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Fifth Brigade at Verrieres Ridge

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FIFTH BRIGADE

VERRIERES RIDGE

Terry Copp

The Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade arrived in France on 16 July 1944 during the worst days of the battle of Normandy. The Allies had expected heavy losses on the D-Day beaches and then, once through the Atlantic Wall, lighter casualties in a war of rapid movement. The opposite had happened. The coastal defences had been quickly breached, but then there were only slow movement and horrendous casualties. In one month more than 40,000 U.S. troops were killed, wounded or missing, while almost 38,000 British and Canadian troops shared the same fate. The Allied air forces enjoyed total air superiority over the battlefield, but in June alone the cost was 6,200 aircrew. Soldiers on both sides were beginning to say that it was 1914-1918 all over again - a static battle of attrition with gains measured in yards and thousands of dead.

Generals in their memoirs and historians in their books on Normandy have usually focused attention on controversies over Allied strategy, especially the Montgomery-Eisenhower debate, but the real problem was at the tactical, not the strategic level. It is an axiom of military science that the attacker needs a three-to-one margin over the defender to have a reasonable chance of success. If the defence is well dug in, even better odds are required. The Allies had landed in Normandy prepared for a war of mobility in which the tactical air forces and the armoured regiments would dominate the battlefield. Instead, they were confronted with a German army able to maintain a continuous perimeter and a defence in depth.

Fifth Brigade's introduction to the battlefield came on 18 July as part of Operation "Goodwood," when the Black Watch forced a

crossing of the Orne opposite the race course in Caen. The next morning the Regiment de Maisonneuve and the Calgary Highlanders went into action and by the evening of the 21st all three battalions held positions on the lower slope of Verrieres Ridge. On the night of the 22nd the Maisonneuves were assigned to clear the village of Etavaux as part of a British (43rd West Riding Division) operation to capture Maltot on the west bank of the Orne. The Maisonneuves captured Etavaux taking more than 100 prisoners from the 272nd Division but their own losses were 10 killed, 48 wounded and 50 evacuated for battle exhaustion.¹ The Maisonneuves had lost more than two hundred riflemen in just four days of combat and since French-speaking reinforcements were in short supply they could not be brought back up to strength. The Maisies were placed in divisional reserve, leaving Fifth Brigade with just two battalions for its next operation.

While the battle for control of Etavaux and Maltot was fought, Lieut-General Miles Dempsey, the commander of Second British Army, met with Guy Simonds, CO of II Canadian Corps, to plan a new offensive in the Canadian sector. On 21 July Montgomery had issued a directive which required II Canadian Corps to remain "as active as possible" so that the enemy would believe that "we contemplate a major advance towards Falaise and Argentan. . . . The Germans must," Montgomery wrote, "be induced to build up strength east of the Orne so our affairs on the western flank can proceed with greater speed."²

This directive is often cited as proof that the Canadian assault on Verrieres Ridge, code-

named "Spring", was planned as a holding action to assist the American breakout, Operation "Cobra"; but on 22 July Montgomery changed his plans. He explained a new scheme to Eisenhower in a letter which stated that he was not going to "hold back or wait" for the Americans. Instead, II Canadian Corps, reinforced with two British armoured divisions, was to attack on 25 July, capturing Verrieres Ridge and advancing south to secure the next high ground at Point 122 near Cranmesnil. Two days later XII British Corps, west of the Orne, would once again try to capture the Hill 112 area. Once this was accomplished VIII Corps, the armoured divisions restored to it, would thrust down the road to Falaise. All of these operations, described as a series of left-right-left blows, would culminate in a new Goodwood using "three or four armoured divisions" to break through to Falaise.³

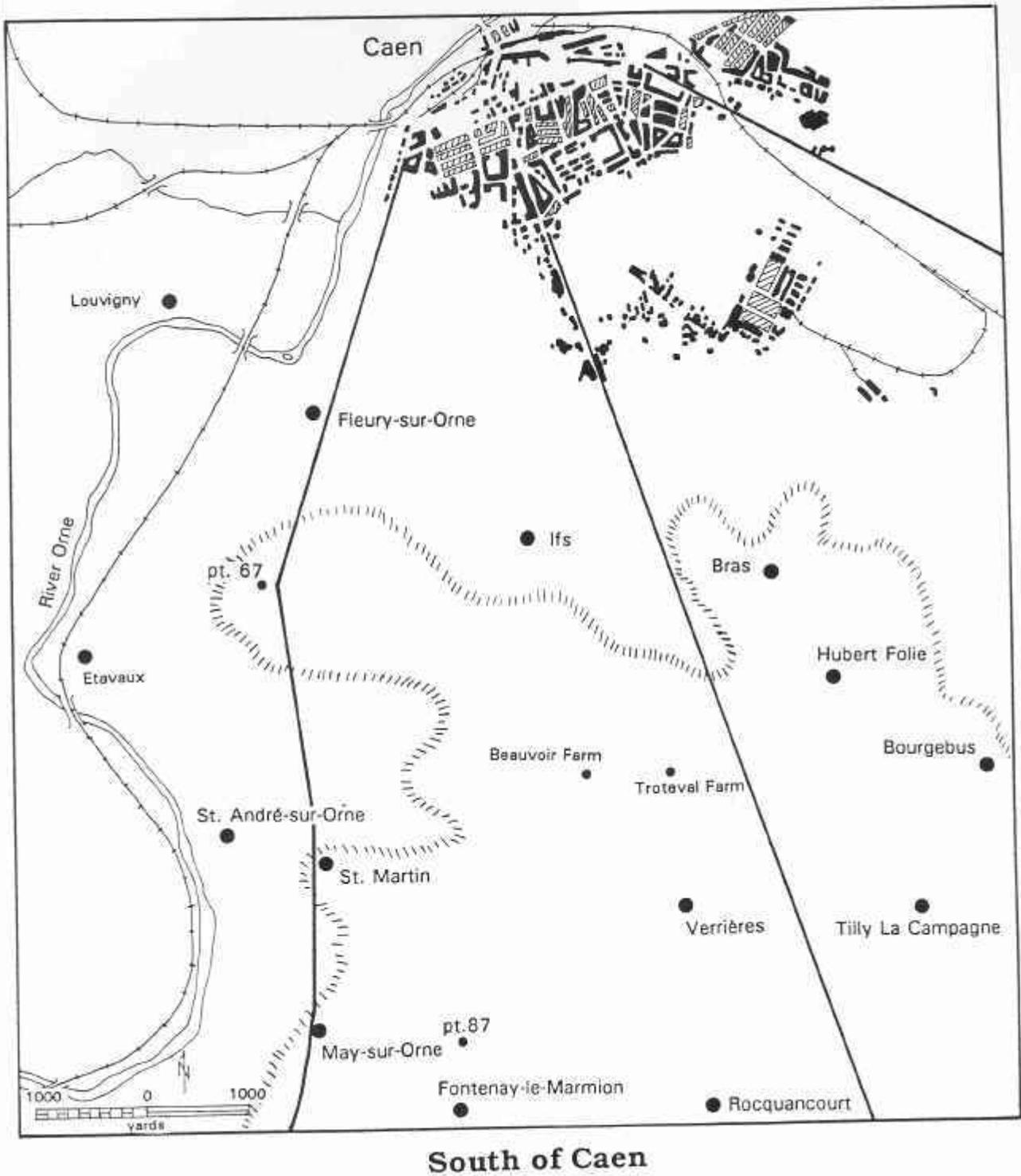
Second Canadian Corps was still operating under Second British Army in July. Simonds discussed the details of the operation "fully" with General Dempsey and obtained his approval, but "Spring" was Simonds' plan.⁴ He designed it as a three-phase battle involving the two Canadian infantry divisions and 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade, plus Guards and 7th Armoured Divisions. Second Tactical Air Force was to devote its full resources to the battle and the medium guns of three Army Groups Royal Artillery (AGRAs) were to supplement eight field regiments. In the first phase 3rd Division was to capture Tilly-La-Campagne while 2nd Division seized Maysur-Orne and Verrieres village. Phase II required 2nd Division to capture Fontenay-le-Marmion and Rocquancourt while 7th Armoured Division attacked Cranmesnil and 3rd Division assaulted Garcelles-Secqueville. These moves were to set the stage for the Guards Armoured Division to seize the high ground about Cintheaux and the river crossings at Bretteville-sur-Laize,⁵ the same objectives listed for the exploitation phase of Operation "Goodwood".

