

1996

Book Excerpt: *The Guns of Normandy: A Soldier's Eye View of France*

George G. Blackburn

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh>



Part of the [Military History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Blackburn, George G. "Book Excerpt: *The Guns of Normandy: A Soldier's Eye View of France*." Canadian Military History 5, 1 (1996)

This Feature is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Book Excerpt

The Guns of Normandy *A Soldier's Eye View of France*

George G. Blackburn

Editor's Note: Everyone who studies the land battles of the Second World War knows that artillery was the principle weapon employed by the Allied armies, but the gunners rarely receive the attention they deserve in narratives of the campaign. George Blackburn has written a book, The Guns of Normandy which restores the gunners to their rightful place. CMH is proud to publish two chapters from this book and to announce that our Autumn issue will include an excerpt from Mr. Blackburn's forthcoming sequel. Chapter 15 takes up the story on 12 July 1944 as 4th Field Regiment is committed to support 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade west of Caen.

Chapter 15

"ARE THOSE OURS?"

Undoubtedly the battery commanders and troop commanders were thoroughly briefed before they and the infantry moved in here to take over from the British units.¹ But you, having received no information on the tactical situation on your way up, can only guess what has been going on up here from the shattered debris and the stench of decaying flesh. Dozens of animals and more than fifty German and British unburied bodies lie scattered about the immediate area. According to the map, the road just beyond the low stone wall that marks the front of the position is a principal thoroughfare leading from Evrecy, hidden away about eight kilometres on the right, to Caen over on the left, some four kilometres northeast of here, passing through the tiny hamlet of Le Mesnil on the way.

If that road wasn't dominated by German fire and you could drive up the gently rising ground on your right about three kilometres, you would

have the best view in any direction of the countryside around here, for you'd be on the crest of a broad hill of mostly open slopes, distinguished on the map by the figure 112 printed near an oval contour line at its summit, denoting its height above sea level in metres (about 373 feet). Obviously, whoever holds the summit dominates the countryside for miles around, including the village of Maltot, reputedly harbouring a nest of Tiger tanks, just out of sight in the valley down in front. And judging from the number of burned-out hulks of Shermans, Churchills, and self-propelled M-10 guns littering the wheat fields just across the road in front and up the slope on the right, the British made heroic efforts to do just that. But their efforts had been in vain, for their FDL (forward defended line) marked on your map board with a red chinagraph pencil, is only part-way up the northern slope, well down from the summit and the 112 contour line.

But what does the enemy hope to accomplish with his extraordinary expenditure of ammunition on Eterville and vicinity?

The fact this is a salient may be explanation enough, attracting showers of high explosive to ensure it is not used as a springboard for another

1. At the very least they would have been aware of the attempts by the Germans to wipe out this bridgehead over the Odon, for even as the Royals were being briefed on the morning of July 11 for their takeover up there that night, the SS were in Eterville engaging the Cameronians in such ferocious close fighting that one hundred of them would die in the lanes, the churchyard, and the orchards of the village before they retired.

Allied drive for the Orne. Or it could be that the Germans are engaged in a softening-up process, the prelude to a major attack designed to wipe out the salient.²

Whatever the enemy's intentions, the constant bombardment is having an effect. You are haunted by Major Whitley's description of the Highlanders' condition when relieved by the Royals, some of them having to be led out of their trenches by the hand after only a couple of days here. And you wonder about the condition of his own men after two and a half days of cowering in holes in the orchard under those flimsy mounds of brush. You are a witness to the fact that the commanding officer of the Royals back at tac headquarters has lost touch with reality after the same length of exposure to the bombardment. And two of the best-trained, most highly motivated, self-possessed, and disciplined troop commanders in 4th Field asked for relief after only about thirty-six hours of it.

How much more can Whitley himself endure? Certainly he is showing signs of extreme physical and nervous exhaustion – his outsized preoccupation with snipers trying to pick off officers, for instance. When he leaned over to rip off your epaulettes, his eyes bulged so far out of his head they threatened to fall out on his cheeks, and they wore a fixed and angry stare.

