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# Reflections on Caen, Bocage and the Gap

## A Naval Historian's Critique of the Normandy Campaign

**Marc Milner**

As the son of a Normandy campaign veteran I have lived with - and relived - the campaign for as long as I can remember. When I began to teach military history the Normandy campaign found a prominent place in my classroom analysis of WW II battle practice. By then I had also largely bought into the two dominant paradigms of the Normandy fighting. The first was that while the Americans ground their way doggedly (if ineptly) through the bocage, the excellent tank country around Caen was wasted by the Anglo-Canadians. The second paradigm followed naturally from the first. The Allies fought poorly in Normandy while the Germans fought superbly. We had won through what John Ellis calls "brute force."<sup>1</sup>

My comfortable notions about the Normandy campaign were profoundly altered by a tour of the Anglo-Canadian battlefields in 1991, and by a second one this past spring which ventured into the American zone. The experience so shattered my assumptions that it is hard to know where to start. But perhaps it is best to begin with the ground.

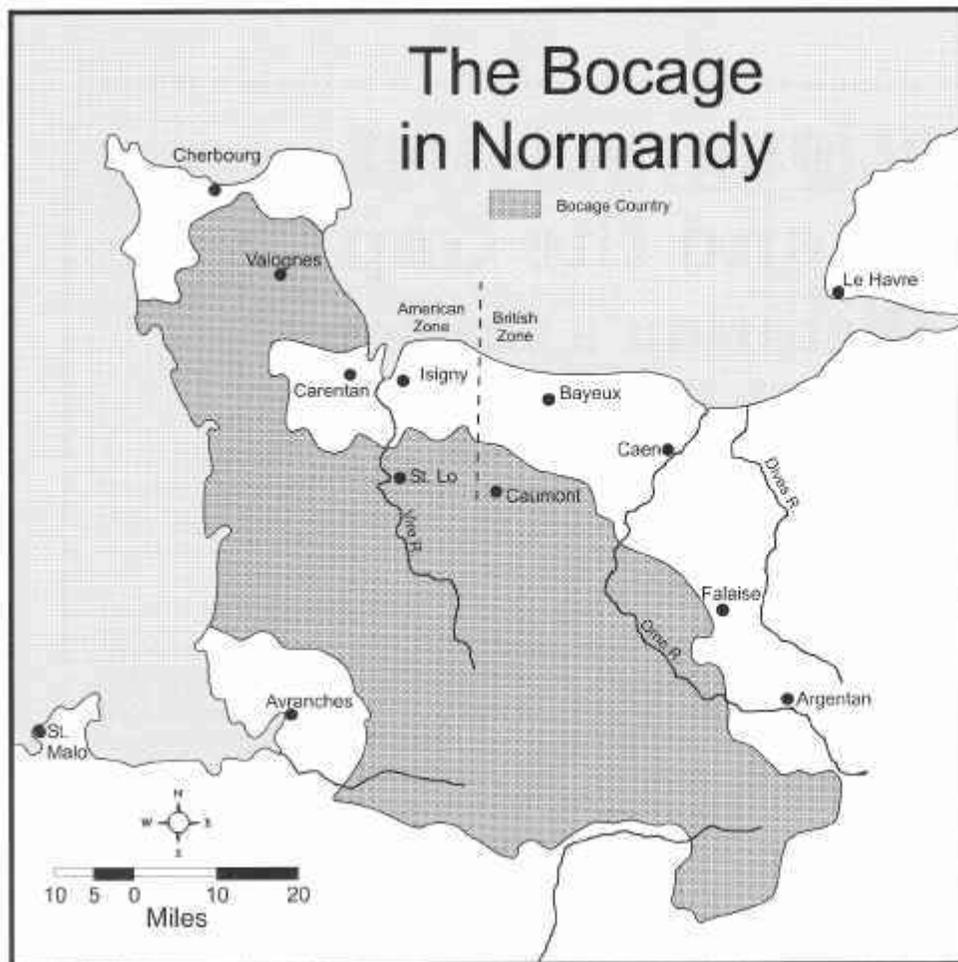
Gordon A. Harrison, author of the US Army's official history, *Cross-Channel Attack*, broke the Norman topography into five areas:

the north Cotentin (rolling uplands north of Valognes), the south Cotentin (generally flat and well watered), the Bessin (the coastal strip lying between Isigny and Bayeux), the Bocage (hilly wooded country extending south of the Bessin and Cotentin nearly to the base of the Brittany Peninsula) and the relatively open Caen country from Bayeux east and southeast.<sup>2</sup>

The Bessin west of Bayeux and the southern Cotentin were seized quickly following the landings, and the northern Cotentin was a strategic dead end. The Bocage and the open ground around Caen lay between the Allies and a break-out of the beachhead, thus they command attention in the Normandy literature and are the focus of this paper.

