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"In the Eye of the Storm"

A Recollection of Three Days in the Falaise Gap, 19-21 August 1944

Arthur Bridge

These are the memoirs of a Canadian infantryman who was involved in, and survived, the battle of the Falaise Gap, the final phase of the Normandy Campaign, in August 1944. He was a rifleman of 14 Platoon, "C" Company, the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders of Canada. In the author's own words this account, "is not intended to represent me as being heroic. Far from it. I was terrified most of the time in battle, and eventually ended up a couple of months after St. Lambert as a battle exhaustion casualty. There's nothing heroic about that. It just happened that I was in St. Lambert at that time, not realizing the importance of the situation until reading about it much later. We low rankers seldom knew what was going on, where we were, where we were going, or what to expect when we got there. It has only been since the war, and with the help of history books, that I have been able to retrace my steps through the campaign and to put names to the places that had no particular meaning at the time - just another place to run in, dig in and prepare for the counterattack."



The Argylls were part of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division, which went to Normandy in July 1944 and relieved the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division just south of Caen. In the battles of early August the Argylls slowly pushed south through the wheat fields, and a determined enemy, suffering heavy casualties in the process. It was obvious that the Normandy campaign was nearing completion, with the American Army running wild further south and west. But the Germans were not giving up easily. As the situation developed, the Americans were advancing northward, and the Canadians were heading south trying to link up and trap the enemy in a massive pocket. The enemy was trying to escape through the few miles that separated the Americans and Canadians, the so-called Falaise Gap. In the centre of the Gap was the small village of St. Lambert-sur-Dives, squarely astride the Germans' main escape route. It was within this context that the events recalled below took place.

On 18 August 1944, we found ourselves dug in along a road somewhere southeast of Falaise, a short distance from a crossroad the Germans were using in their efforts to escape from the closing jaws of the Allied pincers attempting to close the Gap. The crossroad was under heavy attack by "Tiffies," Typhoon fighter-bombers armed with 20 mm cannons for strafing, and rockets for tank-busting. They operated very simply from our point of view. From their vantage point in the sky, they could spot their targets - trucks, tanks, wagons, men - and then dive towards them firing their cannons

or rockets. As they pulled away, they left death and destruction in their wake. Needless to say, we on the ground were very fond of these fly boys and had a lot of respect for them, especially given the hot and heavy reception they received from German machine gunners.

After more or less enjoying the show for several hours (the Germans did not know we were so close by and did not bother us), one of the Tiffies was hit as it tried to pull out of its dive; we could see that its engine had been knocked out. Fortunately, the pilot had enough