Allied intelligence on enemy defences in the area was limited by poor weather which prevented photo-reconnaissance. Prisoners of war from the 272nd Division brought news of the attempted assassination of Hitler, Order of Battle information, and stories of their ten-day trek to Normandy from the Spanish border, but nothing was learned about the strength or location of the battle groups of 9th SS and 2nd Panzer Divisions supporting them.⁶

Intelligence officers also failed to appreciate that 272nd Division had committed two of its three regiments to the defence of St. Andre and St. Martin. This was the main line of German resistance on the left flank and it was held by two battalions and elements of two others. The division's artillery, anti-tank regiments, scores of mortars, and a *Nebelwerfer* regiment were also committed to the defence of the area.⁷

Simonds believed that a repetition of the daylight attack of 19 July had little chance of success so he decided to undertake Phase I in full darkness, hoping to be past the first line of enemy resistance before daybreak. Since the enemy overlooked the area from the west side of the Orne as well as the ridge, the troops would have to wait until close to midnight before beginning to move to their forming up places. This meant that H-Hour was delayed to 0330 hours, leaving less than three hours of darkness for Phase I.⁸

The Anglo-Canadian forces had very limited experience with night attacks. Second Division had begun to study the problem in 1943 when Major-General E.L.M. Burns was in command. A divisional night fighting course offered instruction in orientation and controlling troops⁹ but everyone who has been on a night exercise in strange country knows how difficult it is to keep direction even when no one is shooting at you. The British Army's operational research group had devised a number of navigational aids for nightfighting but their focus was on vehicles, not marching troops.¹⁰ Artificial moonlight, searchlights bounced off clouds, was the only practical measure available to assist infantry.



"Spring" was supposed to involve four divisions but most of the troops were assigned to the later phases. The night attack involved just three battalions, each committing between 300 and 350 men to the assault. This meant that 272nd Division and the Panzer battle groups, who were well dug-in with carefully prepared interlocking fields of fire, outnumbered the attackers by a considerable margin. The Corps Commander counted on darkness and the artillery to overcome these odds and get his troops forward.

Simonds¹ orders left the divisional commanders with little latitude. H-Hour had been determined and both air strikes and the medium artillery program of harassing fire on known German positions were set. Major-General Charles Foulkes, the General Officer Commanding (GOC) 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, had to determine quickly how best to carry out a divisional attack while two of his nine battalions were out of action recovering from their mauling in "Atlantic."¹¹ Foulkes faced a difficult situation. In theory his troops held a line from St. Andre-sur-Orne along the road which ran on the lower slope of Verrieres through Beauvoir farm to the village of Hubert-Folie. In practice this was far from the case, particularly on the right flank where the Camerons had been struggling just to hold on to parts of St. Andre. When Fifth Brigade was informed that for the first phase of "Spring" the St. Andre-Beauvoir road would be the start line, Brigadier W.J. Megill, commander of 5 Brigade, sent two officers to the village to prepare a tactical headquarters. They arrived without any difficulty but when they opened the door of a likely house they heard German voices and promptly withdrew.

Megill decided to go and see the situation for himself. The Camerons had lost a number of officers in the past few days, including their CO, but the acting commander, Major J. Muncie, had a good grasp of the situation. He told Megill that the Camerons did not control most of St. Andre, never mind the adjacent village of St. Martin-de-Fontenay.¹² The Camerons faced continuous mortar fire, frequent enemy counterattacks and the

constant infiltration of small groups of enemy soldiers. As late as the morning of the 24th a patrol of approximately 25 Germans appeared in a quarry to the left-rear of battalion headquarters. Fortunately a section of the Toronto Scottish medium machine guns was deployed in the area and the enemy patrol was destroyed.¹³

Megill went immediately to division headquarters to ask to have the Maisonneuves, now in divisional reserve, returned to the brigade so they could clear the start line for the Calgaries. Foulkes refused, insisting that Sixth Brigade did hold St. Andre and could clear St. Martin. After some acrimonious discussion Foulkes agreed to place the Camerons under Fifth Brigade to secure the start line.¹⁴ The Camerons began this task on the night of the 24th, just hours before "Spring" was to begin. "Stiff opposition" was met from the beginning and it was necessary to keep reinforcing the Camerons' attackforce, which lost three officers in the first hour. By midnight the actual start line seemed to be quiet.¹⁵ This did not mean that St. Martin-de-Fontenay had been cleared nor had anyone attempted to occupy the factory area 300 yards south of the St. Martin church.

