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Account of "A" Company Attack on Troteval Farm by the Fusiliers Mont-Royal on 24 July 1944

Major Jacques Dextraze (as given to Captain Joseph Engler at Caen), 30 July 1944

On 20 July, four days before this attack, my battalion had put in an attack on Beauvoir (043614) and Troteval (051613) Farms and Verrières (052602). That attack ended with our holding Beauvoir Farm but we were not successful in taking Troteval Farm or Verrières. We suffered heavy casualties. Soon my Commanding Officer was told that it was essential that Troteval Farm be captured. This was necessary because 4th Brigade was going to attack using as a starting line the East-West road which runs just North of Troteval Farm. To secure the starting line the farm had to be ours. The battalion itself was not yet reinforced to the point where a full company could be spared for the attack on Troteval Farm. Actually cooks and drivers were being placed in the trenches to hold what ground we had taken. Because of this numerical lack in the battalion, I was given the job of selecting a hand-picked company of 75 all ranks for the attack on Troteval Farm.

Troteval Farm itself consists of a walled enclosure divided into an orchard to the South and gardens to the North with the farmhouse and courtyard proper on the centre of the left flank. It is surrounded by open wheat fields. The night was clear and

Abstract: General J.A. Dextraze, "J Dex" to Canada's post-war army, served as Chief of the Defence Staff from 1972 to 1975 but in 1944 he was a 24-year-old company commander in Les Fusiliers de Mont-Royal (FMR). This account of the action carried out by his company on 24 July 1944 offers a graphic description of the challenges confronting the Canadians during the battles for Normandy. This attack was conducted to clear the start line for Operation Spring which would commence the next day. Though written in the first person, this report was drafted by Captain Joe Engler, the historical officer assigned to 2nd Canadian Infantry Division. It was his job to collect important documents and records, as well as to conduct interviews with the fighting soldiers, which would allow later historical narratives to be accurately written. Engler had the dubious distinction of being the only historical officer to be killed in action when he drove into an ambush on 1 October 1944.

