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# A FOO at Troteval Farm

## 20-21 July 1944

### A. Britton Smith

In the 1944 invasion of Normandy I was Commander of "C" Troop, 14th Battery, 4th Field Regiment Royal Canadian Artillery, a unit of the Second Canadian Infantry Division.

On the morning of 20 July Lieutenant-Colonel Bud Drury, CO of the Regiment, ordered me to proceed immediately to an "O" Group at the Mayor's office in Faubourg de Vaucelles (east of Caen) and to act as his representative and forward observation officer (FOO) with the Fusiliers Mont-Royal (FMR) in a brigade attack. This I did with some puzzlement as I normally worked with 4th Brigade battalions and had trained with them for several years in England. I did not know anyone in the FMR, but assumed my selection was because I had some slight battle experience with the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry (RHLI) and the Royal Regiment of Canada (RRC), whereas 6th Brigade and its FOOs were still unblooded; also two of my observation post (OP) crew were bilingual.

I remember eating apples picked off the mayor's tree in the yard of the "mairie" while the senior officers tried to hammer out some difficulties, which I believe involved adding the Essex Scottish of 4th Brigade to 6th Brigade. This was a surprise, as we had never trained with a four-battalion formation, and it did not fit our usual tactical patterns. [Each brigade in 2nd Division was comprised of 3 battalions.] The Brigade intelligence officer told us that British reconnaissance units reported seeing no enemy between Ifs and Verrières, the proposed route of the 6th Brigade assault. The camouflaged Germans had held their fire, it turned out.

I proceeded to the start line, just south of the village of Ifs, and joined up with Captain Fernand

Mousseau of "C" Company, the FMR. He and his men had been marching since dawn, with no breakfast and no lunch, and they had been awakened very early in the morning; hardly good preparation for their first battle! Nonetheless they were cheerful and spirited.

I explained to him the nature of our barrage and the importance of staying behind the start line and not getting too close to the falling shells as we advanced. He and his men were eager to go, although very hungry, and at 1445 hours the barrage, fired by many artillery regiments, opened. [There had just been time to lay on a creeping barrage. As well, the depth of the assault required many lifts and therefore a great quantity of ammunition.] The infantry followed the bursting shells at a respectful distance after two men were wounded.

I was with one of the lead platoons and had two signalers on foot accompanying me. My carrier followed behind the infantry company. One signaller carried a short range radio set (No.38) to communicate with my carrier and the other a No.18 set on the FMR net (both back-packs). We all toted rifles to look as much like infanters as possible, and I had my camouflage scarf wound over my epaulettes to hide my captain's pips. My binoculars (oversize 12 power) were tucked inside my battledress blouse and my folded map was in the large thigh pocket of my trousers.

We started taking prisoners almost immediately and also came under fire from snipers and MG 42s hiding in stooks of cut grain, which dotted some of the fields. The FMR 2-inch mortar men dropped a few phosphorous bombs on the stooks, setting them on fire and this pretty soon cut down on the sniping. The enemy infantry

were, I think, from the 272nd Division (mostly non-Germans) and formed a screen in front of the 12th SS Panzer, an elite, tough crew of Nazi Party members. They had dug slit trenches under the grain stooks which protected them from our barrage to some extent. Also the German armour and self-propelled anti-tank guns were sited in pits gouged out by a bulldozer, so that only their weapons were visible. This meant that our tanks behind us had great difficulty spotting targets and suffered severe casualties. My bren gun carrier was not fired upon, although several nearby T-16 carriers which were towing 17-pounder and 6-pounder anti-tank guns were knocked out early on.

It was a hot July day with little wind, so the smell of burning rubber and paint from the tanks and carriers on fire, the smoke from blazing wheat sheaves and the smell of burning flesh was a dramatic accompaniment to the continuous crash of the 25-pound shells bursting steadily in front of us; also there was much screaming. Very shortly we had quite a large number of prisoners - I counted a batch of 45 at one time. We used them to carry wounded of both sides to the rear on gates. Eight prisoners as porters and two wounded to a gate.

We followed the prescribed drill of jamming the bayonet of a wounded man's rifle upright in the ground, so that his location was marked. The rifle of course stood up above the grain in the uncut fields. [Our toad-stabber bayonets were best used to puncture tins of milk for tea and not good for this. We missed our original issue of WWI type sword-bayonets.]