From Whitley's bearing, you know he is the type of man who under normal conditions would be meticulous about his appearance. But now, sans epaulettes, sans tie, sans well-blancoed web belt and pistol holster – unwashed, unshaven, his tousled hair spilling down beneath the headband of his steel helmet, and his web anklets riding around backwards on the top rim of his boots – he certainly would confuse any German sniper trying to locate the company commander with his telescopic sights.

But in spite of all this, he's still very much in control of himself and his company, and you find

his domineering manner and his snarling advice – proffered like royal decrees – strangely reassuring.

In contrast, his second-in-command, Capt. Bob Rankin, almost bubbling with energy, shows no sign of being affected in any way by his experiences up here. At least not until mid-afternoon, when returning in his jeep from Battalion with a load of small-arms ammunition, he chooses to “tweak the nose of the devil” in a most irrational way. With a perfectly good, hidden, route up from tac headquarters available to him (the same one you'd used to get here), he elects to emerge in no-man's-land somewhere down in the west end of Eterville. Roaring up the road in front of the position in full view of the enemy, he attracts a string of mortar bombs that land one after the other just behind the tail of his vehicle as he wheels it in and disappears in the orchard behind the bunker. The straining jeep engine and the mortar bombs have barely stopped before you hear Major Whitley calling, “Foo! Foo!”

When you report to the bunker, he tells you that on his drive back Capt. Rankin located the observation post for the German mortars and can point it out to you. This sounds pretty exciting, until he tells you that it should be treated as a “Victor Target.”

As you follow Rankin to the front of the position, you begin to think: surely Whitley was joking? You most certainly hope he was! Two hundred and sixteen guns on a German OP?

At the stone wall you expect Rankin to stop, but no, he vaults over it and positions himself in the middle of the sunlit road. And when you join him, facing southwest up the road towards the rising ground of Hill 112, dotted with burned-out Churchills and Shermans, he points out one of these derelicts about a thousand metres away, halfway up the slope, directly in line with the road. You expect he's going to use it as a reference point, but he assures you with the utmost conviction that the silent blackened hulk is the enemy OP.

2. Historian of 2nd British Army (quoted in Report No.58, Historical Section (G.S.) Canadian Army Headquarters, Dept. of National Defence, p.45) unwittingly offers an explanation for the relentless bombardment of Eterville when he explains that Maltot had been made untenable to Allied attackers because of the number of German weapons sited just over the Orne on the dominant Verrières Ridge, including “not only a large number of flak guns (88's) defending the city of Caen, but a formidable concentration of multi-barrelled mortars....At all events they were able to achieve with them something

dear to the heart of the staff college student, but so difficult to carry out in practice - denying a locality to the enemy through fire power; Maltot was that locality.” Now, if true of Maltot, it should have been equally true of Eterville only a kilometre away and within range of all those same guns and mortars. Thus it would seem clear that the Germans' bombardment of Eterville and vicinity by guns, mortars, and sometimes planes, for eight days or more, was an attempt to use this “fire power” to render that village untenable.

Not wanting to prolong this conference out here in full view of the enemy, but terribly curious, you ask how he discovered that Jerry is occupying that tank?

His tone in replying suggests you must be stupid if you have to ask. "Didn't you see those mortar bombs landing right behind my jeep all the way down the road?" he says. "Well, where the hell else could that OP be except right out there? So there's your Victor target. Go get it."

Of course you tell him a Victor target isn't possible, explaining it would involve every gun in the Corps – nine regiments of 25-pounders, plus the mediums, and perhaps a regiment of heavies. Surely he can see few targets would ever justify that.

He's unimpressed: "When they sent us up here, they promised us we would have the full support of the Corps artillery, and that we could call for a Victor target whenever we needed one."

You agree. Unquestionably that is true, but only when needed.

"Well," says he resignedly, "what in hell can you fire on it?"

You should tell him the truth, that it's only a one-gun target, but you don't dare, he might develop apoplexy. You assure him there'll be plenty of shells.

"Then get on with it," says he, and whirling around, as though he has suddenly lost interest in the whole business, he hops back over the wall and goes trotting back towards the bunker, leaving you feeling very much alone, very naked and very vulnerable.

