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In Support of the Canadians A British Anti-Tank Regiment's first five weeks in Normandy

Tony Foulds

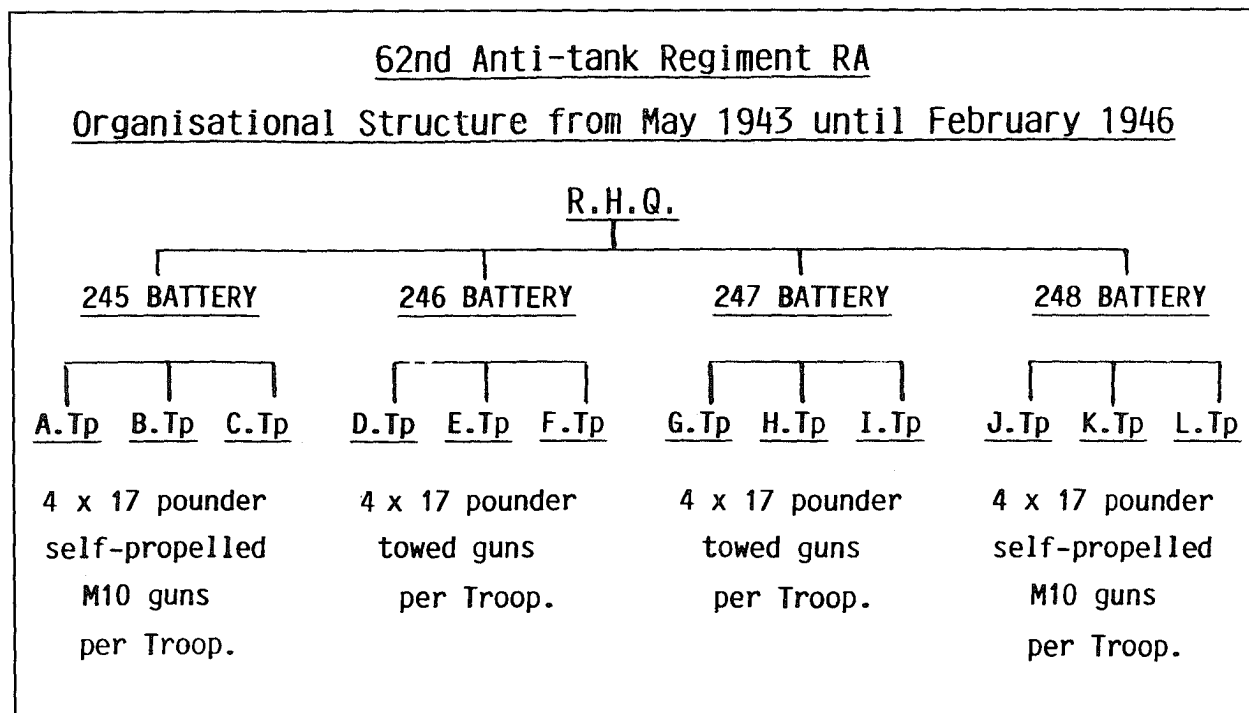
During a typical battle of the Second World War the average front-line soldier would have only limited knowledge of the forces that were deployed around him. He would, of course, be familiar with the battalions of his own brigade and would have come to recognise those units from his Divisional supporting arms that appeared regularly in the line beside him. Of intruders from more remote formations he probably knew little and cared less.

So it must have been for the men at the sharp-end of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division who served in Normandy in the early summer of 1944. The infantrymen from Nova Scotia, Manitoba, New Brunswick and other parts of Canada, along with the machine gunners of the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa, the anti-tank gunners of the 3rd Canadian Anti-Tank Regiment and the tank men of the 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade formed a close-knit fighting entity. It must have seemed to them that their battles were all-Canadian affairs, and to a large extent they were – but not quite. Elements from other formations were sent to join them from time to time and it occurred to me that the readers of this journal might be interested to know something about the experiences of a British Regiment whose units were closely involved with the Division during the first five weeks of the Normandy campaign.