Illustrations (see next page) serve better than words to describe the bocage (which seems to be used synonymously with "hedgerow country"). A Canadian, familiar with the great open area around Caen, is struck by the nature of the ground south and southeast of Bayeux in what became the British sector. The ground around Villers-Bocage and Caumont is steeply rolling, with open fields guarded by hedgerows and deep, wooded valleys. The American bocage further west of Bayeux is even more broken by hedgerows.

The ground south and west of Bayeux profoundly shaped the character and tempo of the battle. The British bocage is noteworthy for two major offensives. The first was a thrust south of Bayeux that commenced on 11 June. It came to a halt two days later when leading elements of the 7th Armoured Division were stopped by Michael Wittman's Tiger tank outside Villers-Bocage: the spearhead of Panzer Lehr Division. The British reacted by flattening Villers-Bocage from the air and cancelling the advance.<sup>3</sup> The second, Operation "Bluecoat" - the so-called British breakout on 30 July - was launched against an enfeebled enemy. Nonetheless, the British found their own bocage tough going:



## The Bocage in Normandy

*An aerial photo showing the typical bocage that covers much of Normandy. The ancient patchwork of individual fields formed by the hedgerows which bound them proved a serious tactical problem for both the American and British armies. The height of the hedgerows is indicated by the length of the shadows, in many cases, taller than the buildings at the lower left.*

*WLU Air Photo 305/4042*



enough that the crisis in British infantry casualties was attributed to it.<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that they launched only two major operations in the bocage in nearly two months of continuous fighting (to be fair, the opening stages of "Epsom" passed through bocage as well): a point I shall return to. The "real" bocage fighting, of course, fell to the US Army slogging its way south along either side of the Vire River. But here, too, there were very few (two?) major operations. I had always thought it odd that there were so few distinguishable "battles" in the American Normandy campaign.

In contrast, action in the open ground around Caen was characterized by quite distinct operational level battles: "Epsom," "Charnwood," "Goodwood," "Spring," "Totalize," "Tractable" and others. Indeed, the difference in the structure of the campaign on the two fronts lends credence to the criticism that Montgomery preferred set-piece battles, which were a sign of his caution and the ineffectiveness of British fighting in general. Meanwhile, the dogged Americans, buoyed by greater personnel reserves and driven by a more aggressive doctrine, moved steadily against the Germans through the hedgerows.

It is a comfortable image, and one popularly accepted. But the ground had a profound impact on the shape of the campaign, and some historians have noted that. So long as the Germans retained any reserves of manpower and the ability to move men and equipment, and so long as the Allies were stuck to the roads, fighting in the bocage was simply a grinding, murderous battle of attrition. In the case of the US Army, it was possible to grind forward through the bocage in battalion or regimental level operations, and it did so - as its casualty statistics reveal (US casualties by the end of the Normandy campaign were significantly higher than those of the Anglo-Canadians).

The ability to infiltrate the hedgerow country had, in fact, been seen as one of the benefits of fighting in the bocage in the first place. In such terrain it would be hard for the enemy to prevent gradual infiltration, and once the Allies were in, extremely hard for the Germans to knock them out with a single, strategic counterattack.<sup>5</sup> So, before 6 June 1944 the bocage looked good - or at least planners were able to put a positive spin on it.

The idea that broken, heavily wooded ground was suitable for infiltration was not limited to Normandy or to the Allies. The ground in front of the main German Gothic Line position in northern Italy, between the Metauro and Foglia Rivers, is rugged, hilly country - perhaps quintessentially Italian - with deep, heavily wooded ravines cutting into sharp hillsides, narrow winding roads, picturesque villages, and razor-backed ridges. Looking at the ground from the village of Montemaggiore (south of the Metauro) in 1985 I hazarded a guess that a determined enemy could delay an attacker for weeks over such ground. Dominick Graham, a veteran himself, a distinguished gunner and military historian, and leader of the tour merely frowned. Gazing at me over the rims of his glasses he said wearily, "Yes, and you could slip the whole bloody Chinese army through! No good fields of fire, Marc! - Too hard to defend. Wait till you see the main position."

When we reached the southern edge of the Foglia valley I understood precisely what he meant. The main German position was laid out north of the river, on wide, totally open, rolling ground, sloping towards the river like the glacis of some great fortress. The broad open valley in front of that fortress was a killing ground, and there was virtually no cover up the grassy slopes beyond. Infiltration was not possible. Here was ground that could be defended with fire.