Suppressing mightily the feeling you've been conned into a farcical situation by a bomb-happy man, you establish as quickly as possible the map reference of that damned tank, which is relatively easy, it being on the side of the hill in direct line with the road that bends right just before reaching it. You call over the wall to Elder, now jammed in a very small trench with the remote control he's managed to drag over here, "Able Troop target – map reference 985638 – right ranging – fire!"

All you want is to see one round. If it lands anywhere close to that damned tank, you'll go into "fire for effect" – maybe five rounds gunfire – enough to satisfy Whitley and Rankin that you've shelled the stupid thing. While you have to wait no more than a minute or so, it seems interminable out there on the road.

Estimating the range from gun to target at about 4,200 yards, you figure the shell will take about eight seconds to come up from the gun when it does fire.³

And when at last you hear Elder calling out the message he's received from the guns, it sounds like: "Shot – four thousand." Meaning, of course, the range at which the shot was fired.

You start counting to yourself, "Hippopotamus one, hippopotamus two, hippopotamus three..." Before you reach seven, there's a sizzling overhead, and before you can get your glasses up, wham, there it is, an orange flash in the middle of a violent puff of rolling smoke very close to the tank. As you do a running vault over the wall, you call to Elder, "Five rounds gunfire – fire!"

Kneeling down just inside the wall, waiting, it feels so safe and secure, you decide there's no way you're going to go out there again. Somehow they let you get away with it once, but luck like that can't last. Anyway, there's no point in making corrections if the fire is off the target; it's only a dead pile of scrap steel.

But when you hear the guns thumping, you've got to see those shells land, and the only way is to jump back out onto the road. You go down on one knee and get the tank in your glasses just in time to see the shells bursting all around it. No correction is needed – in fact you almost imagine a couple of rounds hit it, not that that would make any difference to the empty derelict.

Satisfied, you take the wall in a running leap back into the orchard and join Elder in his cramped trench.

When, after a minute, the firing stops, you immediately give the order "Repeat!" as though the target really means something. A head pokes up from a hole nearby and asks, "Are those ours?" When you assure him they are, he yells, "Give 'em hell, Foo!" This seems to arouse others, and by the time the second bombardment is completed, you have come to realize that these are the first Allied shells these guys have heard being fired on their behalf since coming up here. This is confirmed by their platoon commander, an unusually tall and thin lieutenant, who, standing up for a brief moment and waving a long arm in your direction, introduces himself as Len Gage.

3. At Charge III, a 25-pdr shell, leaving the muzzle at 1,460 ft per second, takes 2.05 seconds to travel 1,000 yds.

Apparently there has been a total lack of close-in targets, and harassing fire tasks are so far away and impersonal that all they've heard are hundreds of enemy shells and mortars seeking them out to kill or maim them. Now, for the first time hearing their shells working for them, they call out to each other and to you in a kind of ecstasy. Until now you've heard no sound of human voices among the trenches in the orchard except periodic calls for stretchers. Suddenly there is a veritable hum of voices.

Encouraged, you decide to invest another forty shells in a morale-boosting effort: "Ten rounds gunfire – repeat!"

The effect on the men of your random shelling of that silent tank might at first be described as "being beyond all expectations." But as things develop a more accurate description might be "astonishing," followed by "incredible – beyond belief," ending up "bizarre" – even "frightening."

A goodly number of A Company, particularly members of the nearby Gage platoon, shower you with compliments – some of them even getting out of their holes to come right over to your trench and call down at you, "Nice shootin', Foo!"

Over and over, you advise them to get back in their holes, that you've done nothing but shell a dead tank and the mortaring is bound to start again any minute. But they don't pay any attention to you; it's obvious they don't want to believe you. Right from the start of the shoot, the infantrymen seemed convinced that something good must come from all those reverberating roars out there in no-man's-land, where the 25-pounder shells were landing just beyond their view. So when the shelling stops and quiet reigns over this section of the front, they aren't at all surprised. And while you and Elder, with your remote control box and cable, scurry back to your own, less cramped trench near the big shell hole, they sit up above ground chatting.

Five minutes go by, then ten, then fifteen, and still no enemy mortars or shells. Half an hour of unnatural peace passes. By now it seems most of A Company have climbed out of their holes and gathered around stoves improvised out of empty hardtack tins cut in half and filled with sand saturated with petrol (from God knows where, maybe from a spare jerrycan on the jeep) and are boiling water like mad for tea while simultaneously heating cans of meat-and-vegetable stew in it.