The 62nd Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Artillery had been formed in London shortly before the outbreak of war and had spent four frustratingly long years learning to deploy and fire a variety of guns of steadily increasing power and calibre. By the spring of 1944 two of its Batteries (Nos. 245 and 248) had been equipped

with M-10 self-propelled 17-pounder guns while the other two Batteries (246 and 247) had been equipped with 17-pounder wheeled guns which they towed with modified Crusader tanks. It had also been appointed corps anti-tank regiment to Lieutenant-General J.T. Crocker's 1st British Corps with the role of providing mobile detachments of powerful anti-tank weapons that could be deployed to strengthen defences or, in the case of the M-10s, support offensives on any part of the Corps front. Because 1st Corps was one of the two British assault corps for the invasion of mainland Europe, men and vehicles had been engaged since the middle of 1943 in a succession of waterproofing, wading and embarkation exercises, firstly in Scotland and then on the South Coast of England. During final rehearsals landings were made at Studland Bay and Slapton Sands.

Towards the end of May orders came for the move into embarkation camps and there, securely enclosed behind barbed wire, the officers received confirmation that all four Batteries were to land on D-Day with the 3rd Canadian Division. Nos. 245 and 247 would initially play a fluid reserve role under command of the Divisional CRA [Commander Royal Artillery]; 246 and 248 were placed with the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade. Some of the individual troops of guns had already been allocated to specific Canadian battalions from whose commanders they were to receive their operational orders. Thus it was that 248 Battery's "J" Troop was briefed by Lieutenant-Colonel F.M. Matheson of the Regina Rifles while "K" Troop Commander attended the briefing given by Lieutenant-Colonel J.M. Meldram of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles. On the dummy maps used



during these sessions code names were substituted for actual place names, but it was not difficult to guess that the destination was to be Normandy. The full picture would not be revealed to Junior Officers and Other Ranks until after the invasion fleet had left port.

On the evening of 5 June, after a false start on the previous day, 245 and 246 Batteries sailed from Tilbury, 247 and 248 from Southampton and at various times on D-Day all arrived safely off the Juno sector of the invasion beaches.

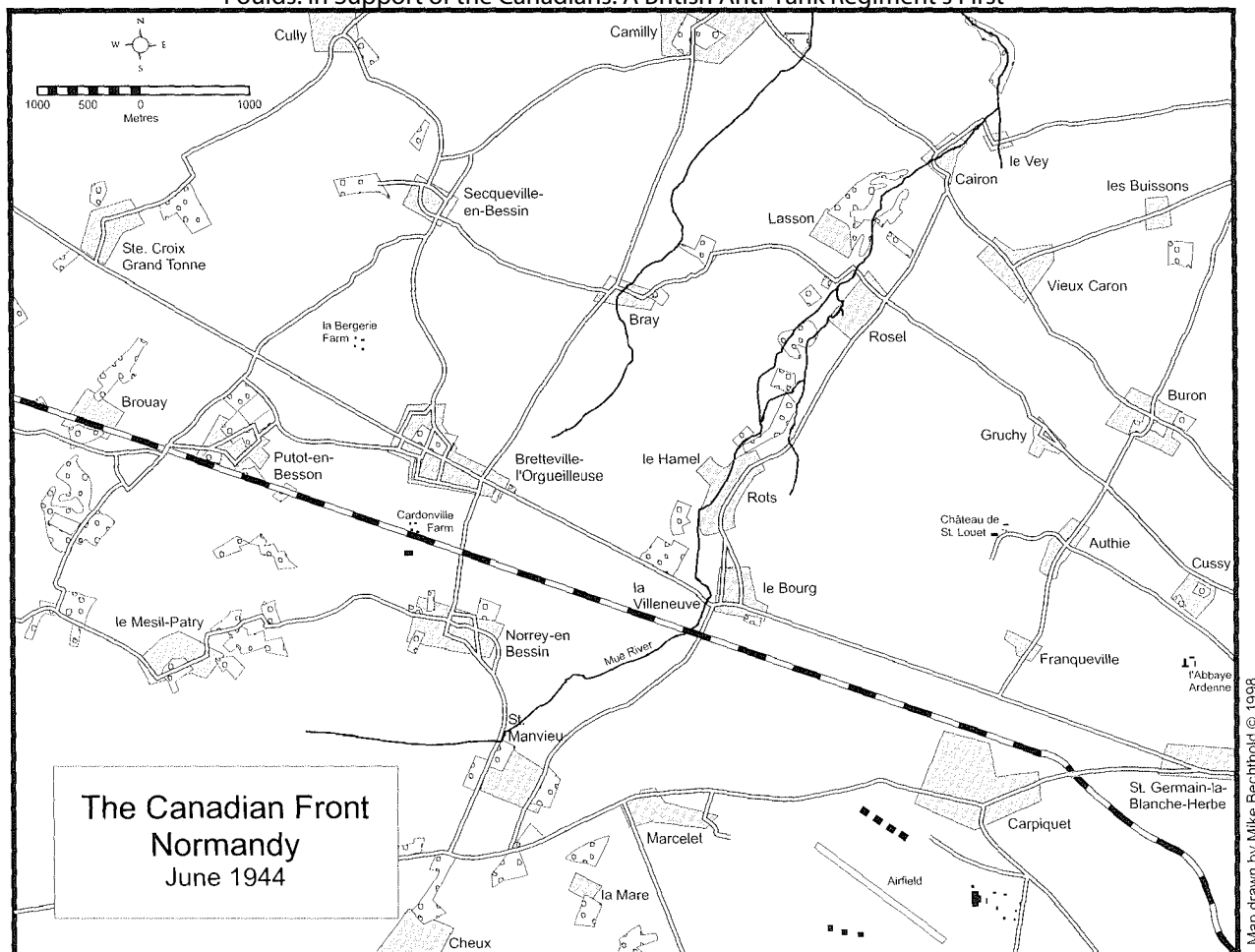
Anti-climax and frustration followed for the two Batteries in Divisional reserve as, largely because of massive congestion on and around the eastern Canadian beaches, their disembarkation was substantially delayed. 247 Battery did not get ashore until the afternoon of D+1 when two of their Troops of towed 17-pounders were hurried to the area of Villons-les-Buissons where they arrived too late to be involved in the 9th Brigade's first clash with the 12th SS Panzer Division that had taken place earlier in the day. In this locality they were destined to spend the next three weeks, uncomfortably shelled and mortared but not called upon to fire their guns.