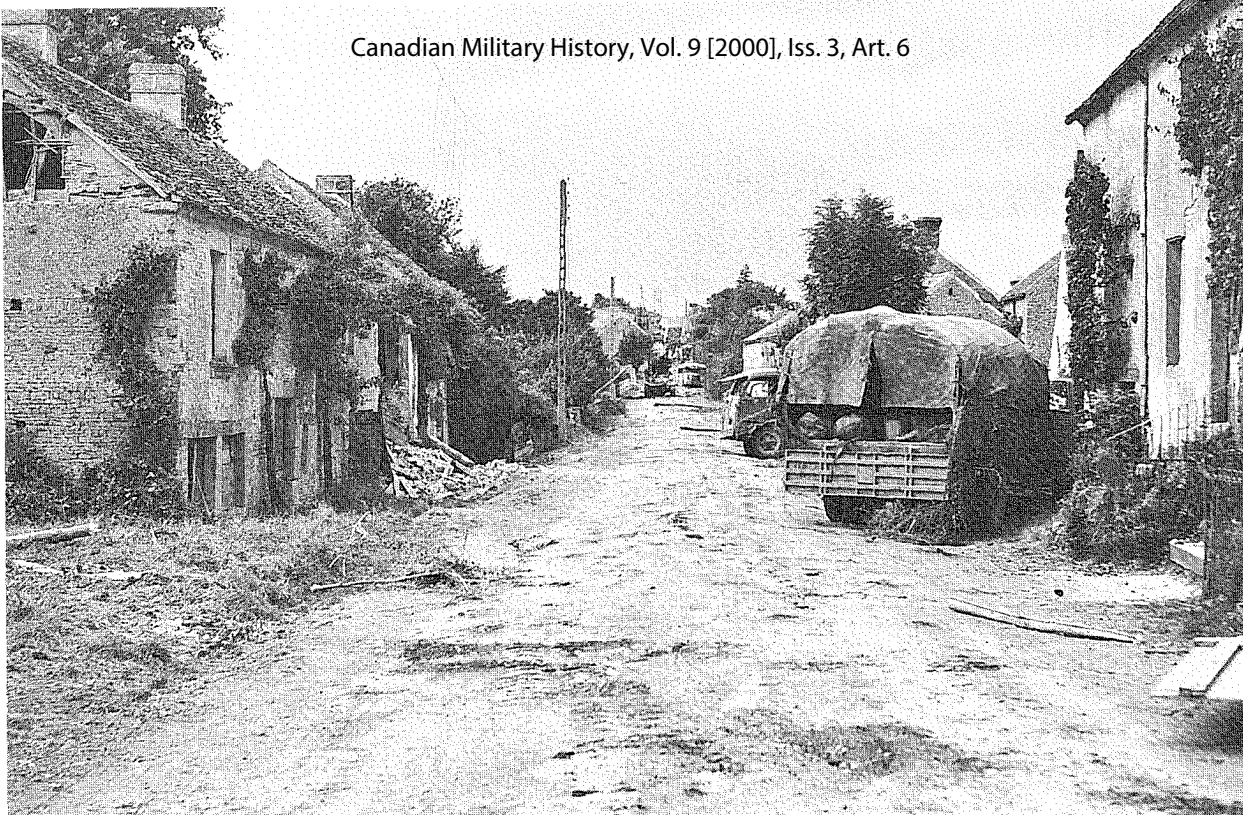


Photo by D.I. Grant, NAC PA 152373

Looking north along the main road through St. Lambert-sur-Dives, 19 August 1944. In the foreground can be seen some trucks belonging to the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. At the top of the photo a column of German troops is visible marching up the hill to a PW cage, being escorted by soldiers from the Argylls.

momentum to keep his plane in a glide, but a crash-landing seemed imminent. That pilot was one cool customer, because he knew he was headed for the deck and trouble, but still managed to bring the aircraft down at about 150 miles an hour and guide it smack into a haystack that brought him to a very abrupt but safe stop. He ended up about 100 yards out in front of our slit trenches, and it was obvious that he needed help. A couple of our guys galloped over to his aircraft and were pleasantly surprised to see the lid open up and the pilot's two arms sticking up in the air. He thought they were Germans! He was unhurt, so the guys brought him back safely to our trenches. He was one happy airman! It turned out that he was a Canadian too, Royal Canadian Air Force, from Winnipeg, if memory serves.

The Germans saw all this and did not take too kindly to it, as they began to lob mortar bombs at us. This can be a very unpleasant experience on the receiving end. Our newly-rescued airman, who had been shot at all day and finally shot down, and barely saved from a fatal crash by a haystack, didn't like the mortar bombs at all. In fact, he was heard to say, "Let me out of here and back in the air where it's safe!" He would have made a lousy infantryman!

We continued our march south to Trun where we spent the night, and the next day, 19 August, we found ourselves in the midst of the area our air forces had been shooting up. Such a mess cannot be described: smashed cars, trucks, guns, tanks, wagons, horses, men in every road and field. Late that afternoon we prepared to move once more, as usual not knowing where or why. As it turned out, we were destined to spend the next few days and nights in the tiny village of St. Lambert-sur-Dives.