While your intellect roundly condemns these reckless activities, which now and then send tell-tale wisps of black smoke eddying skyward over the stone wall, your less highly disciplined stomach begins to growl noisily in appreciation of the delicious odours drifting your way. Neither you nor Elder has had anything to eat since yesterday afternoon. He volunteers to go back to the carrier and see what he can rustle up. He's barely out of sight when Lieut. Gage carries over a mess tin loaded with steaming stew.

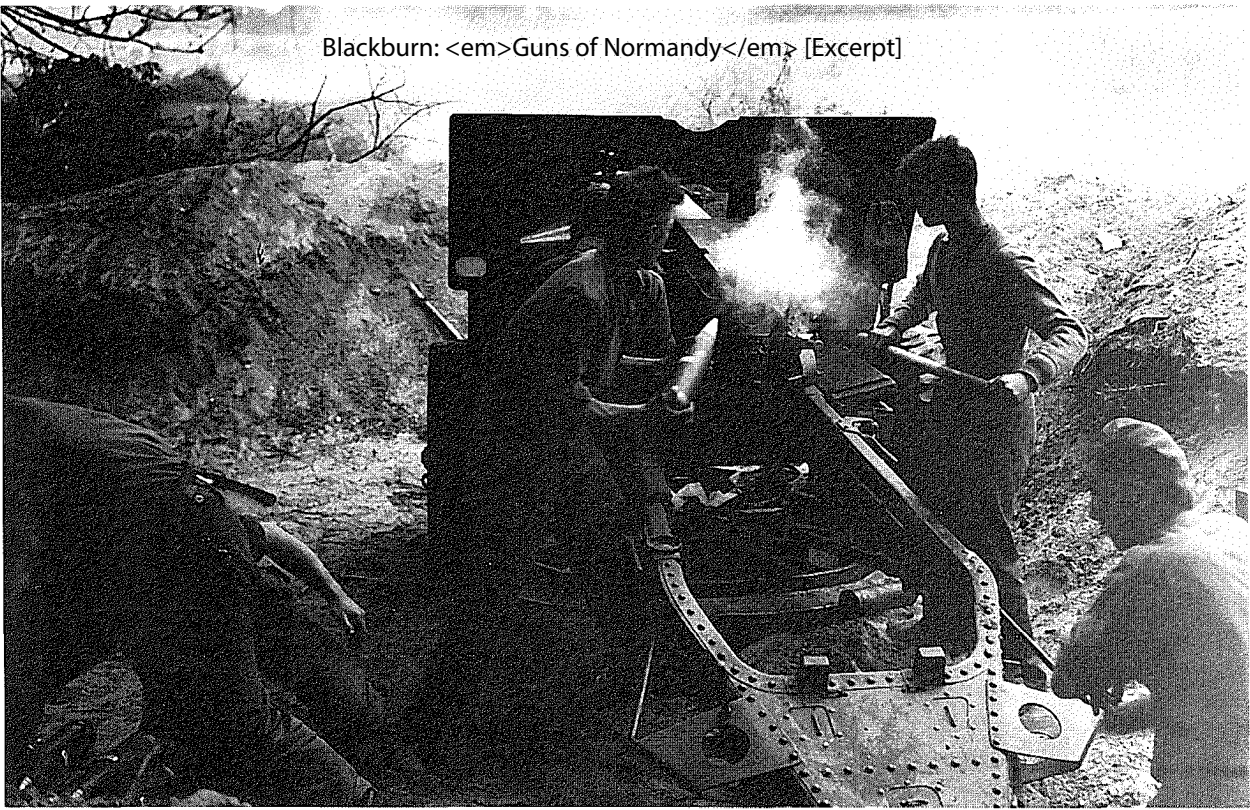
When you protest that you mustn't eat their food, explaining your signaller has just gone back to the carrier to get you something, he assumes you are lying and firmly insists you eat it, stating most emphatically, "You've bloody-well earned it!"