245 Battery stood off the beaches for even longer and it was not until the early hours of D+2 that their LSTs eventually beached opposite Graye-sur-Mer and their 12 M-10s moved up to

a reserve position on the Reviere-Tailleville road. Within 24 hours of landing the Battery had been transferred to the eastern sector of the bridgehead where, in support of the 3rd British and 6th Airborne Divisions they were to spend an eventful four weeks before making a dramatic return to the Canadian sector for Operation "Charnwood" on July 8th.

Things went more smoothly on the 7th Brigade front where 248 Battery was able to get two Troops ashore on Mike Red Beach in the early afternoon of D-Day. "K" Troop touched down first at 1500 hours, two hours later than planned owing to difficulties with the Rhino ferry that was to carry them the final mile from the LST to the beach. By this time the leading elements of the Brigade were about three miles inland and the Beachmaster's staff hurried the SPs across the sands and through the gap in the sandhills with scant courtesy. One hour later they reported to the Headquarters of the Winnipegs and were assigned to the support of "A" Company with whom they spent a slightly nervous first night ashore. At 0500 hours the following morning "A" Company pushed on, with "K" Troop's four 17-pounder M-10s in close attendance, and shortly after 1000 hours they reached the battalion's objective at Putot-en-Bessin, a small village just beyond the Caen-Bayeux section of the N13 highway nine miles inland. Here the Troop's guns were promptly deployed covering the lanes that passed under

Foulds: In Support of the Canadians: A British Anti-Tank Regiment's First



the elevated railway line which crossed the Battalion's front. Later in the day the Canadians' own 6-pounder wheeled guns arrived to take over the position and "K" Troop withdrew to Battery reserve a mile and a half away.

The experiences of 248 Battery's "J" Troop had been similar to those of "K" Troop. They had landed in the late afternoon of D-Day and on the following morning pushed forward with the Regina Rifles Regiment to that Battalion's objective at Bretteville-l'Orgueilleuse. That evening, as Canadian guns took over the protection of the village, they were moved, together with the newly-landed "L" Troop, to strengthen the Brigade's long thinly held left flank which had been dangerously exposed by the 9th Brigade's setback at Authie and Buron during the day.

Because the speed of the 7th Brigade's advance had also out-stripped that of the British 69th Brigade on their right, the openness of that flank was an additional cause for concern and it was in this area that the gunners of the 62nd

Anti-Tank Regiment were shortly to fight their first action.