This complex of buildings, with a single prominent tower housing machinery for a mine shaft, was targetted in the divisional artillery plan as part of a rolling barrage which was to lead the Calgary Highlanders from their check line, the St. Andre-Verrieres road where the barrage would begin, to their objective, May-sur-Orne. The Germans occupied the mine workings in strength and maintained well-concealed positions throughout the southeastern fringe of St. Martin.

Foulkes, by retaining the Maisonneuves in divisional reserve and assigning the Black Watch to Phase II, left Megill with a single battalion which had been briefed to advance quickly, two companies up, following the barrage into May.¹⁶ With hindsight it can be argued that Megill should have intervened and ordered the Calgary Highlanders to use at least one company to clear and occupy St. Martin and the factory area, though how this change



Canadian soldier in May-sur-Orne

(NAC PA 131357)

could have been communicated to the Calgarys is not immediately apparent. Throughout the hours of darkness the battalion was moving from Point 67 to their forming up places and company commanders were fully taxed keeping their men together. A large part of D company, including company headquarters, did in fact get lost and had to return to Point 67 to re-orient themselves.¹⁷ At the last moment Lieut. - Colonel Donald MacLaughlan, the Calgary CO, did change the plan, ordering one of his reserve companies to advance with the barrage to protect the right flank of the assault companies. MacLaughlan's concern with the wooded areas along the River Orne was no doubt justified, but this change did not address the problem of St. Martin or the factory and left him with only the small part of D company which had arrived as a reserve.¹⁸

What MacLaughlan called his "main effort" force, Major John Campbell's Able company and Major Nixon's Charlie company, were lined

up east of the St. Andre-May road. Able company on the left "discovered that the area was not clear" and "had to fight to get on the start line." They hit the check line on time and swung further east to bypass the factory area, but came under small arms fire from the eastern edge of St. Martin. Major Campbell had to choose quickly between detaching men to deal with this position and pressing on to May with the barrage. He chose to keep his men moving, "leaving enemy behind in slit trenches and dug-

outs who later on were to fire on us to our cost."¹⁹

Campbell's men advanced towards the eastern edge of May and informed battalion headquarters that they had reached their objective.²⁰ The artillery continued to pound the village with some shells falling short on the men waiting on the sloping field. According to Lieutenant Morgandeen, the company stayed in that position "only about fifteen minutes." He told the Historical Officer, who interviewed him four days after the battle, that "light was breaking and our artillery remained on the objective. There was no area between the position we had reached and our final consolidation position where we might have set up a proper defensive area. Hence we came back and took up position to the right [east] of St. Martin."²¹

Campbell's men were immediately pinned down by the enemy force they had bypassed during their advance. Heavy mortaring kept



The church at St. Martin-de-Fontenay is in the centre of the photograph. Verrieres Ridge is in the distance. (Photo taken in 1946). (PMR 90-411)

the men in their slit trenches and Campbell, who had lost his wireless link, was not able to get a message through to battalion headquarters to inform MacLaughlan of their withdrawal from May.²² MacLaughlan, Megill, Foulkes and Simonds all believed that Able company was on its objective.

Baker company was to advance on Able company's right flank. They met machine-gun fire the moment the start line was crossed. Fire from a German outpost at the checkline, the sunken Verrieres road, dispersed the company and the commanding officer Major C.C. Nixon was killed. The company continued south "on a magnetic bearing of 197 degrees" but two of the platoons were forced to the ground "after meeting enfilade fire from eight machine guns in St. Martin." The third platoon, commanded by Lieutenant John Moffat, was on the left flank and continued south, arriving at a

"waterhole on the eastern edge of May-sur-Orne. The village was still being shelled by Allied artillery "which came in so low" the men had "to take shelter from it in dead ground."²³ When the barrage stopped Moffat set off to recon the crossroads in May. While he was gone it began to get light. Sergeant Wynder told the Historical Officer that, "As first light came we saw three Tiger tanks and two SP guns. Just along the south side of the road" from May to Fontenay. "When we were spotted by them the tanks and SPs tore in behind the ramps of a blockhouse and began firing." Lieutenant Moffat returned from May and decided that "the objective was held by too strong a force for 20 men and one PIAT to contest." They proceeded "slowly and carefully" back towards St. Andre and met men from Able company "who told us the rest of our company was in the area just east of the factory. We moved to this area and took up a common front

in defense with the rest of Baker company between 0730 and 0830 hours."²⁴ All of the officers except Moffat were now casualties and CSM Ralph Wilson and Sergeant Jack Brandon were preparing to lead their platoons against the German positions in the factory area.²⁵ No one contacted battalion headquarters.

Charlie company, assigned to the area west of the main road, ran into opposition "from both flanks" from the start line on. "Three men of the leading section were killed." Scouts were sent forward to "see if we could clear out this opposition" but it was "too dark and too difficult to clear the enemy out at night." It "was cloudy and smoky and so thick we could not see anything."²⁶ The company commander decided to wait until morning. As dawn broke Charlie moved towards May. They "advanced in single file up the ditches on either side of the road to

the factory area. There, as before, were some snipers and also some groups of men who wanted to surrender." The advance continued using the lefthand ditch which was very deep. The lead platoon, under Lieutenant Orville Mageli, was within 200 yards of May when Major Sherwin Robinson called an Orders Group. He knew that "men had been in May-sur-Orne without meeting any fire, notably the signals sergeant"²⁷ who had twice entered the village in an attempt to lay a cable to A company.²⁸

It was now 0900 and Robinson ordered Charlie company to clear the buildings on both sides of the road "right up close to the church." They "found no one." At this point snipers to the rear of the church and from the right began to fire on Mageli's platoon. Over on the left 13 platoon had "worked up in extended order to

Looking back to St. Martin from the north edge of May-sur-Orne, the mine tower in the "factory" area is clearly visible as is the church in St. Martin. Point 67 may be seen in the background. (Photo taken in 1946).

(PMR 90-412)



the houses. There were many snipers in the orchards to the east of the houses and the platoon had a sticky time. About the same time we came under fire of what seemed to be our own artillery."²⁹ This new hazard was in fact the barrage intended to lead the Black Watch from May to Fontenay. Charlie company, which knew nothing about this plan, took cover in the ditches along both sides of the road and remained there throughout the Black Watch attack.