This is terribly embarrassing, and you tell him so. All you did was drop a few shells around a stupid, burned-out tank simply to humour a bomb-happy captain with too vivid an imagination, who chose as his *bête noire* one derelict tank out of all those derelicts lying about in the field and up the slope out there. It's all utterly ridiculous. Surely he can see that. And it's very dangerous for his troops to be wandering around above ground, so would he please get them back in their holes before Jerry starts shelling again.

Hunkering his tall frame down beside your trench so he can look you directly in the eye, Gage speaks with deep conviction: "Look, my friend, all I know is that from the time we came up here around midnight three days ago we've been shelled and mortared almost steadily. And whenever they left us alone for a few minutes, they shelled the troops next door. Now, ever since you worked them over out there, it's been quiet. And see those guys eating over there? They're having their first hot meal in three days. Now if your shelling didn't do this, what the hell did? You explain it."

Well, of course, you have no explanation. But you know there has to be one, and that it hasn't anything to do with you. It's as though you're sitting in the eye of a hurricane, waiting for the fury of the storm to resume.

Later you realize that if you'd carried that analogy of the lull before the storm to its logical conclusion, you might have come up with an explanation for the break in the shelling and mortaring: Jerry was preparing to attack.



Chapter 16

THE GUNS

It comes in just as the sun is going down, beginning with a flurry of mortars, 88-mm airbursts, and a hail of machine-gun tracers lacing the orchard. The tracers are coming from the right front, but from some distance away, judging from the faintness of their staccato *bur-rup, bur-rups*, barely distinguishable among the hammering Brens and mortar explosions over on the right. And it's clear the tracers, streaking mostly through the upper remnants of the trees, are originating from a point much lower than the orchard, probably from that skinny copse some 400 yards south of here, Just east of the road you earlier studied while waiting for your rounds to land - a good forming-up point, providing a concealed route almost right up to the village.

On your map you find a DF (defensive fire) target marked precisely where you want to bring down fire. But when you pick up the remote microphone to call the guns, it's dead - the line again cut by a piece of mortar or shell. Scrambling out of your hole, you run crouched over as fast as you can back to the carrier and huddle down tight against its steel flank, just outside where Kirby is sheltering. Kirby's ears are covered with

big, puffy earphones, and you have to tap him on the shoulder. When he uncovers his left ear, you give him the DF target number and the order "Fire!" for transmittal to the guns. In an incredibly short time of less than a minute, shells are rustling overhead, and a great furore of overlapping, roaring explosions starts roaring up from the area of the copse. But even as you relish the response of the guns, it dawns on you with a sickening shock that in the heat of the moment you forgot that only a brigadier and up is allowed to fire a DF target.⁴

God! What will they do to you? Something severe, unquestionably. Under present conditions,

4. DF targets are pre-selected "defensive fire" areas that seem most vulnerable to attack. All the technical work at the guns is done in advance, so that predicted fire (not needing correction by observation) will be forthcoming with maximum speed and accuracy. Scale and rate of fire on a DF task is three minutes "intense" for field regiments (five rounds per gun per minute, or 360 rounds per regiment), and three minutes "rapid" for medium and heavy regiments.

To prevent the enemy drawing fire by feints and thus learning the artillery defensive fire plan, only a brigadier or higher rank is allowed to fire a DF target.

with so much at stake, they'll be ruthless. But surely they wouldn't go so far as to cashier an officer for this, would they? You force yourself to stop thinking about it. Later, you'll have time to worry - for now, there are more pressing matters.

You notice Kirby has an odd look on his face, and is shaking his head in bewilderment. Removing his earphones, he tells you there's a strange voice on the net calling for the guns to stop firing and hands you the earphones, with dangling mike attached, so you can listen.

Putting them on, you hear, "Hold your fire, we don't need it." Depressing the presser switch on the mike, you demand, "Identify yourself Who are you?" But the voice ignores your request, and keeps repeating: "Stop the artillery, we don't need your fire. Stop your fire, we don't need it," until all the required shells have been fired. Again and again you try to get him to say who he is, but he refuses to acknowledge you, either during the shoot or after. And you and Kirby are convinced he is a Jerry trying to disrupt the defensive fire.