"B" Company of the Argylls and a squadron of tanks from the South Alberta Regiment (SAR) had fought their way into St. Lambert, which was about a mile down the road from where we were, but had run into heavy opposition and were stalled. We were going in to reinforce them. Having been provided with a strong tot of army rum, we blissfully fell in and followed our company commander, Major Gordon Winfield, through the fields, down the lanes and, just as it was getting dark, into St. Lambert itself. It is a small village of typical Norman stone houses and out buildings on either side of the main road which runs about 400 yards from one end of the village to the other. There were a few farm buildings set in off the road. We met up with our comrades of "B" Company and the South

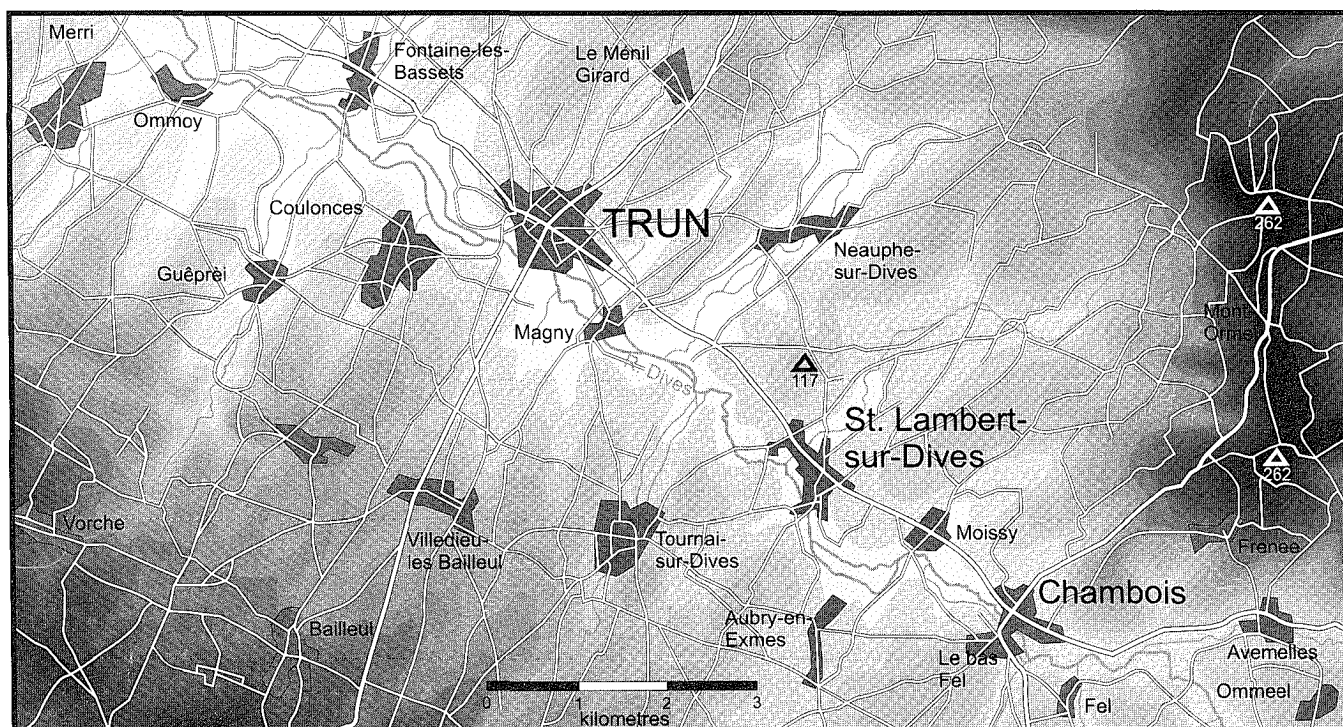
Albertas in the village, which was under shell fire and already crowded with German prisoners. Otherwise, the situation was relatively peaceful. The South Albertas had several tanks well sited to cover the prisoners, who seemed to be quite content to be out of the fight. One of them had a concertina and as we passed he was playing the hauntingly beautiful "La Paloma." To this day, whenever I hear that tune the memory of that evening comes flooding back.