This fell to the lot of the recently-landed 246 Battery. They had arrived off Mike Red Beach at 1400 hours on D-Day, but had been stood off, bombed in the night and not put ashore until 1730 hours on D+1. Twenty-four hours later than scheduled they finally arrived with their twelve 17-pounder towed guns at the 7th Brigade area where "F" Troop was despatched to provide further strengthening for the long left flank, "D" Troop was sent into Bretteville and "E" Troop was assigned to support the Canadian Scottish Regiment on the Brigade's right flank. Here on the evening of D+1, in a small wood (Map Reference 907735) slightly to the northwest of La Bergerie farm, "E" Troop added their four 17-pounders to a defensive outpost consisting of a platoon of the Canadian Scottish, a platoon of machine guns from the Cameron Highlanders and a troop of 6-pounders from 94 Battery of the 3rd Canadian Anti-Tank Regiment. The group spent a restless night listening to sounds of battle coming from Norrey and Putot where the Reginas



Author's Collection

M-10 17-pounder self-propelled anti-tank gun.

and Winnipeg were beating off a series of attacks by Panzer Grenadiers from the 12th SS Hitler Youth Division. At about 0945 hours on the morning of D+2 an enemy force of nine tanks and supporting infantry appeared. They had crossed the railway line to the west of Putot and now, at a distance of about 1200 yards, they commenced plastering the wood with machine gun and mortar fire. Two of the 17-pounders and two 6-pounders soon had them in their sights and opened fire. In the ensuing fight four enemy tanks were destroyed but the defenders also suffered substantial losses. When the two 17-pounders that had opened the engagement had been knocked out "E" Troop commander, Lieutenant Gerry Blanchard, assisted by Lieutenant Ray of the 3rd Anti-Tank Regiment, collected one 17-pounder and one 6-pounder from the rear of the position under intense fire and brought them into action. After resiting various anti-tank and machine guns to improve their field of fire and taking steps to deal with the dead and wounded, the "E" Troop commander set about reorganising his own crews. Serious casualties had depleted their ranks and for a time he was laying and firing one of the guns himself. The position was heavily mortared and machine gunned throughout the morning and early afternoon but the remaining German tanks did not resume their attack. By 1630 hours the action had died down and the battle had been won. That night's war diary reported "E" Troop's casualties as four killed, seven wounded and two missing. Lieutenant Blanchard was subsequently awarded the Military Cross for his part in this affair.

While this action was taking place on 7th Brigade's right flank a much more serious battle was being fought a mile away in the village of Putot where the Royal Winnipeg Rifles, their numbers already much reduced by heavy losses sustained during the D-Day assault, were being steadily overwhelmed by two battalions of Panzer Grenadiers. By mid-afternoon three of the four companies had been surrounded and most of the village was in enemy hands. Preparations for a counterattack were hurriedly made and at around 2030 hours the four companies of the Canadian Scottish advanced towards Putot from the direction of La Bergerie farm. They were accompanied by flank guards of tanks from the 6th Canadian Armoured Regiment and by the four 17-pounder M-10s of 248 Battery's "K" Troop who advanced immediately behind the leading companies. After a fierce struggle, during which the infantry suffered severe casualties, the village was regained and "K" Troop's guns were deployed along a section of its forward edge, covering the railway line. The enemy made no attempt to return after darkness had fallen but it was apparent from the noise of battle that vicious fighting was continuing not far away. The Troop commander spent much of the night with a Canadian lieutenant who appeared to be the only surviving officer of his company. Together they sorted out the wounded from the dead, both Canadian and German, and lined up the wounded along a hedgerow to await eventual collection by medical jeeps. In response to this officer's request, arrangements were made for the Browning machine gun on one of the M-10s to be fired intermittently throughout the hours

of darkness to give his men some relief. June 8th had been a long and painful day for the infantry. The Canadian Scottish had suffered 125 casualties and the Winnipeg a further 256.

Some of the noise heard by "K" Troop during the night had come from the neighbouring village of Bretteville where the Regina Rifles were being attacked with great ferocity by armour from the 25th Panzer Grenadier Regiment led personally by the infamous Colonel Kurt "Panzer" Meyer. After several hours of confused fighting, in the course of which 3rd Canadian Anti-Tank Regiment destroyed six enemy tanks, the assault was finally repulsed. Gunners from 246 and 248 Batteries of the 62nd Anti-Tank Regiment who were deployed on the Brigade's open flank behind Bretteville were well within earshot but not close enough to be brought into the action.