The machine-gun fire doesn't die immediately, but by the time you have repeated the DF target a second time (having decided it can't get you into any more trouble than you're already in), nothing of any consequence is coming into the orchard. It's then that you sense someone is behind you. Turning around, you're amazed to find Stu Laurie there. He asks you where you've been dropping all that stuff, and you confess rather sheepishly that you were firing a DF task.

"Good gawd!" says he, "Which one?"

When you show him, he snorts, "That's not a DF task - that's an SOS task. It was a DF task, but they changed it."

Is he really sure?

"Of course!"

That would account for the speed of response by the guns to your call for fire. The guns always remain laid on the SOS target, considered the most likely route of an attack, when they are not otherwise engaged. The gun crews only have to load and fire when the SOS is called for, and it can be fired by a FOO. The relief that floods through you is so tremendous, you could hug Stu. Combined with the satisfaction at knowing your guns have just squelched an enemy attack of some consequence (no more tracers skitter through the trees, and the popping and chattering of small-arms fire down in the village seem to have

stopped) and the realization you are now free to go back to the guns, where you'll be able to stretch out for a few hours' sleep, your happiness borders on elation.

But this dissipates quickly when you discover that the vehicle that brought up Stu and his crew a few minutes ago, and which was supposed to have taken you and your crew back to the guns, has, in all the noise and confusion, turned around and pulled out while you and Stu were talking. It being a HUP (a soft-skinned, van-like vehicle of glass and sheet metal), you can readily understand the reluctance of the driver (Gunner Weston) to hang around waiting with all that stuff flying around the orchard. At least your crew got on board before it pulled out.

But now you are faced with the choice of walking back or staying here another night. With darkness falling, there really is no choice. To try walking back in the dark would be inviting disaster from those trigger-happy Royals at tac headquarters. The sounds of those clicking rifle bolts still ring in your head. Was that really only last night?

Your disappointment at missing the chance to get back to the guns is leavened by the reassuring knowledge that Stu is now responsible for whatever Whitley and company may require during the night. You can crawl in a hole and sleep the whole night through.

And as you realize you're free of responsibility, you are at once conscious of outrageous, staggering fatigue. After last night, even half a slit trench will be luxury, and there is always the big shell hole. But as you start to explain to Stu how you've acquired a really nice big slit trench, preferable, you think, to the big shell hole he had been using, he tells you that at night Whitley invites him to share the far end of the company headquarters bunker, and he thinks there's room enough in there for you, too. This sounds wonderful. Enclosed, with a thick earthen roof overhead, it will be not only safe, but obviously warmer than an open trench, which, you have learned since coming to Normandy, can become very cold and clammy by early morning, regardless of how hot it has been during the day.

However, at the bunker, Stu leads you to a second entrance that you weren't aware of, facing southeast in the direction of Louvigny. It's not much more than a crawl space, about four or five feet high and four feet wide, obviously designed

as an emergency escape route - a shallow, inclined tunnel apparently leading into the main part of the dugout. And the main dugout must be well-filled at the moment, for Stu, who settles in first, can only get far enough in to allow you to sit across the entrance, your back against one side and your feet against the other.

While your whole right side is exposed to the night air, and whatever the fates may choose to fling about here, the relaxing effect of extreme fatigue, combined with the psychological benefits of having a thick roof over your head and an old comrade beside you, overcomes any doubts you may have of your position. Even having to slap at the odd pesky mosquito suggests a modicum of normalcy, and you're surrendering to the sweetest of sleeps when Jerry starts lobbing over something of very large calibre - much heavier than anything he threw in here during the day.

They don't whine or wail like big shells, but sound more like giant mortar bombs. You only can guess that it's one of their larger-calibre Nebelwerfers firing their rocket-propelled mortar bombs (without their usual banshee-wailing devices), one bomb at a time instead of in six-bomb salvos, thus extending their supply of heavier bombs.⁵

You can hear each one coming from a long way off, growing louder and louder - sounding remarkably like a bus humming towards you at high speed on a highway while you stand at the side of the road. But just as the sound suggests it's going by, it lands with a wicked flash and a horrendous roar that makes the ground shudder and sifts sand from the bunker ceiling. And now and then one lands so close, you feel a stunning compression rather than an explosion. Some concussion waves are so strong, they actually lift you and shift you a little farther into the tunnel.