If open ground can be defended by fire, then the bocage had to be defended by men and it could only be won by men fighting at close range in a steady brawl. When I saw the ground it immediately became apparent why the American advance was so undramatic. No great wind-up, followed by a crash of army groups of artillery and a mad dash by whole divisions and corps for some distant strategic objective. Rather, the US advance was characterized by a steady grind and then the "sudden" capture of places: Carentan, St. Sauveur, Barneville, Valognes, Cherbourg and, finally, the high ground west of St. Lô.

I had read about all of this, of course, but rather typically for a Canadian I ascribed this rather featureless campaigning to the lack of any serious opposition to the US Army. After all, all the tanks were opposite the Anglo-Canadian

armies around Caen, all the US faced were infantry, a few tanks and a few SPs.

This was, of course, not what the Americans had bargained for. The bocage threw the burden of battle on the infantry when so much of current doctrine relied on support from the tanks. Harrison described the frustration during the advance of V Corps towards St. Lo in mid-June. "One of the prime difficulties faced by the Americans in this terrain was in coordinating tanks and infantry." German defences consisted of anti-tank guns heavily supported by machine guns, and mortars, all well concealed in the hedgerows. "Tanks could not go forward to knock out the machine guns," Harrison observed, "nor could the infantry spearhead the advance to take out the anti-tank guns."<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly, the advance was slow. David Eisenhower captured the frustration of American troops - and the mood of subsequent historians - when he opined that in the bocage "the superior mobility of the American Sherman was being nullified on a battlefield carved up into 150-yard plots."<sup>7</sup> In such a static battle and at short ranges the advantage went to the "slower, more heavily armed German Mark V and Mark VI Panther-Tiger tanks..." which Eisenhower claimed were appearing "in large numbers [?]..."<sup>8</sup> by mid-July. It is clear that David Eisenhower and many Americans then and now felt that if they could only get clear of the bocage their Shermans could run free.

The ground, of course, dictated otherwise. Bradley's one serious attempt at strategic mobility in the bocage prior to "Cobra," the launching of Middleton's VIII corps towards Coutances in early July, was expected to be "a slow, costly overland battle of attrition, through 'perfect defensive terrain.'"<sup>9</sup> And so it was. By the 10th Middleton was effectively stalled and the offensive became, in the end, a battle for a good start line for "Cobra."

In the end, the US Army achieved strategic mobility west of St. Lô on 25 July as a result of five factors: attrition of the enemy to a point where the front was held by a veneer with no reserves at the operational level; the concentration of German Panzer forces to the east around Caen; a high degree of co-operation achieved with supporting tactical air forces

(much more effective than contemporary British practice); good training provided to experienced troops; and the astonishing mobility given to the Americans in the bocage by invention of hedgerow cutters for tanks.

None of this could be pulled magically from a hat, or even from previous experience, prior to 6 June 1944. It is tempting to think that the German army could have been beaten by some lightning strategic strike in the summer of 1944, following which they all would have surrendered. But that was not the character of the German army. As in the final Allied push of 1918, in 1944 the Germans had to be ground-down at great cost. If fighting in the hedgerows was costly and frustrating for the Americans, it was no less so for the Germans.

Fighting in the bocage was also, ultimately, successful for the Allies. As Brigadier A.L. Pemberton commented in the War Office history of British artillery, "despite the difficult 'going'" the British experienced in the bocage during the initial stages of Operation "Epsom" in June, "the rate of advance was faster than had been customary in the mountains of Italy" to which he compared the worst of the Norman countryside.<sup>10</sup> This may not have been what those in France wanted to hear, but it is suggestive of the larger problems of the era.

The close countryside of the bocage nonetheless made the open ground around Caen look ideal for a rapid advance. Good tank country, vast open spaces, rolling wheat fields ideally suited to mechanized forces. Some have suggested that had the two Allied armies been reversed in position-the cautious Anglo-Canadians in the west and the fire-breathing Americans in the plains around Caen - the whole campaign would have gone much better, and the breakout achieved much sooner. The ground suggests otherwise.

The area in a radius often to 20 miles around Caen itself and stretching down the highway to Falaise and south along the Dives River is a rolling plain. Although it is cut by wooded river valleys and dotted by compact stone villages, the dominant feature is the broad, prairie-like fields, wide vistas, flat crests and distant horizons. This was the ground chosen by the Overlord planners for airfields, and the ground over which



Two views of "good tank country."

**Above:** A crossroads on the Caen-Falaise highway. The open, rolling nature of the plain is evident. Allied vehicles cover the landscape as far as the eye can see - an 88 gunner's delight.