Two days later, on 11 June, tanks from the 6th Canadian Armoured Regiment, carrying infantry from the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada, made their courageous but ill-conceived charge across the front of 7th Brigade's forward positions in an attempt to capture the village of le Mesnil-Patry. The attack was repulsed with heavy losses and there were fears that the enemy would take advantage of the confusion to launch a sharp counterattack. The three Troops of 248 Battery were rushed to the villages of Norrey, Bretteville and Putot but the expected assault did not come.

After the battle of le Mesnil-Patry the offensive drives of both sides in the Canadian sector

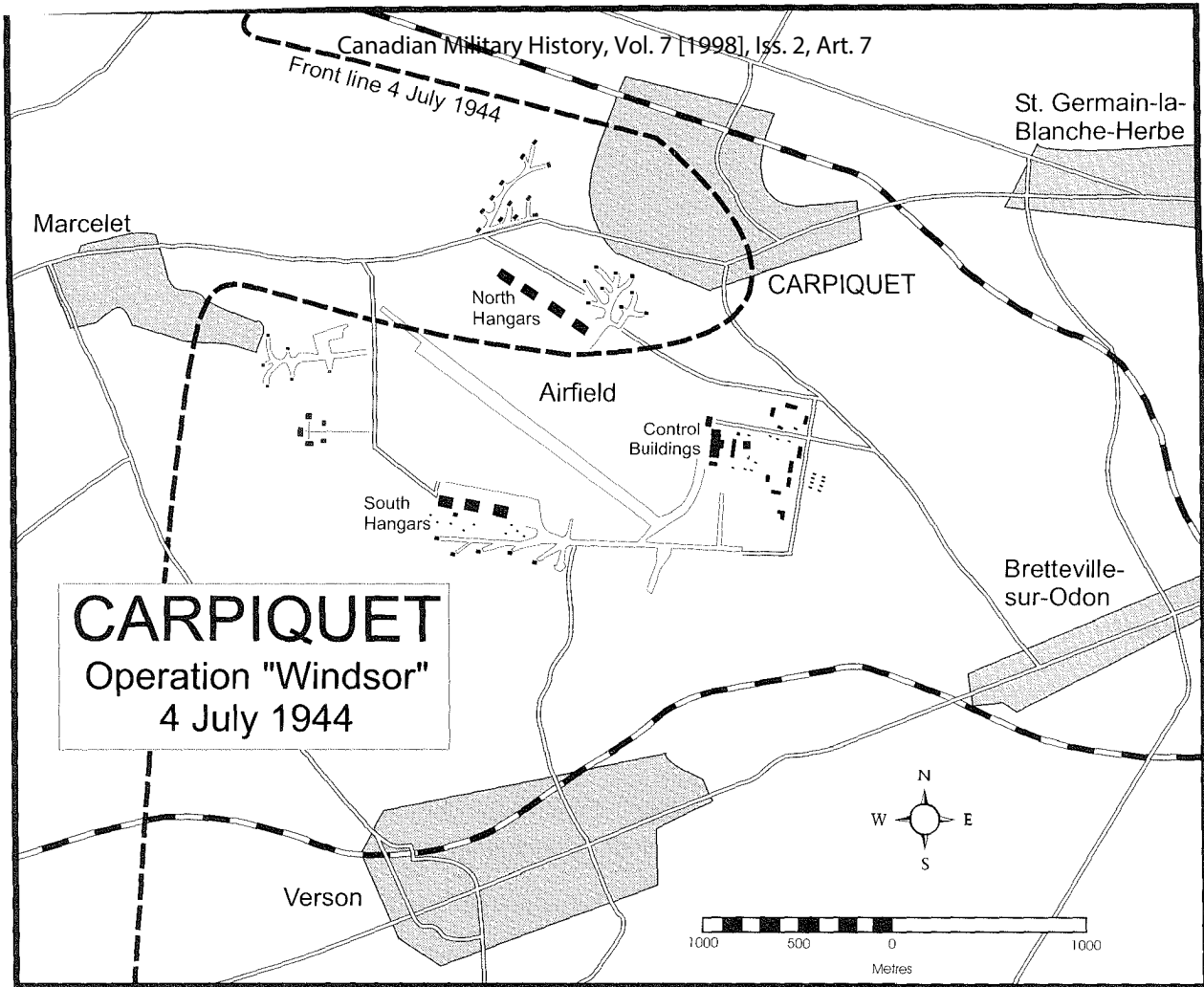
petered out and were followed by a three-week period of relative calm. 246 and 247 Batteries remained with the Canadian 7th and 8th Brigades but 248 Battery was transferred to the 3rd British Division front where it was involved in the bloody battle for the Château de la Lande on 27-28 June and knocked out its first enemy tank.