Each officer carried two syrettes of morphine and these were eventually used up on badly wounded men. The kit included an indelible purple pencil, which we licked and used to make a big "M" on the man's forehead, to avoid an accidental overdose.

And so we fought our way forward about two kilometres to Troteval Farm while at the same time "B" Company on our right was advancing on Beauvoir Farm. Major Gauthier, commanded "B" Company and Captain Gordon Hunter from my regiment was the FOO with him. Gordon was badly wounded later that day and Captain Reg Parker, another of our 4th Field FOOs, was killed that afternoon near Ifs with the Essex Scottish.

When we reached the farms we encountered troops of the 12th SS Division and there was some fierce fighting until they withdrew. A couple of German Mark IV tanks were knocked out by our armour in support close to Verrières village, which was only a few hundred yards from Troteval Farm. However, the tiger tanks and infantry appeared to have pulled back to their reserve position under cover of the smoke which obscured the view of our own tanks. This was standard German tactics. The artillery fire plan ended at the farms, I believe, and "D" Company FMR then passed between us and "B" Company to attack Verrières. The 12th SS hit them very hard, and forced them to withdraw with no ground gained and many casualties.

Major Mousseau and I started to consolidate around Troteval Farm, all of us digging slit trenches well away from the farm buildings to avoid being obvious targets. He and I were talking beside a stone wall when some one threw an egg grenade over and it burst between us. The skin of these bombs is very thin metal, and so we suffered only minor cuts. Happily it was not a stick grenade! I asked the captain in one of the tanks who had by then come up, if he could knock a hole in the wall. This he did quite easily and I quickly jumped through after the tank, looking for the perpetrator of the grenade attack. Suddenly the Sherbrooke officer ducked down yelling a warning and slammed his turret lid. I turned around to face a German NCO with a Schmeisser aimed at me! He gave me one burst, turned and fled into some nearby berry bushes as the tank turret was swinging down toward him with its co-ax machine gun firing. I felt like I had been kicked in the gut, but there was no blood, for a very good reason. I had been cursing the body armour which assault infantry and OP crews wore, but now I fervently gave thanks that I had it on. There were two, one-inch deep pits pushed into the chest plate! The battery quartermaster some days later replaced it, but it then became a regimental curio for a while. The 9 mm ammunition used by the Germans was shorter, lighter and had less punch than our own, although it would fit in our 9 mm pistols and stens.

While we were digging in, a heavy burst of rain struck us, soaking everyone to the skin and filling our slit trenches with mud. However, under cover of the rain, the company sergeant-major of the