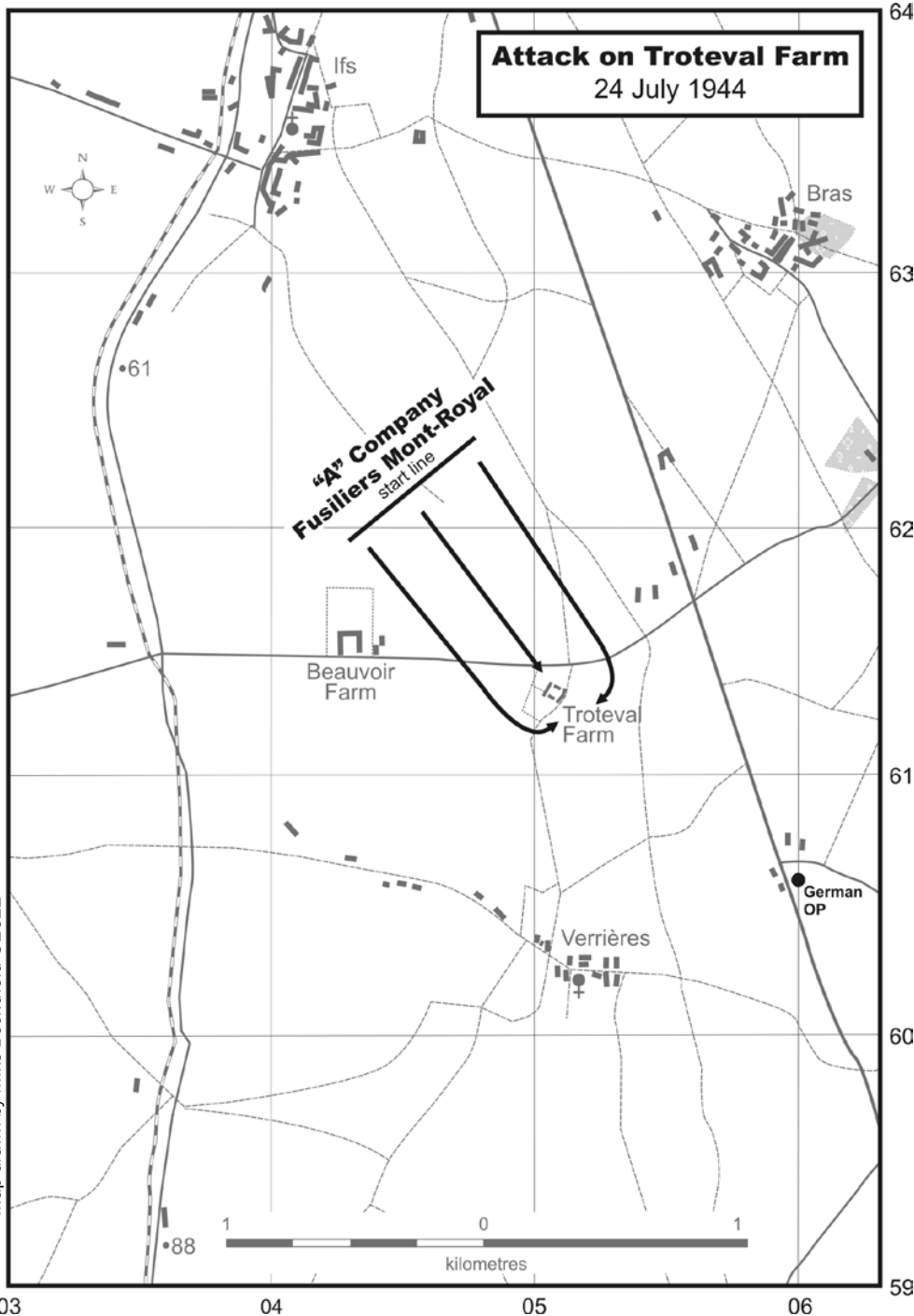
there was moonlight and visibility was excellent.

The force of the enemy was estimated to be about two platoons with six tanks. He had a valuable observation post (OP) at 060606.

My general plan was that, from a starting line about 1000 yards NE of the farm, the company should advance with two platoons up and one in reserve. On the 24 July at 2000

hours we crossed the starting line, which was merely a position in the open wheat fields stretching from about 043619 to 047623. Our advance was through full-grown wheat fields although the right platoon did meet some fields of more open ground. The forward platoons were to encircle the flanks of the farm and, once they were in position and almost simultaneously, the reserve platoon was to strike the farm from the NW corner as the forward platoons opened fire from the flanks. Then as the centre platoon cleared the buildings and the orchard to the South, the reserve platoons were to be moving their southernmost sections around to the rear so that the rear would be covered with fire and the cut-off completed.

In support I had 1 squadron of tanks, 1 field regiment, 1 medium regiment, 4.2-inch mortars, and the 3-inch mortars of the Fusiliers Mont-Royal and the South Saskatchewan Regiment. The tanks were in the rear covering each flank. The 3-inch mortars were to give fire for 20 minutes on our very open left flank. From H minus 30 to H plus 4 the mediums were to play on the farm. From H plus 15 to H plus 19 they fired on Verrières and Tilly-la-Campagne. From H plus 15 the artillery lifted



Map drawn by Mike Bechthold ©2011

but the field regiment remained on call. Two anti-tank guns were also in support and these I planned to place behind the farm itself to cover our flanks. Task 2 for the 3-inch mortars was around the area of the Verrières-Hubert-Folie road. The 4.2-inch mortars gave us screening fire in the area northeast of Tilly-la-Campagne from H plus 20 to H plus 40. I put eight light machine guns at point 045614. These came into action at H plus 45. Belts of defensive fire were

ready to be laid completely around the objective by 6 Field Regiment.