On the night of 3 July elements of 246 and 248 Batteries joined a seemingly endless column of Canadian armour and infantry that wound its way southwards from Bretteville through the burning villages of Norrey and St. Manvieu towards the startline for Operation "Windsor" – the attack on the village and airfield of Carpiquet. This was to be launched from the area of the devastated hamlet of Marcelet which had been captured by the British 43rd Division during Operation "Epsom" a few days previously. "E" and "F" Troops of 246 Battery were to support the Canadian 8th Brigade in its assault on Carpiquet village and the northern buildings of the airfield. 248 Battery's "K" Troop was once again with the Royal Winnipeg Rifles who, for this operation, had been placed under command of the 8th Brigade and given the task of occupying the group of large hangers on the south side of the runway. The German gunners had had plenty of warning of the impending attack and had plotted every yard of the ground that was likely to be involved. They kept up a steady bombardment of the village and woods of Marcelet throughout the night and when the Allied rolling barrage commenced at 0500 hours the following morning they brought down a

A 17-pounder towed anti-tank gun in Normandy, likely belonging to 62nd Anti-Tank Regiment.



NAC PA 128793



Map drawn by Mike Bechthold ©1998

deluge of shell and mortar fire as the attackers crossed the startline. The ordeal of the North Shore Regiment, the Régiment de la Chaudière and the Royal Winnipeg Rifles as they struggled forward across open cornfields against well prepared positions has been well documented in Canadian military history. "E" Troop followed the Chaudières into what was left of Carpiquet village and its 17-pounder guns were deployed along the southern edge. In the course of a subsequent counterattack by enemy infantry and armour Sergeant Miller, who had already been credited with the destruction of four enemy tanks at La Bergerie farm, engaged and almost certainly destroyed an 88 mm gun. For the next five days the gunners of "E" Troop remained in the village, sharing with the Canadians the unpleasantness of being stuck out in a narrow salient and subjected to a continuous bombardment of well-aimed mortar fire.

248 Battery's "K" Troop set off from a startline on the far side of Marcelet and followed the Winnipegs and a group of Sherman tanks and Crocodile flamethrowers up a mile-long

slope of fire-swept country towards the South Hangars. Many of the defenders were ensconced in concrete pillboxes which had been constructed for the airfield's protection long before the time of the invasion. Reaching a wooded area on the high ground not far short of the objective the Troop commander deployed his four 17-pounder M-10s with two guns supporting the leading companies and two slightly further back. Repeatedly during the day the Winnipegs endeavoured to get onto the airfield and on two occasions elements of their forward companies actually reached the first of the hangars but after their accompanying armour had suffered losses and been drawn back they were unable to hang on. Casualties mounted steadily and a decision was taken to withdraw part of the battalion into a copse west of the hangars. At this point communications became confused and for a time "K" Troop's leading M-10s were left alone in uncomfortable isolation. Eventually it became apparent that the stubbornly defended South Hangars were not going to be taken that day with the forces still available and at 2100 hours Brigade ordered the Winnipegs and their



CFPU PMR 83-756

Though from many angles the M-10 looked like a tank, it was not. It had less armour, and was very susceptible to infantry attack and air bursts due to its lack of a turret roof.

supporting arms to return to the startline. "K" Troop was instructed to cover the retirement.

The writer has vivid personal memories of two insignificant events in which he was involved that night back in poor smouldering Marcelet. In the first of these he was hailed by his colonel who was standing in the main street beside a burning cottage talking to General Crocker. It was flattering to be asked by the Corps Commander for an account of what had taken place up near the South Hangers during the day – but it is doubtful whether any particularly useful information was provided! The second recollection is of standing at the edge of the village in the semi-darkness talking to an RC chaplain, presumably from the Winnipeggs, and then watching him set off by himself back up the slope towards the airfield looking for any wounded who might still be out there -an act which seemed to the watcher to be both highly dangerous and deeply impressive.