**Right:** An oblique aerial photo showing the same area from a different angle. The Caen-Falaise highway is visible at the right along with the quarry at Hautmesnil. The forested area at the top is Quesnay Wood.



NAC PA 129137

WLU Air Photo 3977

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Montgomery is alleged to have wanted to "crack about in tanks." It is, in no small measure, the ground the Americans eyed with envy.

But instead of "cracking about" in tanks, the Anglo-Canadians stalled around Caen, and Monty - true to form - resorted to a series of set-piece battles at the operational level: using massive firepower in lieu of tactical sophistry. The result was a different kind of battle of attrition, no strategic breakout, and enduring criticism of Montgomery. Montgomery later claimed that his offensives in the Caen area were never intended to break out. Rather their purpose was *to* draw the weight of German armour onto that front in order to free the Americans for their break-out. The ground suggests that both of these assumptions are far too simplistic. So what happened?

The open terrain in the eastern beachhead is a natural glacis easily defended by fire. Here the Germans not only had the advantage of ground, they also had two others. First, they were usually defending. Second, they had a vast number of powerful, high velocity, long-range tank and anti-tank guns. All of these, like the vaunted 88 mm of the Tigers and the towed variants, the long-barrelled 75 mm of the Mark IV and Panthers, and even the small 75 mm towed Pak 40, had muzzle velocities in excess of 3,000 feet per second.<sup>11</sup> All of these could pierce the front armour of a Sherman at more than 1,000 yards, and in the case of the larger guns -like the 88's - could take out most Allied tanks at twice that range.<sup>12</sup>

Powerful guns allowed the open fields around Caen to be defended by fire against armour: a situation which cut both ways. For example, every German armoured assault failed. The first, on D-Day when some 40 tanks of the 21st Panzer Division attacked the western flank of 3rd British Division near the beaches, was seen-off smartly with heavy losses by both tanks and anti-tank guns.<sup>13</sup> That assault, and one the next day on the leading elements of the 3rd Canadian Division near Authie, were delivered by Mark IVs, tanks roughly equivalent to the Sherman although with perhaps a better gun. In the case of the attack on the Canadians near Authie, two companies of Mark IVs of the 12th SS (Hitler Youth) Panzer Division were engaged by the Shermans of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers Regiment

on open ground in a swirling action. The Sherbrookes claimed somewhere between 31 and 41 Mark IVs destroyed at a loss of 21 of their own tanks.<sup>14</sup>

So much for the Mark IVs. But the Mark Vs - the legendary Panther - fared no better. On 9 June, as part of a series of vicious counterattacks on the Canadian 7th Brigade, which got astride the Caen-Bayeux highway, the 12th SS Panzer Division committed two companies of Panthers in a desperate attempt to clear the road after a number of intense infantry assaults failed.

The armoured assault, advancing over open ground on The Regina Rifles' position straddling the road at Bretteville-l'Orgueilleuse and Norrey-en-Bessin, failed. Canadian fire stripped German infantry away from their tanks, which were met with a hail of anti-tank fire. "We were surprised," Kurt Meyer, the 26th Regiment's commander, recalled later, "by heavy anti-tank weapons." For a while the Panthers were reduced to a petulant shelling of Bretteville from 300 yards and when finally they entered the village, "The Canadians swarmed the advancing armour."<sup>15</sup> The Canadians claimed 12 Panthers destroyed, the Germans admitted to six.

Undaunted, Meyer sent 12 Panthers out the next morning to attack the advanced position of the Reginas, a single company dug in at Norrey-en-Bessin just south of the rail line. Once again concentrated small arms and artillery fire drove the German infantry to ground, but the Panthers pressed on. As they closed on Norrey, the Panthers turned slightly south in order to present their frontal armour to the 6-pounder anti-tank guns at the crest of the gentle slope running up to Norrey. Just then nine Shermans of the Fort Garry Horse, including several Fireflies - Shermans re-equipped with the British 17-pounder gun - deployed south of Bretteville, just 1,000 yards from the attacking Panthers. Seven of the Panthers were destroyed in minutes. The German attack collapsed. So much for the Panthers.