We moved very close, only 75 yards from our barrage, taking the chance, in this case luckily, that no one would be hit. My appreciation was that there were so many men in the farm that if my force of 75 had been 300 yards behind the barrage, the force in the farm would have had time to reorganize in such strength as to prevent us from seizing and holding the farm.

My advance was very fast, about 80 yards per minute. The centre platoon rushed for the northwest corner as soon as the flank fire platoons were in place. As the platoon went in from the northwest corner, the flanking platoon sent their sections to the rear to give a cut-off by cross-fire so that the farm was surrounded with automatic fire. At that moment there were no bodies behind the farm so that the clearing platoon was able to fire freely without endangering the other platoons. We reached our objective about 2015 hours. Clearing the farm took about 15 minutes. Just as we waited nearby for the artillery to lift we could see Jerry running through the orchard and farm buildings from the fields with neither helmets nor weapons. Tanks appeared very shortly afterwards and opened on the flank platoons. We replied by attacking them with PIATs and grenades. The tanks had been harboured just over a small crest and appeared first about 150 yards from the farm.

When a force is small in relation to the objective it seeks to hold, consolidation should be close on the objective. In this case we of course did not consolidate in the farm but we did not go more than 50 yards away from it except the rear platoon which covered a rather larger area. The forward platoons remained close around the farm. It is not wise to consolidate three or four hundred yards past an objective, unless one has considerable force. In this case we occupied the slit trenches Jerry himself had built.

At 0200 hours we received an order to withdraw by 0300 hours because tanks were moving in on me on the left flank, and brigade planned to bring artillery on them to get rid of them. I could not report these because my wireless was off and I felt that in any case we were dug in and were in little danger. Originally there were six tanks hull-down just on the crest

about 150 yards south of Troteval Farm. When they approached us we attacked them with PIATs and No.36 grenades. Four of them moved off to the southwest and two others moved to the southeast. Finally we heard them again about 0200 hours when we were ordered to withdraw. The medium artillery fire drove them away although it probably did not injure them. At 0300 hours I pulled out with all my men except one section of one platoon which I left against orders in order to protect our anti-tank guns. The men came out gradually and orderly. At this time there was a great deal of shelling and air attack as well. When the artillery shoot was finished, we re-occupied the farm without opposition.

My men took only their weapons, skeleton web, and a ground sheet in which was rolled a tin of bully-beef and some hard-tack. Each man carried two No.36 grenades and with each Bren there were 15 magazines. No body armour was worn.

I had 18 Brens instead of the usual 9 and thus had only Bren groups. The No.2s carried rifles and the section leaders carried Stens, but there were no rifle groups as such. Each platoon had one PIAT and six Brens, a total of 25 men per platoon. The actual clearing of the farm was done with light machine guns and No.36 grenades. The Brens were carried with a sling and when held firmly against the hip were as flexible as was necessary. Our section leaders picked up rifles which they found in the area, which belonged to the men of my battalion who had been casualties during the attack two days ago. The

artillery had knocked holes in the walls and in most of the buildings, but one building had no opening in it and a PIAT was used to cut a way through. The PIAT explosion brought Jerry crawling out.

The enemy of course did not occupy the farm but had light machine guns in the corners of the orchard. He was outside in the fields when our shells came down, apparently caught unexpectedly. He never thought we were so close. The garden and orchard had snipers and they were out in the fields as well. We found slit trenches inside the walls and outside. Machine gun posts were



Lieutenant-Colonel Jacques Dextraze examines a map prior to an operation late in the war when he commanded the Fusiliers Mont-Royal.



Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies (LCMSDS) Air Photo Collection 0311-41:20

This air photograph of Troteval and Beauvoir Farms was taken on 9 July 1944 before the area saw much fighting. The start line for the FMR attack was in the top left corner of the photograph.

located in the two northern corners of the wall and to the southwest in the field.