"B" Company was holding the houses at the extreme south end of St. Lambert, and for some reason we kept going down the road, out of town, towards Chambois which is about a mile and a half further on. By now it was quite dark. The glare from burning houses and vehicles that had been knocked out along the road provided us with some visibility. Since we had not been made aware of the gravity of our position, we were having a ball scrounging through the trucks along the way, with no particular feeling of concern (the rum, perhaps?). We had covered half the distance to Chambois, to a hamlet called Moissy, when a machine gun opened up on the front of the column. We were spread out single file, and the company commander and two or three others were hit by this burst. As the firing continued and we couldn't tell where it came from, we took to the shelter of the ditch and started shooting back at the unseen enemy, who were obviously close by as they began throwing

hand grenades at us. One grenade fell among several of us in the ditch and exploded, making a lot of noise but causing little damage.

With the CO out of commission there was considerable confusion in our ranks. Nobody seemed to know what was going on, so we simply lay there in the ditch for a while, as Company Sergeant-Major George Mitchell and our platoon officer, Lieutenant Phil Whitehead, tried to figure out what to do next. Ants from a disturbed anthill made waiting uncomfortable.

Finally, when the shooting let up we took off through a farmyard into an orchard a couple of hundred yards off the road, where we took up positions and waited some more. It had been a long day and weariness took its toll. I fell asleep lying there in the dark. Not for long, though. There were Germans all about, and we nabbed a few prisoners right there in the orchard. Eventually, we decided that we would return to St. Lambert and rejoin "B" Company and the South Albertas for the night. We headed back, but not on the main road we had gone up, but by way of a small lane leading back into town. The lane had been selected by the Germans as a place to park their tanks for the night, and it was an eerie feeling to be slinking by them in the darkness. They didn't cause us any trouble though, apparently thinking we were Germans too!



Map drawn by Mike Bechthold © 2000

St. Lambert-sur-Dives



Photo by D.I. Grant. NAC PA 116586

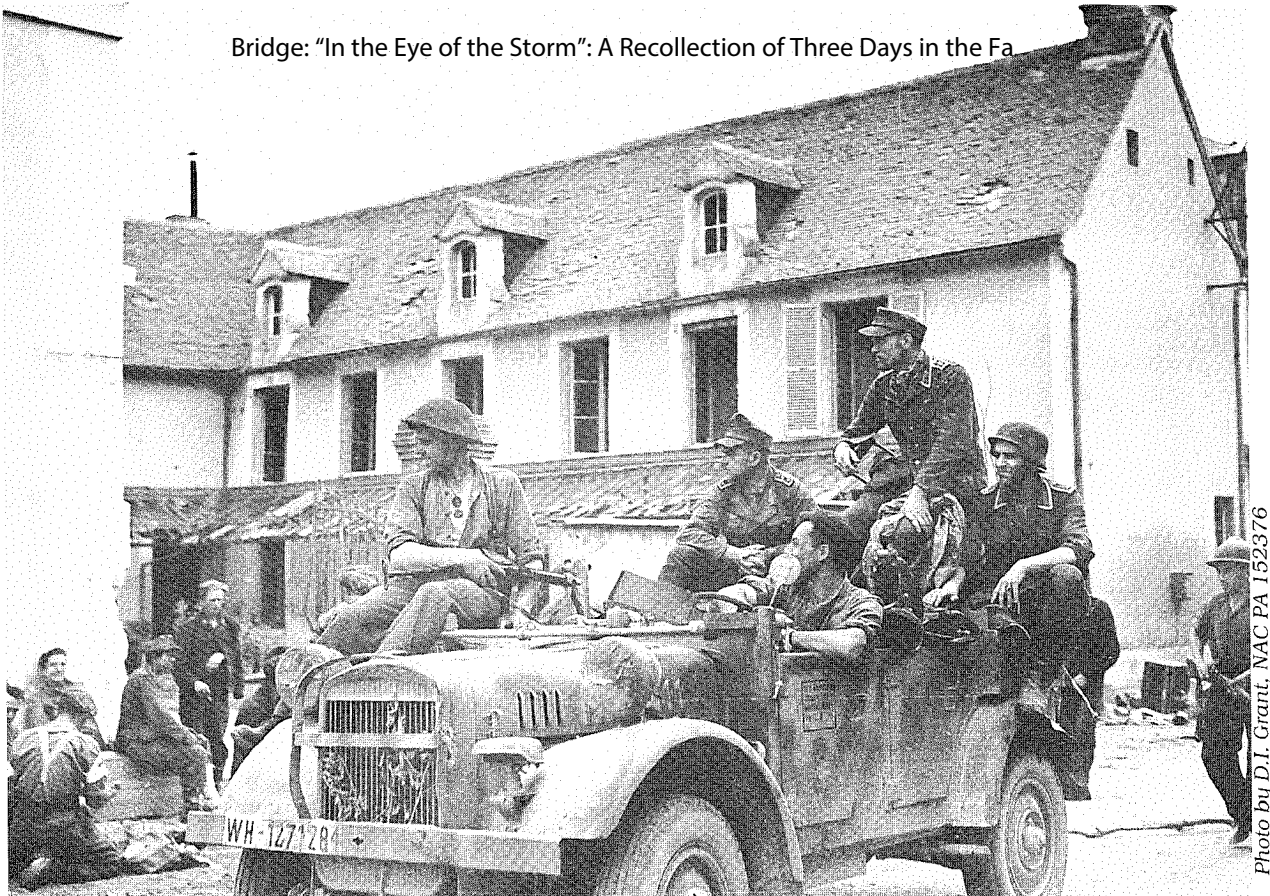
A column of German troops captured by "B" Company, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders in St. Lambert-sur-Dives, 19 August 1944.