As Hubert Meyer, Chief of Staff of the 12th SS Panzer Division, observed, "The anti-tank weapons around Bretteville were so powerful that outflanking movements to the north and south were thwarted."<sup>16</sup> As Oliver Haller concluded in his superb analysis of the action, "It became



*A 12th SS Panther knocked out by Canadian infantry in Bretteville-l'Orgueilleuse.*

evident that offensive operations had become dangerous undertakings - a reality that would plague the Allies for the remainder of the Normandy campaign...."<sup>17</sup> When Kurt Meyer reported to General Geyr von Schweppenburg, commander of Panzer Group West, on 9 June that his best tanks could not budge Canadian infantry from their fortified villages, von Schweppenburg answered, "My dear Meyer, the war can only now be won through political means."<sup>18</sup>

So the best of the masters of mobile warfare, equipped with the best tank of the campaign and led by veterans of the eastern front failed in the earliest days of the Normandy campaign to loosen the front and achieve a decisive strategic result. Indeed, tanks failed at Bretteville and Norrey to achieve even a tactical victory. Inexperience, you say? The men who saw them off were the utterly inexperienced and rather ordinary citizen soldiers of the 3rd Canadian Division.<sup>19</sup>

The Germans fared no better when they launched much larger armoured assaults. The largest of the Normandy campaign saw elements of five Panzer divisions hurled against the western flank of "Epsom" at the end of June. These attacks were destroyed "by massed artillery fire with devastating effect, and all but one of their attacks were dispersed before reaching our forward infantry positions."<sup>20</sup>

It has been customary to apologize for German failure, noting that they never had a chance to mass armour for a proper assault and were hounded from the air. But these are weak and perhaps spurious arguments. It cannot be claimed that the Allies fought poorly and at the same time assert that the failure of the Germans to organize themselves sufficiently for a major counterattack was an act of God, or the air force. Steady Allied pressure on the front counted for something. In any event, as Pemberton points out, the attack on "Epsom" was stopped by guns. The Panthers at Bretteville and Norrey were beaten by anti-tank fire. In the end, fully 63 to 65 per cent of the German tanks destroyed in Normandy fell to gunfire: tactical, battlefield fighting.<sup>21</sup> So if the Germans, particularly the Panthers, could not move effectively against Allied anti-tank fire, what hope did regiments of Shermans have against the tremendous number of German high velocity guns?

The stalemate around Caen was, therefore, the result of open ground wholly dominated by superior fire. Movement simply invited instant death from as much as 3,000 yards away. That great and powerful armoured phalanx called Operation "Goodwood" was shaped by the vulnerability of Allied tanks and the superiority of German fire. Numbers and massive supporting fire support - delivered from land, sea and air - was the only way to cut through the German defences, which were typically



NAC PA 131349

*Canadian soldiers examine the dead German "88." A shell (visible at centre) fired from this gun was capable of destroying Allied tanks at virtually any range.*

side before getting killed. This was easier said than done.

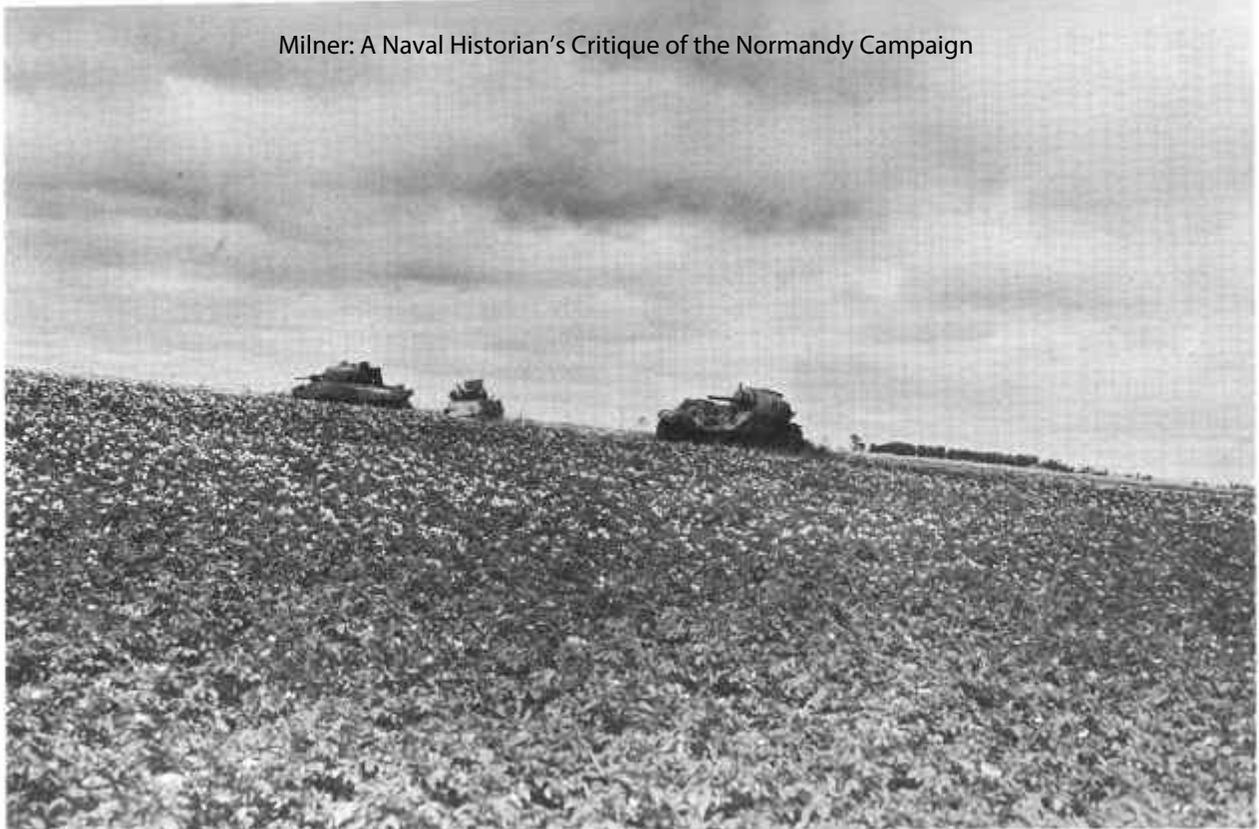
Plans for Operation "Spring" called for two brigades of Canadian infantry to breach the forward German defences, and then two British armoured divisions would pass through and "exploit." The task was, however, much more than six battalions of infantry could accomplish. The Caen-Falaise Plain was defended by the 1st SS Panzer Corps, with support from elements of the 2nd SS Panzer Corps which overlooked the Canadian attack from across the Orne River (on ground the British could not hold during "Epsom"). Directly in front of the Canadians lay an awesome array of the firepower. Around