The two platoons of the Calgary's reserve company that did arrive at the forming up place improvised a company headquarters and set off behind Baker company. The situation quickly became confused. One platoon became involved in a fire fight with four light machine guns located in an orchard just south of the start line. Lieutenant E.A. Michon, who commanded the other platoon, learned that the acting CO had been wounded and went forward to take command. Michon led the company "straight down the wheat fields" to what he thought was the east side of May-sur-Orne. The men took up positions around a church which turned out to be in St. Martin not May.³⁰

Lieutenant Michon told the Historical Officer that "in the confusion of the night and the battle, I lost my sense of time and space. . . ." With daybreak Michon, still convinced he was in May, organized his men to systematically clear the eastern part of the village. "We took many prisoners there and on our way through the eastern edges of the factory district. While there I met a 'B' Coy FOO (Artillery Forward Observation officer) who also thought we were in May-sur-Orne." Michon did not learn where he really was until the Black Watch arrived in the area shortly after 0700.³¹

The Calgary attack on May had yielded close to a hundred prisoners and inflicted other casualties, but their objective was still in enemy hands. The forming-up area for the Black Watch, not to mention their intended start line, was still dominated by German mortar and machine-gun fire. This situation was the result of the failure to recognize that St. Martin and its factory area were well organized, strongly held, defensive positions. The first phase of

"Spring" should have been an attack on St. Martin, not May-sur-Orne.

Given the difficulty of their task, the Calgaries had shown initiative and determination, and some skill in the art of mounting a night attack. Today, military training manuals emphasize what is called C³, command, control and communications, as the key to successful operations. Apart from the jargon, the concept appears obvious to veterans of the Fifth Brigade. The difficulty is that command and control are not possible without communication and in 1944 infantry companies frequently lost touch with their battalion headquarters and each other. Quite apart from casualties to platoon and company signals sections, the back-packed No. 18 set was subject to interference and frequent failure. The Calgaries do not seem to have paid enough attention to providing back-up for wireless communication. MacLaughlan and Megill were left to guess at what had happened to the four Calgary companies. During the three hours of darkness and confusion the failure to send runners to report to battalion headquarters was understandable, but between 0700 and 0900 hours, when the Black Watch were preparing their attack, only the reserve company made contact with MacLaughlan.³²

Phase II of "Spring" was scheduled to begin at first light with the Royal Regiment of Canada seizing Rocquancourt and the Black Watch advancing from May to capture Fontenay-le-Marmion. These attacks were to take place in conjunction with an advance by 7th Armoured Division attacking between the Canadian brigades to capture the high ground near the village of Cranmesnil.

The Black Watch left the area north of Beauvoir farm at 0330 hours and moved in a long, snaking column along the road to St. Andre. A few casualties were inflicted by machine gun fire but it was not until the lead companies turned south towards their planned assembly area near the church in St. Martin that real resistance was met.³³ St. Martin was far from clear of the enemy. Along the east edge of the build-up area there were "high walls and hedgessurrounding orchards. Next to these

were three or four knocked-out Panther tanks."

³⁴ The whole area was studded with machine gun and sniper posts with "weapon slits outside the walls and hedges and dug-outs and scurry holes inside." ³⁵ The artificial moonlight did nothing to help locate these positions and in the darkness everyone was aware that valuable time was slipping away. Just as some degree of control was established, an undetected enemy post opened fire on the battalion's command group, mortally wounding Lieut.-Colonel Stuart Cantlie and injuring Major Eric Modzfeldt, the senior company commander. It was now almost 0530 hours and the first faint light of dawn was visible on the horizon. Most of the battalion was still strung out along the hedgerow leading to St. Martin, instead of at the start line for the attack on Fontenay.

Command of the battalion passed to the senior surviving company commander, a tall, slim, twenty-four-year-old, Major Phillip Griffin.³⁶ He faced a daunting task. His fellow officer, Major Edwin Bennett, recalled the moment of crisis in an interview recorded just five days after the battle:

Major Griffin's problem was that the battalion was rather extended. The companies were still intact and under good control but the threat of dispersion and of possible confusion was near. Light was breaking and we were under fire from the ridge. We had just made contact with the tanks in St. Andre-sur-Orne. They had moved into the orchard as a harbour and had lost two tanks coming through the town. Furthermore it was getting close to H-hour for the attack and the battalion was far from the start line. Soon the artillery fire would begin and would be of no value. Major Griffin had to make time to liaise with the artillery and, if possible, retime their shoot. He had to get the tank commander into the picture and make use of his force in any new plans. Before this could be done, he had to find out the situation in St. Andre-sur-Orne from the Camerons of Canada and obtain what reports he could on the Calgaries and the situation at May-sur-Orne.

Major Griffin is a brilliant officer of absolutely outstanding courage and ability. His take-over in this strained and ticklish situation was superb. There was no uncertainty whatever in his actions. He foresaw only a delay, which would at the outside be two hours, while he re-arranged timings and obtained essential information. The plan for the attack would be the same as had been previously set. In the meantime the battalion was to move to St. Andre-sur-Orne and occupy the cross roads there on the Verrieres road so that the men would be less obvious targets for the fire from the left flank and so that a firm base for operations would be available. So complete was his



St Martin-de-Fontenay and the "factory" (top) and May-sur-Orne (bottom). Photo taken on 7 August 1944. (LCMSDS)

control and so well trained the battalion that this was done at once and in incredibly good order. All the companies were in their new positions within 20 minutes of the conclusion of the 'O' Group. Up to this time our casualties, aside from the three serious losses in leadership were slight, amounting to ten or fifteen altogether.³⁷

Griffin's actions between 0600 and 0930 hours when the Black Watch attack began, cannot be fully reconstructed. What is known is that a new artillery fire plan was agreed upon and tank support arranged with Major Walter Harris, the commander of B squadron, First Hussars.³⁸ The artillery plan was simply a repetition of the original scheme to lead the battalion to Fontenay but Griffin decided to move directly to the start line rather than by the road to May. He now wanted the tanks to protect his right flank rather than the left as in the original plan, hoping that the promised advance of 7th Armoured Division would fully occupy the enemy to the east. At about 0830 hours Griffin made contact with Lieutenant Michon, commanding D company of the Calgarys, and asked him to "clear out the factory area." Michon "went forward to recon to discover very heavy machine-gun fire coming from the factory area on the right and from the knocked out tanks on the high ground on our left." Michon told Griffin that, "this was too strong opposition for one company to clear without artillery support or smoke. He then asked me to go forward to see if the Start Line was secure and to send him word as he had no information concerning our forward companies."³⁹ The Black Watch start line was a road angling out of May-sur-Orne and Michon would not agree to recon it for Griffin. He failed to contact the other Calgary companies and then reported to battalion headquarters. MacLaughlan ordered him to "try and get forward to the objective." Captain Harrison and the missing part of D company had arrived but their attempt to "get forward" was stopped cold by an intense mortar barrage which caused "very heavy casualties."⁴⁰

Griffin had sent a patrol to May-sur-Orne consisting of his intelligence officer, Lieutenant L.R. Duffield, Sergeant Benson and one scout.