His defences included a string of mines about 50 yards from the farm circling all around it, flat on the ground with just a bit of hay to cover the mines. We lost two carriers because of these. We found one sniper in the orchard tied into a tree with ropes. He must have stayed there through the barrage with only his ammunition and rifle and how he stood our fire I don't know. No

snipers were upstairs at the windows. In reply to our shelling Jerry shelled the right and left flanks of the farm. He evidently did not expect our entry to be from the corner on diagonal. Because we stayed so close to the barrage, his DF fire came down where he expected us to be at this time, that is, a safe distance behind us. His snipers were poor shots but his tanks were good.

Jerry is no good at night. He needs only noise to frighten him away. On one occasion a burst of Bren

fire unaimed into a field caused him to pull out from the area.

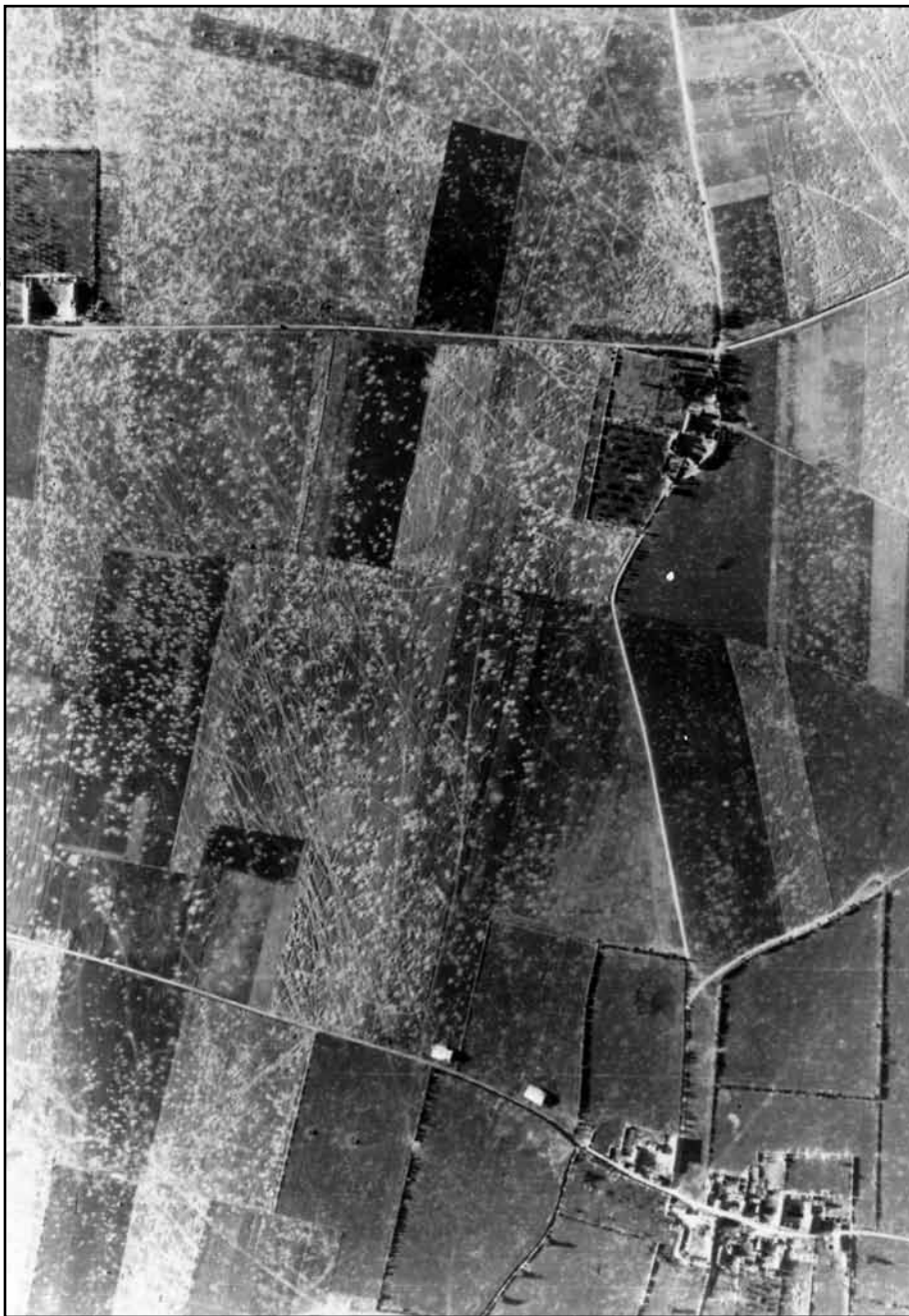
Our artillery was marvellous. All its defensive fire tasks were carried out when requested and Verrières, Tilly-la-Campagne, and the areas northwest of Verrières were surrounded with belts of fire, in fact there was protective fire all round. This fire was very accurate. I left two sections to protect my anti-tank guns on withdrawal and my men were 150 yards from the farm itself. Fire came down on the farm, yet no men were hit. The rest of the company had pulled out five minutes before the barrage began.