deployed in depth, with mutually supporting lines of dug-in tanks and anti-tank guns. In the case of "Goodwood" there were 11 such lines, with hundreds of high velocity anti-tanks guns aimed at vulnerable targets. So the Anglo-Canadians led with infantry, set objectives within range of supporting field artillery, rushed forward anti-tank guns and a FOO and waited for the counterattack - very much the way the German army was fought to a bloody shambles in 1917-1918.

In no small way the fighting around Caen is exemplified by the ill-fated Canadian attack up Verrières Ridge on 25 July, Operation "Spring." The Canadian II Corps had won the first bit of high ground south of Caen in the final stages of "Goodwood." According to historians, what lay before them was the excellent tank country of the Caen-Falaise Plain. The ground is, in fact, not flat, but a series of gently rolling hills of great tactical significance. As a rule, the Germans held the far crest with anti-tanks guns and dug-in tanks and machine guns, with powerful armoured and Panzer Grenadier forces in immediate reserve. It was the Canadians' task to roll down the slope from their own position, across the bottom of the bowl and up the far

Verrières village itself was 1st SS [*Liebstandart Adolf Hitler*] Panzer Division, reinforced by the 101st SS *Schwer Panzer Abteilung* (Tiger I); the 12th SS *Hitlerjugend* Panzer Division was just out of the action to the east. The western end of Verrières Ridge was held by the very ordinary 272nd Infantry Division, but it was powerfully reinforced by elements of the 10th SS Panzer Division, the 9th SS Panzer Division and an armoured *kampfgruppe* from the 2nd Panzer Division, with the "Koenig Tigers" (Tiger II) of the 503 *Schwer Panzer Abteilung* in immediate reserve behind the front. Providing direct fire support from across the Orne onto Verrières Ridge were the 10th SS Panzer Division and the Tigers of the 102nd SS *Schwer Panzer Abteilung*. The 2nd Panzer, 9th SS Panzer and 116th Panzer Divisions were in immediate reserve behind the front. Thus, most of the estimated 650 tanks and assault guns on the British front were within firing range or a few minutes driving distance of the Canadian attack on 25 July 1944. The number of towed anti-tank guns available to the Germans is unknown, to me at least.

The Canadian attack failed. While the leading elements of "Cobra" were slogging their way



*Sherman tanks of the Fort Garry Horse left to rust on a hillside near Tilly-la-Campagne. These tanks were destroyed during Operation "Spring," and this photo was taken the following year.*

through the bocage, Canadian infantry surged across the open, fire-swept ground south of Caen trying to get to the enemy before the barrage lifted or they were shot down. The infantry gained a lasting foothold only in Verrières village itself. There the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry dug in about 1,000 yards from their start line and moved up their own 6-pounder anti-tank guns, while towed 17-pounders and two squadrons of British tanks were deployed in depth behind - all firing over open ground. Savage counterattacks by the 1st SS were beaten off by massed artillery, machine gun, anti-tank and tank fire. Verrières was retained, but it remained a thin salient on the crest of the ridge. To the east, along the valley of the Orne River where the enemy had excellent observation and fields of fire from across the river, the German counterattacks were more successful. Tanks, assault guns and panzer grenadiers drove as far north as the original Canadian start line on Point 67 before being driven back.