Major F.P. Griffin

(Black Watch Archives)

The patrol moved straight down route 162 "without using the ditches"⁴¹ and walked into the centre of May-sur-Orne without seeing or hearing any Germans or any Calgary Highlanders. At the crossroads in the centre of the village they turned left towards the road which marked the battalion start line. Fifty yards before reaching it they were fired on by a machine gun and Duffield returned to tell Griffin that the Calgarys were not in May and that the machine gun would be able to fire into the flank of the battalion. Griffin's response was to order Duffield to lead a reinforced patrol, six men, back to May to "take out" the machine gun.⁴²

Duffield's patrol was not the only force to visit May-sur-Orne that morning. Major Walter Harris, commanding the First Hussars squadron, had listened to divisional and brigade orders "to go ahead" with Phase II and had sent one of his four troops forward. This troop "located some of the Calgary Highlanders in a hollow north of May, badly cut up and in need of stretcher bearers, ammunition, etc." Leaving two tanks to assist the Calgaries, the troop proceeded to feel its way cautiously into the village. At the main crossroads the lead tank was holed by an anti-tank gun and the troop withdrew to a hull down position on the north edge of the village.⁴³

Meanwhile Major Griffin was conferring with Brigadier Megill, who had learned through the gunner radio net that a fire plan, timed for 0930 hours, had been requested by the Black



Lieut.-Colonel Stuart Cantlie
(Black Watch Archives)

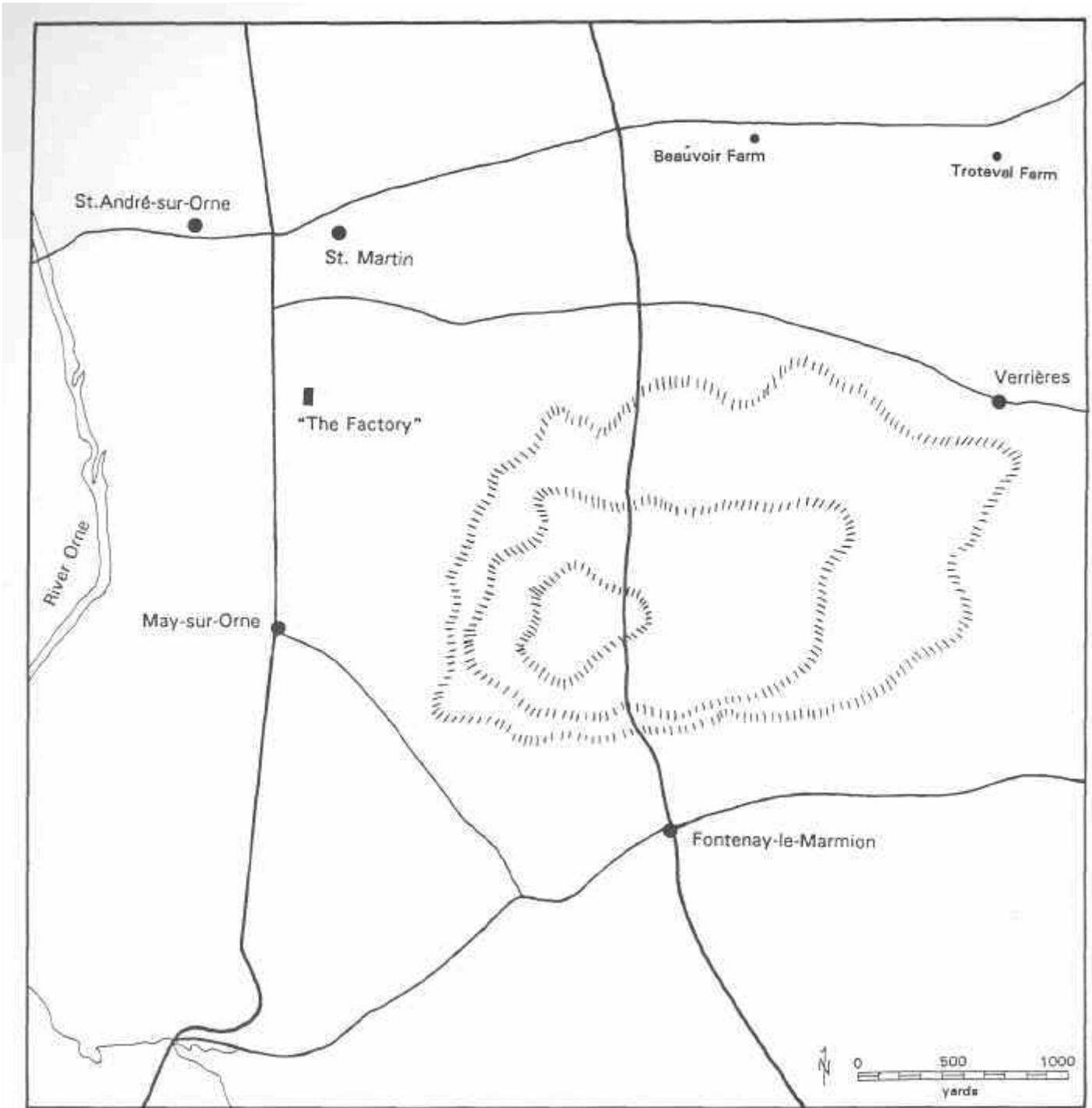
Watch. Megill recalls that Griffin was on the verandah of a building on the forward edge of St. Martin looking out towards May. There did not seem to be any shelling at that time and Major Griffin calmly explained his plan and pointed it out on the ground. Megill thought it looked like "a dicey proposition" and suggested that the Black Watch secure May-sur-Orne first. According to Megill, Griffin replied that they had "patrols into May" and he doubted that it was held on "a continuous basis." Griffin felt sure that if the Black Watch attack went in, then once it had passed its start line the Calgary Highlanders could "fill in behind, on into May-sur-Orne." Megill accepted this assessment and returned to his headquarters.⁴⁴