**Beauvoir  
Farm**

**Troteval  
Farm**

**Verrières**

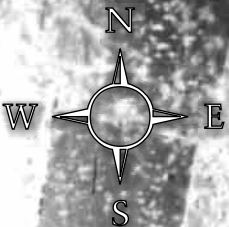
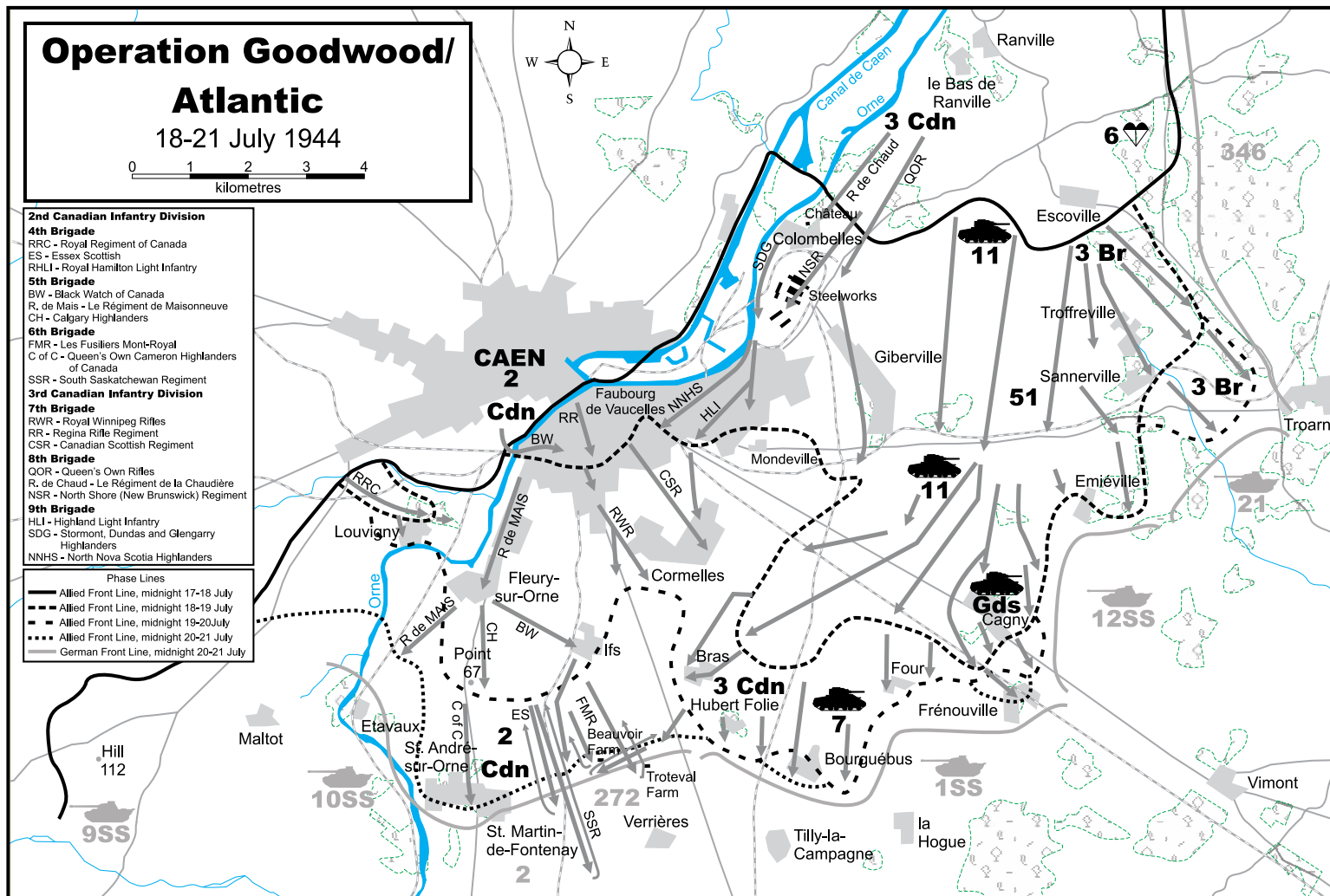


Photo taken 30 July 1944 - Canadian Forces Photo Unit PMR 86-486



FMR reached our position in a jeep carrying two dixies of stew and coffee (or tea? - I forget) kept warm in hay boxes. He also brought cases of .303 ammunition, 2-inch mortar bombs and No.36 grenades, but no PIAT ammo. The FMR grabbed first for the ammunition boxes, ripping them open and stuffing the loose rounds into their bren magazines, most of which were empty. The riflemen took the cloth bandoliers, each of which contained several five-round clips, and after filling their pouches slung the remaining khaki bandoliers around their necks. Then they went at the food, having had nothing for 24 hours! Good discipline!

The arrival of the ammo was well timed, as the first of many counterattacks developed shortly after, coming from the village of Verrières a few hundred yards ahead of us. Major Mousseau asked for artillery fire and I brought the battery down on a defensive task out in front of our position, which I had already registered. Suddenly there was a snicking sound above us

and twigs and leaves showered down from the tall Lombardy poplars which lined the lane where we stood. I realized that my guns were firing charge 3, or a very flat trajectory at that range, and that we were in considerable danger. I quickly switched to charge 2 which lowered the muzzle velocity and raised the guns. After that the shells came in at a safe height. Thank God none hit a solid branch and 'air burst' overhead.