Operation "Spring" is either ignored in accounts of Normandy or, if mentioned at all, portrayed as another example of ineffective "British" fighting and lack of commitment, or both.<sup>22</sup> Anyone who walks the slopes of Verrières Ridge, counts the barrels pointed in the Canadian direction and assesses the natural

strength of the German position can only wonder at why the attack was mounted in the first place. There is an on-going debate among Canadian historians whether "Spring" was a holding action or a legitimate attempt at breakout. Whatever it was, the fighting was brutal and bloody: the second bloodiest day of the war for Canada (after Dieppe). The feint in support of "Cobra" cost Canada nearly 2,000 wounded, including almost 500 dead, about the same casualty bill as that suffered by the two US divisions on Omaha beach on D-Day. It is significant that when Field Marshal Kluge had to choose between which front to visit on 25 July 1944 he ended up on the slopes of Verrières Ridge.

It is curious, in retrospect, that this rolling piece of open farmland - the prized avenue for a strategic breakout south of Caen - was given to the Canadian Corps to tackle. One gets a sense that the British wanted out. Indeed, after "Goodwood" the good ground south of Caen was left to the Canadians, the Poles and a couple of British divisions to handle. The main British effort shifted - interestingly enough - to the bocage country south of Bayeux! Perhaps Major-General George Kitching's meeting with General Sir Miles Dempsey, commander of Second British Army, is revealing on this point. Kitching commanded the 4th Canadian Armoured

Division, which became operational as part of II Canadian Corps at the end of July. The first thing Dempsey asked Kitching when they met in Normandy was "Are your tanks petrol or diesel?" As Kitching recalled, "When I told him they were petrol, he seemed disappointed...General Dempsey wished that our tanks were diesel and, as we became involved in battle, so did we."<sup>23</sup> Petrol driven tanks caught fire easily when their engine compartments were pierced and tank crews displayed an understandable reluctance to expose themselves to enemy fire. Maybe the British felt they were better off in the bocage: the short ranges largely overcame the limits on their own guns and, besides, nothing was proof against the "88."<sup>24</sup>

The essential problem was that the enemy had the long range, high velocity anti-tank guns and we had the little tanks that burned. The Allies also had to attack. The Canadian solution to the problem south of Caen was to adopt massed armoured assaults - dense phalanxes of tanks and armoured personnel carriers - in poor visibility with massive fire support, including strategic bombing. "Totalize," launched on 8 August at night, Operation "Tractable" launched amid smoke and dust on 14 August were qualified successes against what was, by then, a much weakened enemy (although one still well equipped with scores of anti-tank guns).

The Canadians eventually exploited their success, pushing down beyond Falaise, towards Trun, St. Lambert-sur-Dives, Chambois and, perhaps, Argentan. Why they went is, to me at least, most inconceivable. By then, of course, the Germans were on the run and we were trying to link-up with Patton's Third Army advancing from the south. In between lay the rump of the German Seventh Army and Panzer Group West, which were trying to pass through the same ground, while strong German forces attacked from the east to hold the Falaise-Argentan Gap open. When Bradley was asked if he would push his armies north of Argentan and stand in the way of the German escape he rejected the idea. "Better a solid shoulder at Argentan than a broken neck at Falaise!" was his justly famous response. So what were the Canadians and Poles doing south of Falaise, wrestling with the most lethal tide of humanity the west has ever witnessed?

Many Germans were able to slip through the noose because the area south of Falaise, particularly in the Trun-Chambois area and beyond, is well-bocage. It strikes one as genuinely odd looking over the countryside from the Polish monument at Mount Ormel that, while the Americans fought desperately for two months to get out of the bocage, the Canadian "breakthrough" south of Caen led them straight into it!

In fact, one look at the ground south of Falaise explains why the Germans fought so fiercely to the north. Martin Blumenson suggested many years ago that, "The Germans massed their forces [around Caen]...not because Montgomery drew them there but because they were trying to fulfil a purpose of their own."<sup>25</sup> Blumenson argues, quite rightly, that the Germans wanted to use the good tank country around Caen to launch their own single, knock-out blow. But it is also true that it was easier to defend the open ground around Caen with fire, than to prevent a steady Allied infiltration of the bocage country to the south.