"Windsor" was only the preliminary phase of the much larger three-divisional Operation "Charnwood" that was to be launched four days later against the solid ring of defences

surrounding the city of Caen. In preparation for this offensive the 12 self-propelled 17-pounder M-10s of 245 Battery had been brought back from the far side of the River Orne where they were replaced by the less mobile towed guns of 247 Battery. 245, who had accounted for four enemy tanks while serving with the British 6th Airborne and 51st Highland Divisions, were now to fight their first battle alongside the Canadians. 248 Battery, on the other hand, learned to their disappointment that on this occasion they would be working with inexperienced elements of the newly-landed 59th Division. Their unhappiness was reflected years later when one of their Troop commanders wrote: "I missed my friendly Canadians."

On the evening of 7 July the gunners of 62nd Anti-Tank Regiment were among the thousands of Second Army men who watched with awe as a stream of RAF heavy bombers dropped their loads onto territory they were expected to occupy on the following day. It was good for morale but, sadly, did more damage to the unfortunate city of Caen than to the German perimeter of fortified villages that had first to be overcome.

Two Troops of 245 Battery had been attached to the Canadian 9th Brigade and at 0730 hours on the morning of 8 July they crossed the start-line near les Buissons behind the Highland Light Infantry of Canada and advanced towards the heavily defended village of Buron. After a fierce and costly struggle the HLI established a hold on the greater part of the village and shortly after 0900 hours the M-10s were able to move through the rubble strewn streets to the forward edge where they then deployed, with "A" Troop covering the southern and western approaches and "B" Troop facing southeast. Not long afterwards the barrage of incoming shell and mortar fire grew heavier and a counterattack was launched by the German armour. In the course of this a battlegroup of 20 to 30 Mark IVs and Panthers moved across the front of the gun positions and in the ensuing action 13 enemy tanks were destroyed before the remainder withdrew to the southeast. This was perhaps the most celebrated British anti-tank engagement of the Normandy campaign, but the victory was not won without cost. By the end of the encounter six 17-pounder M-10s had been put out of action (four were later recovered), two officers and four other ranks were dead and a further six men had been wounded. Later in the day the three guns that were still serviceable joined the North Nova Scotia Highlanders as they passed through Buron and advanced to Authie where they were deployed along the left flank of the village. At 2200 hours the remnants of the two Troops were withdrawn to the north of Buron for maintenance and reorganisation. A Military Cross was subsequently awarded to the Battery Commander and Military Medals to two of the gun sergeants in recognition of the parts they had played in this battle.

While all this had been going on the Battery's third Troop, which had been allocated to the 7th Brigade for the offensive, had followed the Canadian Scottish Regiment into Cussy and engaged several enemy tanks but without achieving any decisive result.

Although elements of 246 and 245 Batteries moved forward again with the 7th and 8th Brigades on the next day, and "K" Troop of 248 Battery provided support on their left flank from St. Contest which had eventually been taken by the 59th Division, none of their guns were brought into action. After a hard fought battle, in which the 3rd Canadian and 59th Divisions had each sustained more than a thousand casualties, Operation "Charnwood" had achieved its objective and the city of Caen had finally fallen.

The writer, who with 248 Battery, had been involved in 59th Division's assaults on la Bijude and Epron on 8 July, visited the site of 245's engagement on the following day and viewed the battlefield with mixed emotions. Any elation that stemmed from counting the burnt out wrecks of 13 enemy tanks was soon tempered by the scene of carnage which encompassed each and by the sadness of the loss of two troop commander friends and their men. Of the seven officers of this Battery who had landed in France, three were now dead and one missing.

The 62nd Anti-Tank Regiment would meet up again with the Canadians later in the campaign, but for the time being their Batteries were dispersed to the support of other Divisions and other Corps and this eventful, but little known, association of the first five weeks was over.

Tony Foulds joined the 62nd Anti-Tank Regiment as a subaltern in the summer of 1943 and served with 248 Battery during the first seven weeks of the Normandy campaign. He was wounded at the beginning of August and spent his twenty-first birthday and much of the next two years in military hospitals. He subsequently completed his military service as a Staff Captain at a home-based headquarters.