The two surviving tanks were ordered back to "Laager" for the night. We protested loudly but their commanders said they had to replenish fuel and ammunition. They swung their guns around over their stems and draped a huge yellow cloth triangle over each turret to identify them as friendly. (Smaller yellow cloth triangles were carried by all of us, with a loop around our neck and smaller loops on the other two corners for our thumbs. To identify us when we came under friendly fire (usually from our aircraft), we stuck our thumbs into the two loops and snapped the triangle out of our breast pocket as

identification.) When the tanks were just clear of our position, a dug-in German SP gun very close on our left fired with a horrendous crash and a round screeched over our heads striking the upper part of one tank's turret with an enormous shower of sparks. The turret rocked up and crashed over the side, although the tank continued on. The driver must have been shielded from the metal flying around above and behind him. Our eardrums were punched in and the grain around us was knocked down flat by the blast of the high velocity shot. I tried to call a Typhoon in, to hit the gun, but the rain and low clouds had stopped all aircraft flying. The last plane we had seen was a German fighter which strafed us shortly after we crossed the start line.

The classic counterattack was beaten back with heavy fire from the FMR and a great number of artillery shells from the 4th Field Regiment. On our left a quarter of a mile away at Hubert Folie the Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders (SDG) were dug in, but we had no liaison with them, unfortunately. We could have used some mutual support but we did not know

their radio frequencies and evidently they did not know ours, they being 3rd Division and we 2nd Division.

That night it rained off and on but despite that, several German patrols approached the farm in fairly large numbers. The FMR lost a few men as prisoners. I had registered an SOS task across the front of the company position which we fired effectively several times for a few minutes. The SOS signal for that day was red, red, green but I discovered that my Verey pistol ammunition was too swollen after being soaked for several hours in my wet pockets; - it simply wouldn't fit into the chamber.

Our Verey flares came as a brass-based cardboard cartridge like a big shotgun shell, whereas the Germans used an all-metal case. Luckily we had captured a German FOO and I had taken his flare pistol with its ammo. Their red flares could be distinguished by a band of milling, and the green flares by a half band. White was plain. I kept my red flares in my left pocket (port side!) and green in my right (starboard!) otherwise I could not tell

A 25-pounder in action in Normandy.





A close-up air photo of Troteval Farm taken on 31 July 1944.

ours apart in the darkness. The Germans were way ahead of us on this one. (For some reason red and green were the two favoured flare colours in both armies). Most distress signals to the guns consisted of 3 "shots".

I had told my signal sergeant to forget about attempting to bring a field telephone line up to the position as the heavy shell-fire and tank traffic would make it impossible to maintain. This left us entirely dependant on radio and batteries were a problem. Our chore-horse battery charger was much too noisy to run so close to the enemy, but somehow during the night Sergeant Tom O'Rourke made it up to the OP on his motorcycle with some fully charged batteries strapped on behind him. [He was later wounded and returned to Canada with me on the hospital ship *Abba*].

Very early the next morning another German attack came in, but without tank support. We repulsed it with relative ease, although they brought down a heavy preparatory concentration of artillery and mortar fire upon us. This cost us several more casualties. Meanwhile another early attack on Beauvoir Farm to our right had been successful and the Germans took quite a

few prisoners of "B" Company FMR. We watched them being marched off to Verrières. Captain Gord Hunter, my fellow FOO had been wounded, as I said, and his replacement had not yet come up from the gun position. This was undoubtedly a factor in the FMR losing Beauvoir. Naturally we felt very exposed after this German success. I was preoccupied at Troteval and could do nothing to help "B" Company .

During one of the brief lulls in activity a deserter who claimed to be a Polish conscript, approached the OP with his hands in the air; one of them waving a rag. He had a pillowcase knotted to his waistbelt, which looked slightly suspicious. We were thinking of grenades, so made him dump the contents, which turned out to be about 20 small cans of bully beef! These were the "iron rations" carried by German soldiers and, obviously, he had been collecting them from his dead comrades. He said he had been hiding out "waiting for the Tommys."

