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D-Day at Bernières-sur-Mer

The 5th Bn, Royal Berkshire Regiment

Gordon Blight

Editor's note: Canadian visitors to Bernières-sur-Mer are frequently puzzled by the name of the main street leading from the beach to the village church. The signs read "Rue Royal Berkshire Regiment." Who were the Berkshires and why such prominence in a Canadian landing area? C.P. Stacey's official history has no listing for the regiment. Copp and Vogel ignore them in Maple Leaf Route: Caen as does Reg Roy in 1944: The Canadians in Normandy.

The British official history is almost as silent except for a single chart on "Initial Beach Organisation" which lists "8 Kings and 5 R Berks" as the Beach Groups for 7 and 8 Canadian Infantry Brigades. We are also told that "each beach group contained units of the Royal

Engineers, the Royal Army Service Corps, the Royal Army Medical Corps and other specialist formations, and a specially trained battalion of infantry whose commander was the beach group commander. The main task of the infantry was to provide working parties for the specialist units...but at first most of the beach battalions were involved in fighting to subdue enemy posts which had not been cleared when the assault battalions moved inland." (L.F. Ellis, Victory in the West, Volume 1 (London: HMSO, 1962), p.218.) What follows is the D-Day story of the 5th Battalion, Royal Berkshire Regiment taken from their regimental history, The History of the Royal Berkshire Regiment (Princess Charlotte of Wales's) 1920-1947 by Brigadier Gordon Blight.)

The day broke, grey and louring. The men ate their breakfasts, while in some sectors ships cruised slowly round or anchored to wait for H-Hour. The coast was now discernible as a thin line drawn along the horizon, and the sea heaved wickedly for those who were not good sailors.

The ships swung round in the growing light. Assault boats were lowered, and at the appointed time men went over the side and scrambled down the draped nets, or slid down canvas tubes, into the flat bottomed landing craft. The naval bombardment of enemy gun positions began, and then, suddenly, as if propelled by a single source of power, the first assault waves were off towards the shore. There were four or five miles to go over a roughish sea. The troops eyed it with distaste as hillocks of grey-green water bore down upon them, threw them over a shoulder, and racing on left them to the next. The pills taken against sea-sickness failed to contend with the tea and the hard-tack biscuits that most men had found enough for breakfast. The planners who had provided grease-proof paper bags were more than justified.

As the shore loomed up, a church spire and odd isolated houses, seeming unnaturally tall, stood out above the haze. Here, there, and further inland, thick black columns of smoke pillared into the sky. Quick-firing Oerlikons and other guns on the landing craft began to fire with a worrying din, and the troops, numbed and drenched, forgot the tossing sea.

On approaching the shallows, soundings were taken by some of the ships wallowing in the surf; others raced through as if trusting in their speed to avoid submerged obstacles. As yet no German fire reached out to them and they were untouched. In spite of the smoke that shrouded the shore, they began to see objects ahead in detail. To the left unharmed houses stood above a sea-wall; in front was a beach backed by sand-dunes, among which bursting shells, momentarily lit by a lick of flame, hurled their jagged mass of metal into the air. The ratta-tat of machine-guns and a crackle of rifle fire sounded away to the right. There was a sudden crash as a mine went up. Then, as one man described it:



On D-Day, soldiers from the Royal Berkshire Regiment landed immediately behind the Canadian assault troops. Their task was to provide local security on the beaches, and assist the myriad tasks taking place – supply, medical, PoWs, etc. The Berkshires were easily identified by the white band on their helmet. Here some Berkshires can be seen helping to create access off the beach at Bernières while landing craft disgorge their cargoes.

Photo by Ken Bell, NAC PA 128791

The middle compartment of the ship began flooding almost at once, driving the men aft. We helped the wounded as best we could, and were thankful the ship did not sink. Presently a “frogman” broke the surface of the sea, swam round a little and disappeared. He was fixing us up I supposed. A feeling of complete unreality came over me, as if I had nothing to do with it all; that I was merely an onlooker and not very much interested.

At last they ran ashore. Down went the ramps. Men jumped into the water waist high, glad of a firm footing once more. They began wading towards the beach. There were bullets now, coming from no one knew where. One went straight through a haversack, drilling a neat hole in everything, and leaving its owner speechless with rage, not caring at all about his escape. On they went hurriedly, through a litter of rubbish floating on the tide, just as if a picnic party had passed that way, and a moment later they stepped ashore. They had landed, and that for the moment seemed the only thing that mattered.

The sector of the assault in which the battalion were concerned extended east and west of the seaside village of Bernières-sur-Mer, on the coast of Calvados. The battalion was among the first ashore. The leading troops were met by the cross-fire of machine-guns hidden in the sand-dunes, the shelling of mortars, and the more distant artillery. As men fell others stepped up and forced their way forward through the barbed-wire entanglements, across antitank ditches, into Bernières, 400 yards ahead. The battalion reconnaissance sub-units, following after, fought for their positions on the beaches, against the enemy posts left by the assault troops whose job lay ahead.

Nothing that day stopped the battalion. Each of the defences was attacked in turn, with grenades and bayonets, and its garrison was killed or taken prisoner. As A company fought their way up the beach, they were halted by an enemy stronghold. Remnants of a Canadian platoon lay scattered on the sand. Lieutenant C.I.



