the afternoon of 20 July 1944 given at la Villeneuve 23 July 1944 by Major J.S. Edmondson, "B" Company (Edmondson Account). Note: Although I have seldom quoted from my original account of 23 July 1944, I have used it as a guide in the writing of my personal account recorded here.
16. Accounts of the attack by the S Sask R on the High Ground 0459 in the afternoon of 20 July 1944 given at la Villeneuve 23 July 1944 by Major Lane, Mortar Officer (Lane Account); Dickin Accounts.
17. Court of Enquiry in the Field 2 August 1944 into the losses of equipment sustained by the Essex Scottish Regit and S Sask R during 20-21 July 1944 (Enquiry 2 August 1944); SSR 9th Witness, Maj. J.S. Edmondson; Edmondson Account.
18. Accounts of the attack by the S Sask R on the High Ground 0459 in the afternoon of 20 July 1944 given at la Villeneuve 23 July 1944 by Lieutenant F. Mathers, "A" Company (Mathers Account).
19. WD 6th Brigade, July 1944, Sheet 13.
20. Enquiry 2 August 1944, SSR Witness No.10, Capt. W.G.A. Lane.
21. WD SSR WD July 1944, p.13.
22. Edmondson Account.
23. WD SSR July 1944, p.13.
24. Enquiry 2 August 1944, SSR 7th Witness, Lt. S.M. Carter.
25. Mathers Account.
26. Enquiry 2 August 1944, SSR 4th Witness, CSM. J.A. Smith.
27. Enquiry 2 August 1944, 6th Witness, Capt. G.E. Colgate; WD 2nd Anti-Tank Regiment, RCA 20 July and 31 July 1944.
28. Enquiry 2 August 1944, SSR 3rd Witness, CSM J.W. Coldwell and 4th Witness CSM J.A. Smith.
29. WD SSR preceding post-battle dates and times as per July 1944, pp.13-15.
30. WD SSR August 1944, p.5.
31. WD SSR August 1944, p.5; WD 6th Brigade, 10 August 1944; WD 2nd Canadian Infantry Division 10 August 1944.
32. David J. Bercuson, *Maple Leaf Against the Axis: Canada's Second World War* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1995), p.223. See also J.L. Granatstein and Desmond Morton, *A Nation Forged in Fire* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1989), p.202; John A. English, *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign: A Study of Failure in High Command* (New York: Praeger, 1991), pp.229-230; and C.P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign: Volume III of the Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War* (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer, 1960), p.175.
33. George G. Blackburn, *The Guns of Normandy* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1995), p.189.
34. Enquiry 2 August 1944, SSR 7th Witness, Lt. S.M. Carter.
35. Cliff Smith, letter to John Edmondson, 27 February 1996.
36. Matheson, Dickin, Stewart, Edmondson (also 9th Witness Enquiry 2 Aug 44), Lane Accounts.

John S. Edmondson was born in Estevan, Saskatchewan in 1919. He joined the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry Regiment in 1938, and then served with the South Saskatchewan Regiment during World War II in the Defence of England, on the Dieppe Raid and in the Normandy Campaign until wounded during the capture of Falaise. After the war, he was transferred to the Black Watch (RHR) Regiment of Canada. He served in Canada in many roles, and as an exchange officer with the British 4th Division in West Germany as part of NATO. In addition, he served with the U.N. Military Observer Group in Kashmir, India and Pakistan. He served until reaching the mandatory retirement age in 1971. John, with the assistance of his son Doug, wrote this account in 2003.