Despite this, you think you could sleep soundly if it weren't for the heels of Stu's boots scrunching and kicking you in the ribs. You're so tired nothing really matters any more, but he, cursed with alertness, having had several hours'

sleep back at Carpiquet, is nervous as a cat. You can't see him in the blackness of the dugout except when it's lit momentarily by a flash of high explosive in the orchard outside, but he seems to be pointed head first into the tunnel, crouching on his hands and knees. And when one of those big "express buses" starts humming this way, his feet start "digging" involuntarily - ever more vigorously as the sound grows louder - the soles of his boots grinding and banging your left hip and lower ribcage until the humming ends with a stupendous explosion.

Fortunately, his "digging" lasts only a few seconds, but no sooner has an explosion brought an end to it, than another "bus" can be heard humming this way. Then, after some ten or fifteen of them, they cease for a while. During the lull, Stu silently digs you in the ribs with an elbow to get your attention, then pokes you urgently in the chest with what turns out to be a water-bottle full of Drambuie mixed with whisky. Gratefully you take a slug, then nudge him to take it back, as you listen to Tom Whitley's voice calling into the dark orchard, and hear distant voices, barely audible, replying.

"Number One Platoon?"

"Okay."

"Number Two Platoon?"

"Okay."

"Number Three Platoon?"

No answer,

"Number Three Platoon?"

"Stretcher!"

After that you doze off until the "buses" start coming again and Stu starts digging and booting you awake. And when the bombardment ends, there's an elbow in the ribs and the same wordless ritual with the breathtaking water-bottle, while outside in the dark stillness, the Major's voice can again be heard checking out his platoons. Once more there's a plaintive call of "Stretcher!" announcing another wounded man. And this goes on throughout the night, causing you to ponder the selfless courage of the stretcher-bearers, carrying wounded men back through the menacing shadows to the MO at the battalion aid post.⁶

5. At this time in Normandy all three brigades of 272 Nebelwerfers (known to the troops as "Moaning Minnies") were deployed opposite the Canadians and British south of Caen. These fearful multi-barrelled (six to ten barrels) rocket mortars came in three calibres:

	<u>Projectiles</u>	<u>Range in Yards</u>
150 mm	75 pounds	7,300
210 mm	248 pounds	8,600
300 mm	277 pounds	5,000

6. On December 18, 1944, Pte. J. A. Smith was decorated with the Military Medal for his outstanding work at Eterville as a stretcher-bearer.



Stretcher-bearers might be described as ordinary soldiers equipped with a limited supply of bandages, sulpha, and morphine, and a minimum of training in first aid. However, ordinary men they are not. They are men of extraordinary, outsized courage, not only providing succour to the wounded, but by their very presence providing vital reassurance to all who must remain here through the night, and who may, at any moment, have need of their services. And beyond all this, by their hour-to-hour exhibition of courageous service to their comrades, they are unwittingly setting a standard of conduct for their company and their battalion which few will match, and none is likely to surpass.

In a hazy half-awake, half-asleep condition, you pass the nightmarish hours, until finally it is daylight and Jerry moves his attention to the flanks and the rear areas for a while.

Well fortified by the frequent passing of the communion waterbottle throughout the night, you decide to make your way back on foot to tac headquarters, calling up a vehicle from the guns to meet you there.

Later you'll be told that Tiger tanks accompanied last night's attack and remained

sitting on the flanks until well after dawn. But you neither see nor hear anything of them as you walk back through the first rays of the rising sun, past the fly-covered, mutilated dead horses, through the field of dead cows, and down the shady lane past the bodies in battledress and German grey, their upturned faces turning black from the blistering heat of the past few days.

At first it is a pleasant change to be free of the confinement of that bunker tunnel. But soon you wish you'd waited for a vehicle, for the odours hanging in the air of rotting flesh of animals and men, freshly desecrated by last night's shelling, are intolerable.⁷

7. Even after thirty years, Madame Restoux grimaced and wagged her head from side to side as she recalled for the author the day she and her family returned to their devastated farm at the southeast corner of Eterville on the road to Caen:

There were many, many dead Germans and Tommies lying around...and the 450 apple trees in our orchard were just so many sticks. Our first job was to bury our dead horses and thirty-five dead cows in the field behind the orchard. The smell was terrible. The bombardment must have been frightful ...the ground through the orchard was covered with jagged pieces of metal, and when the metal collectors came with baskets, they collected a wagonload of copper and brass fuzes.