We reached the relative safety of St. Lambert without further incident and took up positions in the houses at the south end of the village with "B" Company and a bunch of their prisoners. We didn't know at the time the significance of St. Lambert, situated as it was directly in the centre of the ever-narrowing German escape corridor. There were thousands of Germans in various stages of organization and disorganization struggling to get through, and we were right in their way. Confusion reigned supreme. For example, our section moved into a house and took positions in the ground floor windows covering the main street. During the night one of our boys went upstairs to look around and found five fully armed but very weary Germans having a sleep – more prisoners for the bag. Many more prisoners were taken as they tried to pass through St. Lambert, not knowing that we were there. There were far more prisoners than there were of us, but they didn't know that!

As dawn broke, we realized that we were in for a time of it, as enemy activity was apparent wherever we looked, and the shelling continued. It was at this time that a most courageous act occurred. From the direction of Chambois could be heard the clanking of a tank, clearly coming our way. Company-Sergeant Major Mitchell

heard it too, and as it came into view through the early morning mist, George, with a pistol in his hand, stood in the middle of the road facing the tank, shouting at us to "Get the bastard!" It was a frightening moment as we had no anti-tank weapons with us and, had the approaching tank not turned out to be one of the South Albertas' Shermans that had gotten lost the night before, we would have come off second-best, armed as we were with nothing but rifles and George's pistol.

The tank was a welcome addition to our defences, as we were now under constant attack by masses of the enemy, and it parked in front of the house we were holding, facing toward Chambois. At about 8:00 a.m., an enemy tank approaching from the direction of Chambois spotted our Sherman before we spotted it. It took one armour-piercing shot right through the front armour of the Sherman to put it out of action - the crew came tumbling out in jig time, all apparently unharmed. There was trouble, however; the gunner was still inside and the tank was starting to burn. The shell had hit the tank about a foot from the gunner's position, and it was apparent that he was hurt, because when an AP shell hits a tank, it penetrates the armour generating terrific heat as it does so, then it flies around inside destroying equipment, igniting



A soldier from the Argylls, driving a captured German car, escorts a group of German prisoners into captivity, St. Lambert-sur-Dives, 19 August 1944.

ammunition and fuel. The Sherman's main gun was right over the gunner's escape hatch, making it impossible to open it and get him out.

Once again, George Mitchell showed us what a true hero he was. He climbed up on the burning tank in full view of the enemy, aided by Corporal J.R. Holmes, and traversed the turret of the tank so the gun no longer blocked the hatch. A couple more of us climbed up when the hatch had been opened and we pulled the poor driver out. His face and hands were literally cooked from the heat, and the flesh was hanging off him. Although still alive, he was unconscious. There was a first aid post set up at the north end of St. Lambert, and we had to get this man help quickly. So, in spite of the enemy activity, we set out to get him there. Having no stretchers at hand, we found a door that had been knocked off a house, lifted the tankman onto it and using two rifles, one at each end, four of us picked him up and started down the street to the first aid post (FAP).