The Black Watch had to move quickly if its lead companies were to take full advantage of the timed artillery program. Unfortunately the Hussars were delayed owing to the narrowness of the sunken approach road and when the first tanks arrived at the forming-up place the Black Watch had already begun to move forward.⁴⁵ The tanks quickly started across the open ground, aiming for the gap between May and the ridge east of the village. Accurate, large-calibre, anti-tank fire struck the lead tanks immediately and the others sought dead ground. By 1020 hours six tanks had been lost and Major Harris wounded. At least one troop reported reaching the start line but their tanks were then caught in enfilade fire from the eastern edge of May.⁴⁶

The Black Watch, proudest of regiments, did not falter. The men were heavily mortared all the way to the start line but kept moving. With two companies up and the two other companies close behind the regiment walked into the jaws of a trap. The Germans with excellent fire control had been occupying May in strength throughout the battle. They now emerged, reinforced by Panzer battle groups, overwhelming the Black Watch-Hussars attack.⁴⁷ On the ridge to the south and east of the village the troops in the main German line of resistance, complete with dug-in gun and mortar positions and packets of hull down tanks with attendant Panzer grenadiers, watched in awe as the Black Watch moved forward.



May-sur-Orne (left) and Fontenay-le-Marmion (right). The "factory" south of St. Martin may be seen at the top of the photograph. Note the shape of the fields in the centre which correspond to the crest of Verrieres Ridge. The minor road running northeast from May was the Black Watch start line. (LCMSDS)



Verrières Ridge



Lieut-Colonel Donald MacLaughlan
(NAC PA 183990)

Captain John Taylor described the advance in a letter to his father dated 15 August 1944:

To begin with I might say that you need never be ashamed of having belonged to the Black Watch . . . We started across country at 0900 hours. By then the Jerries were thoroughly awake as to what was going on and from the start we had trouble from very heavy machine gunning from the flanks, mortars and artillery fire. The troops were steady as a rock and we kept going. I was the left forward company and on my right was B company, then commanded by Sergeant Foam, all the officers having been knocked out. We overran two strong points, then I got hit so I can't be accurate as to the rest of the story but I understand they got to the objective.⁴⁸

Taylor was wounded before Griffin and approximately 60 men crossed the crest of the ridge. One survivor, Private Montreuil, reported that Captain John Kemp, commanding D company, urged Major Griffin to call off the attack but Griffin replied "that the orders were to attack and that the battalion would therefore carry on."⁴⁹ On top of the ridge the remnant of the battalion "ran directly into a strong and exceptionally well camouflaged enemy position."³⁰ Tanks and self-propelled guns were concealed in haystacks and intense close-range fire forced the men to ground. Griffin, who may have been the only officer left, ordered a withdrawal -"every man to make his way back as best he could." Not more than fifteen were able to do so. Griffin's body was later found "lying among those of his men."⁵¹

The Black Watch suffered 307 casualties on 25 July. Five officers and 118 other ranks were killed or died of wounds, 101 were wounded and of the 83 taken prisoner 21 were wounded. As the official historian has noted, "Except for the Dieppe operation, there is no other instance in the Second World War where a Canadian battalion had so many casualties in a single day."⁵²

The battle did not end with the destruction of the Black Watch. The brigade message log portrays a scene of confused fighting on the northern edge of May lasting into the early afternoon. At 1615 hours a smokescreen was laid across the front and Brigadier Megill ordered the Calgarys to withdraw into St. Andre. Elsewhere on the Corps front prospects were equally dismal. The North Nova Scotia Highlanders and Fort Garry Horse had been mauled in their operation against Tilly-La-Campagne and in the centre the brilliant success of the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry in capturing Verrieres village could not be followed up. The Royal Regiment of Canada and C squadron of the First Hussars bypassed Verrieres heading for Rocquancourt but they ran into a "hurricane of fire" and took heavy losses. To their right the 1st Royal Tank Regiment encountered accurate long-range fire as soon as it moved forward.⁵³



May-sur-Orne

(NAC PA 131352)

This tentative advance by one British squadron was not part of 7th Armoured Division's planned attack for Simonds had cancelled the armoured advance. The 1st Royal Tank Regiment was under orders to assist the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry in Verrieres and was not part of a larger operation.⁵⁴ Despite his caution in committing the armoured division, Simonds still believed that some of the objectives of Phase II could be won. At 1730 hours he issued orders to renew the offensive. Second Division was to capture Rocquancourt and May-sur-Orne and then at dawn on the 26th, Fontenay-le-Marmion would be attacked.⁵⁵ The Germans had other ideas and throughout the early evening hours pressed a series of major counterattacks against Fourth Brigade, which made an advance to Rocquancourt out of the question.⁵⁶ There was less pressure on the Fifth Brigade front and an

attack by the Regiment de Maisonneuve scheduled for 1900 hours was allowed to go ahead though it is difficult to discern what this move was supposed to accomplish.

The Maisonneuves were to advance down either side of the road to May, with Major Ostiguy leading C company on the right and Major Massie's B company advancing via the factory area. D company under Captain Robert was to set out at H+15 to clear out the woods on the right flank and then seize the quarry northwest of May. The enemy still occupied the factory area in strength and the barrage provided by two field and four medium regiments was of little assistance. Indeed, once past the start line they were fired on from St. Andre. Ostiguy's men reached the diagonal woods about 400 yards north of May before enemy fire made further progress impossible.⁵⁷



[INAC PA 114507]

At 2034 hours the Maisonneuves reported: "Both forward companies pinned down in line with factory by MGs along road. It is impossible to have artillery engage as target is in our rear."⁵⁸ Forty-five minutes later, when it became clear that German resistance was growing, Megill ordered the Maisies to return to St. Andre where they were to spend the next four days holding the village and attempting to secure St. Martin. During the course of Operation "Spring" the Maisonneuves suffered 12 fatal and more than 40 non-fatal casualties.