It has been suggested that the Anglo-Americans relied too heavily on artillery, limited their thinking to a few thousand yards and failed to exploit their successes. Not only would the Germans have done it better, the Russians, too, would not have penny-pinched their way forward.<sup>26</sup> I used to subscribe to those views but now I think they merely obscure the real strengths and the real problems of the Anglo-Americans in the Normandy fighting.

Whether it was because of their expertise in artillery or the dreadful weakness of their tanks, the Allies fought a grinding battle of attrition in both the bocage and in the open around Caen. The army that was whittled away, often in near suicidal counterattacks was German, not Allied. To argue that the western Allies ought to have fought like Germans or Russians is, in the end, pointless. There is a strong element of cultural determinism in the way all armies fight, even if they adopt organization and doctrine derived from other armies. In any event, German armoured attacks invariably failed. And there was no room, nor the reserves to adopt a Russian-style army front scale operation.

So, would the US Army have fared better in the open fields around Caen? Hard to say. The US equivalent of the 17-pounder anti-tank gun, the 3-inch gun, features so little in the literature it is hard to get a feel for its ability. If it is the same gun as that in the M-10 tank destroyer then the 3-inch was perhaps not up to the task of handling German armour in the open at long ranges (the success of the 3-inch in the close country around Mortain is another matter). The 17-pounder in particular, with a muzzle velocity in excess of 3,000 ft per second in either the towed or the Firefly version - and firing the new AP round (which even the infantry battalion level 6-pounder could fire) was a match for German tanks if well handled. In that sense, Max Hasting is adrift when he said that "the towed anti-tank gun was of little value to troops in attack."<sup>27</sup> Given the German doctrine of counterattack, the Canadian response (much as it had been in 1917-1918) was to seize ground, lay on defensive supporting fire, move the anti-tank guns up and kill Germans. It worked, but it wasn't fancy and analysts have carped about it ever since.

Even without the 17-pounder the US Army fighting around Caen would not have been driven into the sea. Naval gunfire support would have crushed German armoured onslaughts if the army's artillery had not done so already. Rommel knew that, and after 9 June 1944 so too did Schweppenburg. But those little US Army Shermans would have brewed-up just as easily around Caen as those of the Anglo-British armies did. And so the US Army would have resorted to large, set-piece battles to overcome the problem of open ground dominated by superior enemy fire. British historians would be carping about the cautious Americans, and whining that if only Monty had had the open ground around Caen they would have been in Paris by the end of June.

Or maybe not: its the ground, you see! - or have I missed something here?

### Notes

This paper was originally presented to the North Great Plains Historical Conference, Bismarck, ND, 25 September 1997.

1. John Ellis, *Brute Force: Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War* (New York: Viking, 1990), For a

- good summary of conventional wisdom on Normandy, see the account in Gerhard Weinberg's majestic *A World at Arms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
2. Gordon A. Harrison, *Cross-Channel Attack* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History US Army, 1977 (1951)), p.180.
3. For a detailed description of the action see Eric Lefevre, *Panzers in Normandy Then and Now* (London: Battle of Britain Prints Ltd., 1990).
4. Carlo D'Esté, *Decision in Normandy* (New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1983), ch.16.
5. Max Hasting, *Overlord* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), p. 146.
6. Harrison, p.383.
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8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, p.347.
10. A.L. Pemberton, *The Second World War, 1939-1945, Army, The Development of Artillery Tactics and Equipment* (London, War Office, 1951), p.222.
11. *Handbook on German Military Forces* (Washington: US War Department, 1990(1945)).
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13. Ellis, pp.203-204.
14. OP. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945* (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer, 1960), pp. 126-132.
15. Oliver Haller, "The Defeat of 12th SS: 7-10 June 1944," *Canadian Military History*, Vol.3, No.1 (Spring 1994), p.20.
16. Quoted in Haller, p.23.
17. Haller, p.24.
18. Quoted in Haller, p.23.
19. Michael Reynolds, in *Steel Inferno: 1 SS Panzer Corps in Normandy* (New York: Sarpedon Books, 1997), describes the defence of Bretteville and Norrey as "one of the finest small unit actions of WW II." See page 85.
20. Pemberton, p.222.
21. *Ibid.*
22. See, for example, Eisenhower, p.381.
23. George Kitching, *Mud and Greenfields: The Memoirs of Major-General George Kitching* (St. Catharines: Vanwell, 1993), p. 188.
24. David Fletcher, *The Universal Tank: British Armour in the Second World War, Part 2* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1993), p. 100.
25. quoted in D'Esté, p.338.
26. Roman Jarymowycz, paper to the RMC Military History Conference, March 1997.
27. Hasting, p. 189.

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