By this time the enemy attack had reached its peak, with hundreds of German troops charging at St. Lambert from the west being met by heavy tank fire and our own small arms fire. Before we were able to reach the FAP an enemy

machine gun opened up on us, and two Argylls helping with the makeshift stretcher were hit. The remaining two of us could not manage the awkward load and we had to take shelter again, leaving the poor tankman at the side of road. I understand that he eventually did make it to the FAP, but died of his injuries a few days later.

My rifle was one of those used for the stretcher and the weight bent the barrel, making it useless as a weapon. I was only able to watch as the attackers came charging on and were mowed down in their hundreds by the South Albertas' tanks and our own machine gunners. Eventually, the attacks fizzled out, and those who got as far as our positions were happy to surrender, adding to an already overcrowded prisoner compound. This sort of thing went on all that day in varying degrees of intensity, and with each break in the action the prisoners were directed back towards Trun, under the watchful eyes of our tanks. Very few tried to escape. The attacks and shelling and slaughter continued, and our casualties mounted as well. I was able to acquire another rifle and teamed up with fellow Argyll Private Roger Dufresne on a Bren gun.



Soldiers from the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders patrol one of the back streets in St. Lambert-sur-Dives, covered by a Sherman tank from the South Alberta Regiment. Note the knocked out German tank on the right side of the street.

*Photo by D.I.
Grant, NAC
PA 131348*

On one occasion, a Universal carrier with a Canadian driver came down the road from Trun into St. Lambert and stopped at our position. The driver was making some peculiar motions at us that we couldn't figure out, so a couple of us went over to him and found out that there were two armed Germans huddled in the back of the carrier. They had made the driver their prisoner and were using him to drive them through our lines. Result: one released Canadian prisoner, two more Germans for the bag.

We soon realized that there was nowhere for us to go but to sweat it out in St. Lambert. We dug slit trenches under the command of Major David Currie of the South Alberta Tanks, who was in control of all troops in the village. As we were getting dug in at the north end of the town, a German machine gunner, who had worked his way into a position a short distance from where we were, began firing at us. Captain Ivan Martin, who commanded "B" Company, decided that something had to be done about this unpleasantness. He went over to a slit trench and asked an Argylls private to "help me get that machine gunner." The private looked up at him from the security of his trench and replied, "You're kidding, of course." Undeterred, Captain Martin took off alone with a Sten gun; a few minutes later we heard a burst of gunfire and back he came with an MG-42 machine gun over his shoulder! Not long after this he was killed by shell fire.

Most of the day, only the SAR and the Argylls' "B" and "C" Companies were in St. Lambert. Later, however, help arrived when some Lincoln & Welland Regiment troops, 17-pounder anti-tank guns of the 5th Anti-Tank Regiment, and some men from the Highland Light Infantry found their way in.

That evening, a downpour of rain struck us and it became chilly in our little slit trench, so I salvaged a horse blanket from the carnage and wrapped myself up in it. It kept the chill off but I couldn't help but feel itchy all night! That night there was more of the same action that had taken place during the day: Germans trying to get through St. Lambert to the safety beyond. In fact, many were successful, because in the dark it is hard to tell friend from foe. On many occasions they simply walked right by our slit trench. One particular incident stands out clearly. After the rain stopped, we distinguished two figures about 30 feet from our trench, busily digging themselves in and carrying on a whispered conversation that sounded strangely unfamiliar. On approaching them with a cocked rifle and an itchy trigger finger, we were relieved to find that they were two stalwarts of the 1st Polish Armoured Division who had become separated from their unit and were looking for a safe place to spend the night.