The Calgary Highlanders had been ordered to withdraw to St. Andre on the evening of 25 July but the companies were scattered and out of touch. Megill relieved Lieut.-Colonel MacLaughlan who was exhausted by the day's events and Major Vern Stott, the second-in-command, came forward to re-organize.⁵⁹ Megill told Stott to plan the defence of the area and this task was quickly accomplished by visiting

each company and placing it in an all-around defensive position. Regrettably, Stott was wounded "when a crump of mortar" struck him in the shoulder. "During this same period Major John Campbell staggered into battalion headquarters"⁶⁰ seriously wounded. Captain Ross Ellis took over command. That night the Calgarys were sent to join the Black Watch in the rear area. They had lost five officers and 172 other ranks killed, wounded and missing. Every company commander who had gone into battle the previous night was a casualty.⁶¹

On the morning of 26 July 1944 Fifth Brigade began the first day of its second week at the front. More than one thousand men, roughly one fifth of the total strength of the brigade and more than half of its infantry rifle strength, were killed, wounded, prisoners of war or exhaustion casualties.

The battles for May-sur-Orne and Verrieres Ridge were soon to be rationalized as operations which had greatly assisted the American breakout from St. Lo. But, in the immediate aftermath of what had seemed like a week of disasters, the senior officers of II Canadian Corps were forced to think about the events differently. Simonds met with both Montgomery and Dempsey to discuss "Spring" and then talked with his two divisional commanders.⁶² The British Generals must have had some reservations about Simonds' conduct of the battle, particularly his persistence in continuing daylight attacks which, like Canadian operations on the last day of "Goodwood," had been marked by heavy casualties to infantry battalions. Infantry was a terribly scarce resource in 21 Army Group and it seems unlikely that Montgomery or Dempsey would have permitted a British general to press such costly operations in the way the Canadians had.⁶³

For Simonds, "Spring" was not a failure of command but a demonstration of the inadequacies of individual Canadian units.⁶⁴ Brigadier D.G.B. Cunningham and the commanding officers of two of his Ninth Brigade battalions were fired for refusing to press the attack against Tilly.⁶⁵ Major-General Keller, whom the British had suggested replacing in early July,⁶⁶ was retained in command, perhaps because he had followed orders and demanded that Cunningham mount a new attack. Major-General Foulkes was also left in command. Foulkes had functioned as little more than an observer during the first week of battle. He had received an outline plan from Corps headquarters and prepared a divisional plan without consulting his brigadiers. Communications with the assault troops and even with brigade headquarters were poor throughout the battles but Foulkes did not go forward to discover what was happening. Much can be blamed on the fog of war but a divisional commander ought to be more than a conduit for orders from higher formations. Foulkes confined his interventions to orders to "get going."⁶⁷

Second Division's brigadiers had also failed to play a decisive role in the battles of July.

Brigadier H.A. Young, commanding Sixth Brigade, ignored the problems the Camerons were having in St. Andre, insisting that the start line for Operation "Spring" was secure. Young did not go forward to determine the situation for himself and does not seem to have grasped how difficult it would be to stage a night attack under these circumstances. Brigadier Megill, who has been much criticized for his role in "Spring", did go forward repeatedly and did attempt to learn all he could about the actual situation. Megill had been appalled by the plan for "Spring," which seemed to have been prepared by someone who could not read a contour map and had never seen the ground.⁶⁸ Verrieres Ridge, he believed, ought to have been cleared from east to west, not by uphill attacks overlooked from three sides. Megill had discussed this with Foulkes, after a 7th Armoured Division liaison officer had suggested that his men did not seriously believe that their part in Phase II of "Spring" was possible, Megill returned to Foulkes' headquarters where he sought assurances that the brigades' left flank would be protected by a vigorous British thrust. Foulkes told him that 7th Armoured would go all-out on the morning of 25 July and Megill had to accept this assurance.⁶⁹

Once the operation began and his worst fears were being confirmed on an hourly basis, Megill could not bring himself to intervene. When Foulkes ordered the Calgarys to press their attack and told the Black Watch that speed was essential, Megill simply passed the orders on.⁷⁰ When he learned over the "gunners net" that Griffin had arranged an attack for 0930 hours, Megill went to see the Black Watch commander but did not overrule his decision. Later that day Megill learned that Foulkes was going to renew the attack using the Maisonneuves and leaving them under Sixth Brigade command. Foulkes and Brigadier Young arrived at Fifth Brigade headquarters to organize this venture and Foulkes began the discussion by reporting that Simonds was "furious at the failure which had occurred."⁷¹ Megill protested the decision to order the Maisonneuves into battle and a shouting match erupted with Foulkes demanding to know if Megill was challenging his orders. The result

of all this was not, however, to cancel an ill-conceived plan but to conduct it under the control of Fifth Brigade.

Megill offered this explanation of his actions on 25 July in a 1988 interview:

It was perfectly clear that the attack should have been called off at a very early stage in the morning. I suggested this not later than perhaps 8:00 or 9:00 o'clock. Instead the Corps commander was pressing the divisional commander and he was pressing us to get on with an attack which we knew was almost hopeless. Under these circumstances one does not quit. You do as much as you possibly can and hope that someone will see the light and give you some relief.⁷²

If Phillip Griffin had lived he would no doubt have offered a similar explanation.

After Operation "Spring" failed and it became apparent that the Americans had broken through the German defences, Montgomery changed his plans again and issued a new directive. He noted that six of the ten Panzer divisions were concentrated in the open country south of Caen, so "further large scale efforts in this sector were unlikely to succeed." British Second Army was therefore to regroup and attack with not less than six divisions on the Army's right flank at Caumont. This operation, code named "Bluecoat", drew all three British armoured divisions to the west, forcing a postponement of any armoured thrust east of the Orne towards Falaise, but the Germans did not know this.

The Canadian effort at Verrieres Ridge, marred as it was by poor operational intelligence, communication failures and the kind of mistakes inexperienced troops were bound to make, was nevertheless a successful military operation. The enemy responded to "Spring" with co-ordinated counter attacks by elements of two Panzer divisions. Their attempts to evict the Canadians from Verrieres village and St. Andre cost the enemy heavy casualties and distracted attention from the vital part of the front where an American breakthrough turned into the long-awaited break out. Operation "Spring" may not have been planned as a holding operation but it certainly became a very successful one.

This article is taken from Chapters IV and V of *The Brigade: The Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade, 1939-1945*. Stoney Creek: Fortress Publications, October 1992.