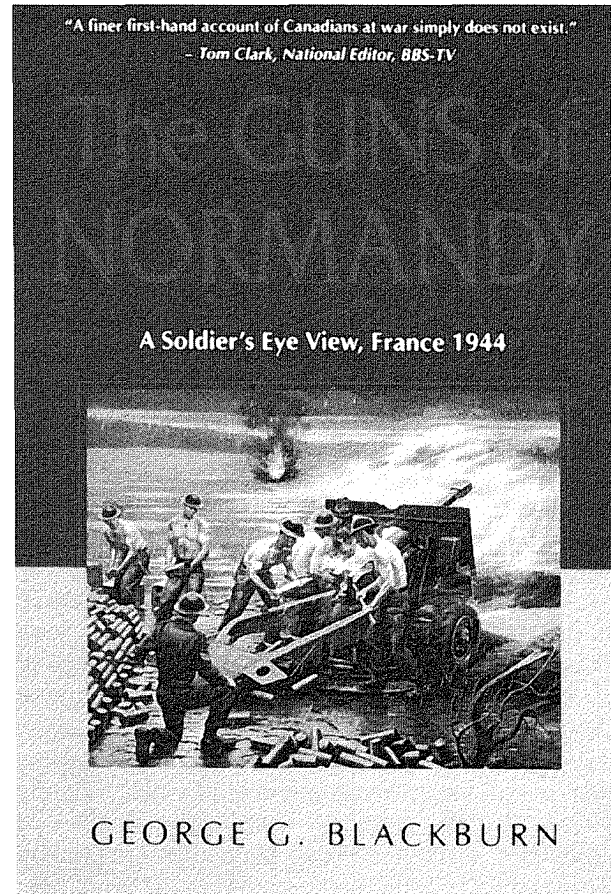
On arrival at Royals' tac headquarters, you discover your crew never made it beyond here last night. They arrived at about the same time as the German attackers were infiltrating through the village, and the Royals' sergeant-major drafted them to help defend the headquarters. Issued rifles and assigned holes close to the vehicles, they spent the night trying to spot and shoot Jerries out of trees on the perimeter of the field, where they'd placed themselves to shoot into the Royals' trenches.

On your way back to the guns with Weston in the HUP, which now sports a round bullet hole in the windshield directly in front of the passenger seat, you try sorting what you learned on your first tour of duty in an OP.

Even as you fight off nauseating waves of exhaustion from having been denied sleep for forty-eight hours, an overpowering sense of well-being surges through you - a mixture of relief, thankfulness, and pride that you came through it without coming apart at the seams. You now know that responding to the demands of the moment can mercifully keep a man from dwelling on survival. Sustained by a deep sense of belonging to a group and responsible for its collective safety - at least to the extent of holding your end up and conducting yourself in such a manner as not to bring danger to your comrades and disgrace to yourself - a man is encouraged to assume an aggressive spirit and posture. And while no sane man can escape suffering the agony of fear, you know that under certain conditions a terribly frightened man, quite illogically, will throw caution to the winds and give in to a burning desire to wreak vengeance on the enemy.

In a static position with no enemy in sight, however, survival is everything. You've survived to see the sun go down - but will you see it rise in the morning? You've survived to see the dawn - will you survive the day? Darkness has come again - will you survive the night? And so on. Is it possible it was only the day before yesterday you came up to the Royals, that fewer than forty-eight hours have passed while you were in that

godforsaken acreage of Eterville? Is not some new scale required for measuring the passage of time when you are visiting hell; when every minute is concerned with survival and you spend your time counting the number of seconds between the sound of the distant thump of a smoking tube and the arrival of its roaring missile; when your reactions must be in split seconds if you are not to die, and your greatest pleasure comes from hearing the buzzing of a fly and knowing you're still alive after the last lot? Are sixty seconds of this the same as a minute back in Canada?



George G. Blackburn, *The Guns of Normandy: A Soldier's Eye View of France* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995) \$34.99, 536 pages, ISBN 0-7710-1500-3.