Lessons

1. Vehicles must have sand-bags in them and officers must check to see that they remain in. This will save lives and vehicles.
2. Always tell your men exactly where you, the company commander, will be at various phases of the battle. The platoon commanders and section leaders will come for no reason at all or will invent silly errands to come and see if you are there. Knowing you are there reassures them. Do not let them worry. If the wireless link with battalion is out, do not mention it, merely tell them all is well. When they know where you are and feel that you are confident they themselves will be confident and aggressive.
3. The commander must stay back, until the show is over, at a point where he can view all his forces or at least know what

Troteval and Beauvoir Farms, along with the village of Verrières, are visible in this air photo was taken on 30 July 1944, almost a week after the FMR operation.

Canadian Forces Joint Imagery Centre PMR 83-486



LCMSDS Air Photo Collection 0311-4120



Canadian Forces Joint Imagery Centre PMR 83-486

Before and after photos of Troteval farm taken on 9 and 30 July show much destruction. Apart for the obvious shell holes in the fields, a close examination reveals breaches in the wall around the farm, de-roofed buildings and numerous other physical scars.

- they are doing. It is unwise to go forward because the risk of losing a commander is serious and because he must be able to see the whole battle if he is to influence it. If he is with the forward platoon he is unable to find out what the other platoons are doing. There are other ways and other places for the company commander to show that he is not afraid.
4. When advancing go slowly and thoroughly. Burn every haystack. Clear a few houses thoroughly and not many haphazardly.
5. We have a preponderance of equipment and should use it boldly.
6. Don't consolidate too far forward of your objective if you have a small force.
7. Stretcher-bearers should be well forward.
8. Weapons must be picked up from casualties and kept with the part of the company which is still fighting.
9. Reinforcements should, if possible, accustom themselves to battle gradually.
10. Take chances with the artillery barrage, being close to it is essential. Where sticky fighting is likely, for example in a village clearing, the artillery lift should be so arranged that thoroughness in clearing does not mean losing the barrage.
11. Men never forget. An officer's influence on his men in times of action varies with the consideration he has shown them in training. If they respect him during training they will respond to his control under fire.
12. Defensive fire tasks must be laid down all around the objective beforehand. There is neither time nor opportunity in action to indicate targets.
13. Supporting arms are the key to success. Their use must be carefully planned.
14. When the enemy comes out unarmed with his hands up or with the evident intention to surrender, don't shoot him. This saves a lot of trouble for if the first few are treated properly the whole bunch will follow. Caution however, is necessary.

Jacques Dextraze (1919-1993) was born in Montreal and served with the Fusiliers Mont-Royal during the Second World War, eventually commanding the battalion. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order and bar for his actions during the war. Later, he commanded the 2nd Battalion, Royal 22e Régiment in Korea and served with the Canadian Army on various UN deployments. He rose to the rank of general and ending his career as the Canadian Forces' chief of the defence staff from 1972-77.