In the late afternoon still another German attack came in, the fifth, I think. This time supported by several Tiger tanks and some determined panzer grenadiers who persevered

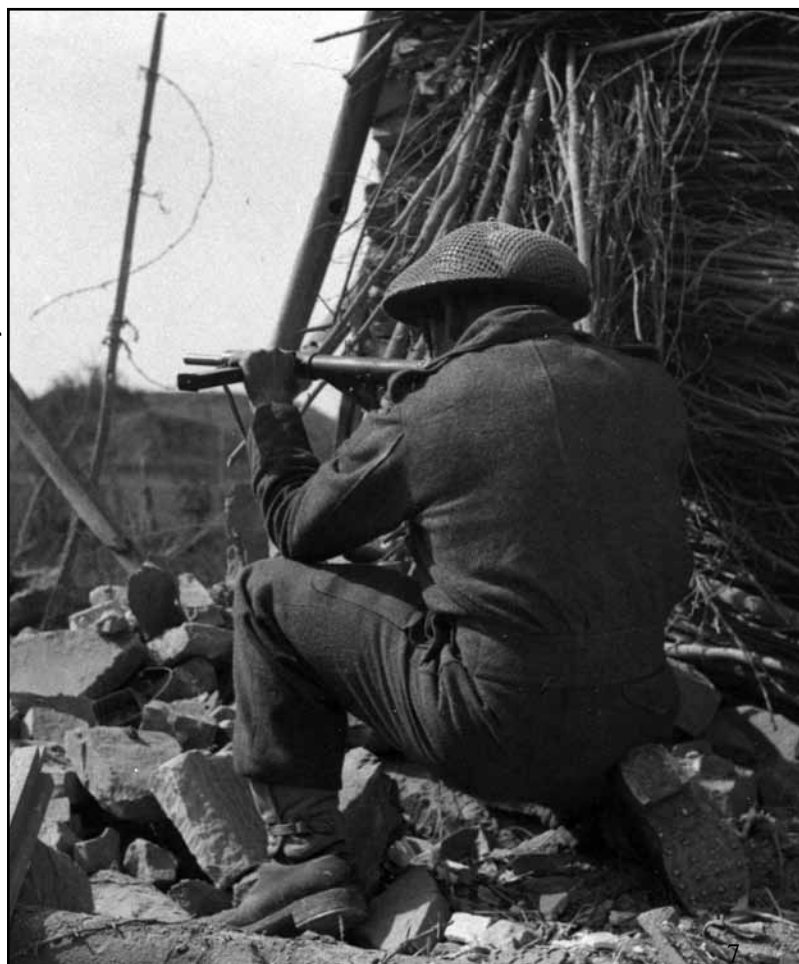
through our defensive fire. "C" Company were down to 17 men, all ranks, twelve of whom were wounded. Most ammunition was gone, including all the PIAT anti-tank ammo, so Major Mousseau, himself wounded, had no choice but to surrender. Shortly before this, when the Germans overran the position, we agreed that as a last resort we would bring down artillery fire right on ourselves, as our people were in slit trenches and the attackers were exposed (a calculated but not uncommon risk). This we did for several minutes, using up a lot of ammunition, but inflicting many casualties on the infantry attackers. We had no anti-tank guns nor any of our own tanks to support us, so nothing could be done against the German Tigers. I decided to make a run for it in the carrier, but after all the pouring rain it refused to start. We had to unload a wounded FMR officer from the rear compartment to get at the engine and meanwhile considered crawling away through the grain to avoid capture. In preparation, I rolled my 12 X binoculars in my Burberry raincoat and pushed it down in the mud of my slit trench, expecting that I could recover both when we retook the position.

Most of the time we were communicating with FMR battalion headquarters on our 18 set. The "C" Company sets had been knocked out. We were quite forceful in our requests for reinforcements, but nothing appeared. I was also sending "sit-reps" through 4th Field R/T channels on my No.19 set, begging for an additional company of infantry or even better, the reserve battalion. I believe that because this was the first action for 6th Brigade and its battalion commanders no one at HQ appreciated the importance of reinforcing "C" Company's success. At that time the company at Troteval Farm was the only sub-unit of 2nd Division still holding its objective. All others had been driven back by counterattacks. We held on at Troteval Farm largely because of terrific artillery fire, which amounted to over 600 rounds per gun for 4th Field, during the battle, mostly fired on "Mike" targets (24 guns). Back-breaking work in the rain and almost non-stop for the gunners. Needless to say I and my OP crew had been fighting all along as infantry, using our rifles to good effect although our Bren gun had jammed early on (full of mud!) and we never had time to clean it.