NOTES

Abbreviations:

2 CID	Second Canadian Infantry Division
5 CIB	Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade
CH	Calgary Highlanders
CMHQ	Canadian Military Headquarters (London, U.K.)
D Hist	Directorate of History, National Defence H.Q. (Ottawa)
LCMSDS	Laurier Centre for Military, Strategic and Disarmament Studies
NAC	National Archives of Canada
N PRC	National Personnel Record Centre
PRO	Public Record Office (London, U.K.)
RHC	Royal Highland Regiment (Canada) The Black Watch
WD	War Diary

1. G. Marchand, *Vers la Victoire*, Appendix.
2. C.P. Stacey. *The Victory Campaign*, 182.
3. The directive and the letter to Eisenhower are in C.P. Stacey, 181-83 *The Victory Campaign*. The letter to Eisenhower is dated 23 July but Lieut.-General Miles Dempsey discussed the operation with Simonds on the morning of the 22nd. Dempsey Papers PRO WO 285/9.
4. 2 CID Intelligence Summary #8, 23 July 1944, WD 2 CID, July 1944, RG 24, NAC.
5. 2 Cdn Corps Operational Instruction #3 Operation "Spring" 24 July 1944 and Gds. Armoured Division OO Nov. 2 Operation "Spring", 24 July 1944, WD 2 CID.
6. 2 CID Intelligence Summary #8.
7. I am indebted to Roman Jarymowycz who has provided the details of the dispositions of the 272nd Division from Canadian and German sources.
8. G.G. Simonds, *Attack by RHC- Operation "Spring"*, 21 Jan. 1946, 8 pages CMHQ Report No. 150, Directorate of History, D Hist.
9. WD 2 CID, July 1943.
10. This and other work of the Army Operational Research Group is discussed in Terry Copp, *Scientists and the Art of War: Operational Research in 21 Army Group*, to be published in 1993.
11. The South Saskatchewan Regiment and the Essex Scottish could play no part in "Spring". The Fusiliers Mont Royal were greatly understrength but were assigned to clear the startline for the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry.
12. "Transcript of Interview 1 with Major-General W.J. Megill," 11 pages 1989, 2.
13. Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, "The Battle of St. Andre-sur-Orne." Appendix to WD July 1944. RG 24, NAC.

14. Megill, 3.
15. 5 CIB Message Log 24 July 1944, *WD 5 CIB*, RG 24, NAC.
16. Lieut.-Colonel D.G. MacLaughlan, "Account of the Attack by the Calgary Highlanders on May-sur-Orne," 6 pages, 28 July 1944, D Hist.
17. Capt. D. Harrison, "Account . . ." 1 page, 29 July 1944, D Hist.
18. MacLaughlan, 1.
19. Quotations in this paragraph from Lt. Morgandeen, "A" Coy, "Account. . .," 2 pages, 29 July 1944, D Hist.
20. MacLaughlan. No exact timing of this report is available but 0530 hours seems probable.
21. Morgandeen, 1.
22. Ibid, 1.
23. Lt. John Moffat and Sgt. Wynder, "Account . . .," 2 pages, 29 July 1944, D Hist.
24. Ibid, 2.
25. Roy Farran, *The Calgary Highlanders*, 153.
26. Lt. Mageli, "C" Coy, "Account . . .," 2 pages, 29 July 1944, D Hist.
27. Ibid.
28. Sgt. Palfencier, "Account. . .," 29 July 1944, 4 pages D Hist.
29. Mageli, 2.
30. Lt. E.A. Michon, "D" Coy, "Account . . .," 29 July 1944, 2 pages, D Hist.
31. Ibid, Timming from "Message Log" *WD 5 CIB*, July 1944.
32. Ibid, Timming from "Message Log" *WD 5 CIB*, July 1944.
33. War Diary, 25 July 1944, Major E. Bennett, "Account . . .," 1 August 1944, 7 pages, D Hist.
34. Bennett, 1.
35. Ibid.
36. Personnel File, Major Phillip Griffin, NPRC NAC.
37. Bennett, 1.
38. A Memorandum of an Interview with Major W.E. Harris, M.P., 24 January 1946, 4 pages, D Hist.
39. Michon, 2.
40. Ibid.
41. Sgt. Benson, Scout Platoon, RHC "Account . . .," 1 August 1944, D Hist.
42. Ibid.
43. Harris, 2.
44. Megill Interview.
45. Memorandum of Interview with Lieut.-Colonel J.W. Powell, 9 January 1946, D Hist.
46. Ibid.
47. Message Log 5 CIB also reports a Calgary attack and its failure between 1000 and 1030 hours.
48. Letter, Capt. J.D. Taylor to Lieut.-Colonel D.H. Taylor, 15 August 1944. Personnel File, Black Watch Archives, Montreal.
49. Pte. M. Montreuil RHC "Account. . .," 1 August 1944, D Hist.
50. CMHQ Report No. 105, 10.
51. Ibid, 11.
52. Stacey, *Victory Campaign*, 192.
53. CMHQ Report No. 105, 61.
54. Simonds, 4.
55. Stacey, *Victory Campaign*, 192-93.
56. Ibid, 193.
57. Captain C. Cuddihy, Adjutant, Regiment de Maisonneuves, "Account . . .," 2 August 1944, D Hist.
58. 5 CIB Message Log, 25 July 1944.
59. *WD CH*, 25 July 1944.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid, and Farran, 154.
62. *WD II Canadian Corps*.
63. Dempsey's War Diary states that he met with Simonds at 2130 hours on the 25th, "I told him to halt where he is, to hold all ground gained, no further attacks without reference from me" Dempsey Papers. PRO WO 285/15.
64. Simonds' evaluation of Operation "Spring" follows this article.
65. "Interview Brig. D.G. Cunningham," 1983.
66. Letter Dempsey to Montgomery, 6 July 1944, Crerar Papers, vol. 3.
67. At 0645 hours Foulkes called Megill "to say that D Coy. Calg not to dig in but to go wide and keep going." This was not terribly helpful to anyone. At this time Foulkes also placed the Maisonneuves on "one hour notice to move" and return to 5 CIB command but he did not release them from divisional reserve until the afternoon.
68. McGill Interview.
69. Ibid.
70. "Message log" 5 CIB, 25 July 1944, serial 116, *WD 5 CIB*.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid.

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