Photo by
F.L. Duberville,
NAC
PA 136280

German PoWs are watched at the point of a bayonet by a Canadian soldier and a British MP in front of one of the many resistance points at Bernières-sur-Mer, while in the background soldiers from the Royal Berkshire Regiment tend to the wounded.

Spackman, with two sections, worked his way towards the German pill-box responsible for the damage. There was little cover. With two non-commissioned officers he crawled towards it. As they reached the post the Germans began to throw grenades: one, well aimed, caught and wounded the two men. Lieutenant Spackman went on alone.

Another grenade fell near him but failed to explode. There was no time to lose. He sprang from his position, and before the German machine-gunner could fire he shot him with his revolver and charged the post. Those remaining in the garrison, apparently flabbergasted by the fury of this young officer, put up their hands and surrendered. Using them as guides, Lieutenant Spackman next cleared an intricate network of

underground defences. In all, he captured twenty-six prisoners.

From the first the regimental pioneers were busy removing mines from the shore and the road nearby. Within an hour of landing, Beach Group Headquarters was established in a concrete shelter marked by a flag and the "China Dragon." The medical officer, Captain L'Etang, with ten men, set up an aid post in the dunes. It was the first medical station to open; and soon the battalion stretcher-bearers began to bring in the wounded they had collected under fire a mile away.

As the companies cleared their areas, the group specialists began to work. The Royal Engineers laid Somerfelt tracks to carry heavy

motor traffic over the sand. Bulldozers tore down obstacles and flattened sandhills to make a passage through to the country behind. The battalion mortar, carrier and anti-tank platoons undertook the defence of the various stores area, where they defeated the straggling attempts at infiltration made by the enemy, before they could make a serious threat to the supply lines. The ferrying of men, tanks carriers, lorries, stores and ammunition from the craft waiting off-shore began before noon. Coming away from the ships in a continuous stream they moved quickly up the beaches and disappeared inland.

Snipers were troublesome throughout the day, until they were eventually detected and destroyed. In the afternoon the beaches were bombed; and at night the raids increased. In spite of the enemy's rain of destruction, mainly directed at the shipping lanes, the work of unloading went steadily on.

As a result of orders received shortly before midnight, certain elements of "B" and "C" Companies moved forward into the line. Their job was to cover the left flank of the Canadians who were forming up for an attack. After a forced march of five miles the companies made contact with the North Shore Regiment. They took up their allotted positions, where they remained until the following day. On return to the beaches shortly before noon, they at once resumed work.

The tasks of the battalion became increasingly varied. Large numbers of prisoners of war arrived, for whom there was no immediate interrogation service. The Intelligence Section undertook the work, classified information, and forwarded that of value to the right quarter. Refugees, still in their night attire, huddled on the railway station, as if awaiting a train. They had clearly become a battalion problem, or at least no one else seemed concerned. A woman spy was caught, and suspected "fifth-columnists" were arrested. The battlefield was cleared, the dead buried, and the defences kept alert; and all this time the clearing of the ships continued unceasingly, with men working in shifts that left little time for sleep.

During the first morning the wind, dropping a little, continued to whip the surface of the sea. It still caused anxiety – but worse was to follow. A fortnight later a tempest arose, and for 72 hours it raged unabatingly. Craft of all kind were

driven ashore and wrecked, and the "Mulberry" harbours were severely damaged. Most of the American ports were out of action altogether, but at no time on the battalion sea front was unloading entirely stopped. When the amphibious vehicles known as "ducks" (DUKWs), were unable to reach the ships, unloading continued from coasters, which were beached on the turn of the tide. Losses due to the storm almost reached 20,000 vehicles and 140,000 tons of stores.

The continued interference by the enemy was of course only to be expected. Shelling was spasmodic, but with well-camouflaged trenches close at hand the battalion went almost unscathed – except in a daylight bombardment which caused casualties among the pioneers. Air-raids, often carried out by single machines working in relays, were a nuisance that mostly occurred at night. Anti-aircraft fire from naval ships anchored off shore, and a balloon barrage, usually kept the planes sufficiently high to do little damage. Attacks by low-flying fighters at tree-top level were more serious affairs. On one such occasion headquarter area was enveloped in a sheet of flame started by a blazing ammunition lorry; a hurried evacuation took place without mishap.

Difficulties of this sort caused little delay in the battalion's work. Soon after landing they were unloading 4,000 tons of stores a day; later they achieved 7,000 tons during the twenty-four hours. At the end of the task on August 26th, the records showed that they had unloaded, transported, and stacked 319,980 tons in spite of wind, weather, and an active enemy. So the first weeks of the landing passed with the 5th Battalion toiling unceasingly to provide the stores for the great offensive that was in progress.

The general plan, after establishing and linking together the various beaches, was to draw the German 7th Army to the British left flank, and there to accomplish its defeat. The strategical aim was to allow the Americans to break out to the west and the south, and after wheeling to drive on Paris and the crossings of the Seine. The plan was successfully carried out in stages that ran ahead of their programme. By mid-August the battle of Normandy was won, and the Allied armies were advancing everywhere. Now, there was no longer a need for beach groups. The port of Cherbourg was open, and the work of the battalion was at an end.