Shortly after that, a tank was heard clanking down the road from the direction of Trun, and

it came right into town past our slit trenches and was heading towards Chambois. By this time, one of the 5th A/T Regiment's 17-pounders had been set up covering the road, and although it was pitch dark, they sensed the whereabouts of the tank, and let fly one round. It actually seemed as though we could see the shell in flight, which travelled not more than 50 yards and splashed into the tank. The tank stopped abruptly. The next morning we found it knocked out, with two dead German infantrymen who had been riding on its top, and the crew inside all dead.

The following day, 21 August, there was a definite slackening of German pressure, and

more and more prisoners came in. Some of them needed a little encouragement, but many were quite willing to surrender to avoid the terrible punishment that was being meted out to them. One of our boys, Lance-Sergeant Earl McAllister, went out into the fields on his own and returned with almost 50 Germans he found sheltering in a barn. Another of the more adventurous Argylls, Private Fred McIntee, was having fun rounding up stray Germans in bunches. On one occasion, he caught up with a group of five or six in a small open truck, and he brought them into town. There was a tragic ending to this particular escapade, however, as he had neglected to have the prisoners remove their helmets, which was a normal indication of surrender, so when one

Two views of a Sherman tank of the South Alberta Regiment brewed up in St. Lambert-sur-Dives. **Below**, a soldier from the Argylls cautiously moves by the still burning tank, while at **right** another tank from the regiment attempts to squeeze by its disabled brethren.

Photo by D.I. Grant, NAC PA 132192



Photo by D.I. Grant, NAC PA 116522





The author, Arthur Bridge, photographed in February 1945

the battlefields of Normandy where the Argylls had fought. It was truly a sentimental journey. Naturally, St. Lambert was high on our priority list and, as we drove down the road from Trun, through the rolling fields of grain, the memories came flooding back.

We found St. Lambert without any trouble, virtually unchanged over the years, except that the shell holes in the houses had been repaired and new roofs installed. We stopped and parked the hired car at the northern end of town, took a few pictures, and started to walk back towards the south end, via the main street. Immediately in front of the spot where we had been dug in, in 1944, Maureen suddenly and inexplicably fell to the ground. Rather, she floated to the ground. Both of us were dumbfounded because she hadn't tripped or slipped, and there was no apparent reason for her to have fallen. I helped her to her feet. She was not hurt in any way and said she had experienced a sensation not of falling but of slowly being pulled down – a sensation over which she had no control. I looked down where she had fallen and, there in the grass, was a bullet. I picked it up. It was German, unfired, and had been there since 1944.

I still have that bullet.

Arthur Bridge was born in July 1924, joined the army in February 1942 and was shipped overseas in June 1942, as a reinforcement to the SD&G Highlanders. The next spring they discovered that he had lied about his age and was not old enough to be overseas, so he was sent to the Holding Unit. Soon afterwards, the Argylls came over and he was able to join them, now being of legal age. His older brother, Ralph, also served with the Argylls all the way to Berlin.

After the war Arthur spent a couple of months in the Occupation force in Germany, and a repat camp in England. He returned home to Belleville, Ontario in April 1946. Following the war Arthur worked in the cartage and finance industries, retiring in 1987. Today he lives on Vancouver Island.

of our tankers saw the truck approaching with Germans aboard he opened fire. Unfortunately, Mac was the only casualty and he was killed.

As the day wore on, the pressure eased. Those Germans able to escape had already gotten by us; those who couldn't were either prisoners or dead, and eventually the shooting and shelling stopped. The trucks from the German convoy that had come into town the previous day were in good operating condition and some of our enterprising comrades got three of them running and we climbed aboard and drove back to where the Battalion Headquarters was located near Trun; it sure beat walking for a change. The only concern we had was that some of our own troops or air force might identify the trucks as being German and shoot us up. Fortunately, this didn't happen, and we got back late in the afternoon, those of us who had survived, that is. We left St. Lambert to the 3rd Division to finish mopping up. Tired and hungry, we left behind a scene of death and destruction that is hard to imagine, never mind actually experience.

Epilogue

In 1980, when we were finally able to take a European vacation, my wife Maureen and I (married in London on 28 April 1944) revisited