My driver, Bombardier Chris May, finally got the engine started and under cover of our exploding shells we made a run for it, coming under heavy fire from the co-ax machine guns of the German tanks. (They would not waste the main armament on a tiny Bren carrier.) We could see white powder flying around us, which we feared might be phosphorous. This later turned out to be powdered hardtack of which we had lashed a large tin on top of the carrier. This was riddled with bullet holes. The same was true of a large PIAT box welded across the front, which had contained a few cans of bully beef and stew, now splattered gruesomely over everything, as well. But, the carrier armour withstood the fire although the paint was badly chipped.

I reported to Lieutenant-Colonel Gauvreau at the FMR battalion headquarters and told him that "C" Company had surrendered. He reassigned me to Major White of "A" Company, the reserve company. Our task was to recapture Beauvoir Farm. We crawled through the grain and along some ditches getting quite close to Beauvoir where we saw two Tigers systematically swiveling on the FMR slit trenches to fill them in. It was obvious that we could not attack German armour with only infantry, so I cancelled my quick fire plan

Photo by Ken Bell, LAC PA 131357



A soldier from the Fusiliers Mont-Royal on patrol, 9 August 1944.



and left Beauvoir for the future. We succeeded three days later.

The Germans established a fairly strong defensive position around Troteval Farm including a mine field. They also strengthened Verrières village right behind it, which gave us a much harder time a few days later (25 July) when the RHLI attacked successfully and I was wounded. My friend Captain Jack Thompson, the other 14th Battery FOO, also with "The Rileys", was killed.

After the war my brother-in-law, Warren Hurst, visited Troteval Farm, and saw that the hole in the wall had been rebuilt. The French farm family had survived the entire battle, hiding in the cellar. They lost one member killed, unfortunately.

I never went back. I wrote a citation for the Distinguished Service Order for Major Fernand Mousseau at the request of Lieutenant-Colonel Gavreau. He did not get it, being a POW, although he had escaped from a German hospital dressed as a nurse, and rejoined the FMR in the fall. I had lunch with him not long ago in Ottawa.

My driver, Bombardier May, and signaller, John Clark, were recommended for the Military Medal but instead received a mention-in-despatches. Both were later killed - May on the 25th when our carrier hit a Tellermine while attacking with the RHLI.

In this first combat experience for 6th Brigade since Dieppe there were several lessons to be learned:

- 1) There was no liaison between the FMR of 2nd Division and the neighbouring SDG of 3rd Division on our left;
- 2) Artillery FOOs should work with the infantry whom they normally support and know;
- 3) A tactical formation should not be varied on the eve of battle, after years of training (4 battalions instead of 3);
- 4) Left Out of Battle (LOB) personnel should be sent up to replace assault casualties at the same time as replacement ammo;
- 5) A reserve company should not be left uncommitted while the two forward companies are fighting for their lives;
- 6) The successful battalion (FMR) should be strengthened or replaced with the brigade reserve when it is obviously in deep trouble;

7) Anti-tank guns should be deployed in the consolidation stage. If the anti-tank guns are wiped out, then the supporting armour should be left overnight in close support and not withdrawn to Laager;

8) Attacking troops should be well rested and well fed in preparation;

9) Inexperienced commanders should not be combined with inexperienced troops.

A. Britton Smith joined the 32nd Battery, Canadian Field Artillery in 1935 when he was 15. He graduated from Royal Military College in 1940 and was posted to the 8th Field Regiment, RCA in England. In 1942 Smith was promoted to Captain and sent to the 4th Field Regiment. He landed in Normandy with the rest of 2nd Division in July 1944. For his actions at Troteval Farm he was awarded the Military Cross. The citation reads:

On 21 July 1944 Captain Smith was Forward Observation Officer in "C" Company of the Fusiliers Mont Royal during the battalion attack on and subsequent defence of Troteval Farm, south of Caen in the Verrières area. During the day the position was attacked by enemy infantry and tanks on four separate occasions. These attacks were all disorganized by artillery fire directed by Captain Smith who had to move to exposed positions under heavy fire to obtain the necessary observation. During one of these attacks, Captain Smith and his crew fought off and killed many of the enemy who had worked themselves to within 20 yards of the observation post. By his great coolness and bravery under heavy enemy fire as well as his complete disregard for his own safety, Captain Smith was largely responsible for Troteval Farm being held and for heavy casualties being inflicted on the enemy.

His war ended when he was wounded in Verrières village acting as a FOO for the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry. Following the war Smith attended law school.