

2002

In the Heat of Battle: Letters from the Normandy Campaign

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Recommended Citation

MacDonald, Harold and MacDonald, M.A. "In the Heat of Battle: Letters from the Normandy Campaign." Canadian Military History 11, 2 (2002)

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In the Heat of Battle

Letters from the Normandy Campaign, 1944

Captain Harold MacDonald with M.A. MacDonald

Harold S. MacDonald was an officer with the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment from June 1942 until the end of the Second World War in Europe. Throughout this period he penned a steady stream of letters to his best friend, his wife, Marjorie, who was then a newspaper reporter with the Saint John Evening Times-Globe.

These letters, totalling 463, were carefully preserved by Marjorie and provide a continuous and absorbing account of the experiences of a front-line Canadian infantry officer in Northwest Europe during the Second World War. They begin in June 1942 with a description of the rowdy voyage on the troopship carrying him and his regiment to England, and go on to provide vivid portrayals of his experiences of life in wartime Great Britain and of numerous training exercises in which he participated. For the most part, however, they are concerned with his fraught and demanding responsibilities on the battlefields of continental Europe.

Hal Macdonald was born in Saint John on 15 February 1917. A graduate of the Modern Business College in Saint John, he was working with the accounting department of T. McAvity and Sons, in Saint John, when the Second World War broke out in September 1939. He enlisted that year as a private, and progressed through non-commissioned ranks to officer training at Brockville in the fall of 1941. In June 1942 he was posted to the North Shore Regiment and remained with that unit until the end of the war. In action, he served successively as second-in-command of "D" Company, commander of the Carrier Platoon, commander of the Support Company, and then as adjutant.



At war's end he was the North Shores' liaison officer with the 8th Brigade, of which the regiment formed a part.

Upon his return to Canada and demobilization in 1945, MacDonald joined Colonel Charles Leonard in the century-old Saint John firm of manufacturers' agents and food

brokers, which in due course became Leonard and MacDonald Ltd. His many activities and interests included the New Brunswick presidency of the Canadian Red Cross from 1964 to 1967, and also the presidency of the Canadian Food Wholesalers from 1977 to 1978. He was killed in an automobile accident on 11 November 1984, leaving his wife, a son and a daughter

The letters presented in the following narrative cover the period from MacDonald's landing in France in late June 1944 until the end of the campaign in Normandy in the third week of August. They constitute an invaluable source of information about that campaign from the point of view of an observant and articulate front-line participant and tell us much about such important subjects as battle stress and exhaustion, the conditions under which soldiers lived and died, morale, the debilitating effects of 'friendly' fire and the daily grind of attrition warfare. The letters are presented here to stimulate interest in the collection as a whole, which almost certainly merits publication in its entirety.

Cameron Pulsifer
Canadian War Museum

The North Shore Regiment, together with the Queen's Own Rifles and the *Régiment de la Chaudière*, constituted the three infantry units of the 8th Brigade, 3rd Canadian Division. Though generally English-speaking, this New Brunswick regiment also included many French-speaking Acadians. With its two companion units, it stormed ashore on Juno Beach in Normandy on D-Day, 6 June 1944.

Hal MacDonald did not land with his regiment that day, however. Instead, his commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel, Donald B. Buell, placed him in charge of bringing to Normandy the North Shores' reinforcements - vehicles, equipment, and about 100 men - who would join the unit in action a few weeks later. Tensions mounted for this group as D-Day came, and went. They devoured every scrap of information as they waited in camp in England. They went on long route marches of 15 to 20 miles to keep in shape and endured numerous attacks of the new German V-1 rockets, pilotless aircraft also known as 'doodle bugs' or 'buzz bombs'. At last, on 27 June, the order came for them to depart for Normandy and, two days, later the North Shore reinforcements boarded ship at the London docks.

Their first impressions on leaving were not favourable, as related later by MacDonald when out in the English Channel:

After we sailed some lads went down to check their trucks. In my vehicle my kit bag had been slit and everything emptied. Three packs had been emptied (including mine) and saddlebags rifled. In another vehicle they took cigarettes, clothing, spare razor blades, flashlights, watches, soap. The

miserable buggers. We figure it was the dock workers who loaded the vehicles - then they had the nerve to wave us Bon Voyage and Good Hunting!

Now there's a marvellous view, the hundreds of little ships moving back and forth along Liberation Lane. Whoops! the boat is doing one of its unsettling rolls. Just now, in our hold, there's a poker game going on. Vehicles all around and one blanket per man spread on the floor. Thought I'd be excited going to France, but instead it's like going home to the battalion and a very matter of fact affair.

In Normandy, after the successful landing on 6 June, the Allies had become bogged down in the face of intense German resistance. Initially, Allied commanders had expected the important city of Caen, about 16 kilometres inland from the beaches, to fall to the British and Canadians on the first day of the battle. But such hopes were soon dispelled as they faced heavy concentrations of German armoured, or *Panzer*, units and fanatical elements of the SS. Only on 4 July did Canadian forces, including the North Shores, begin an assault on Carpiquet, the site of an important airfield, to the west of Caen. Here, they were to remain locked in an intense struggle for the next five days, subject to enemy counterattack and continuous artillery and mortar bombardment. It was not until 9 July, that they finished capturing the airfield while, further to the east, British and Canadian troops at last occupied Caen. For the North Shores, the struggle for Carpiquet proved the costliest of the whole campaign, with 132 casualties, including 40 killed.

MacDonald's group caught up with the regiment in the midst of this struggle. Almost immediately, the CO made MacDonald second-in-command of "D" Company, under the injured Major Clint Gammon. Hal wrote:

I shall never, never complain of personal discomfort now that I've seen what 30 days of continuous action has done to strong men. Sleep is a long-lost dream. Clint and I figured on snatches of sleep last night. I had half an hour, and rest of the time dropping on floor and jumping out to trench. Seems funny to be sitting just a matter of yards from

Hal MacDonald and Sergeant Rob Oliver at the Carrier Platoon, Shoreham, England.



the bastards. Quite a stench, but one gets used to it. Lost quite a few boys and everyone is a bundle of nerves. Flies, mosquitoes - and a couple of kittens playing around this once-elegant but now derelict house.

These people lived on wines, not bad either - clears ones head at dawn. The people, those I've seen, have very blank, resigned expressions. The Germans - all bastards, rotten, sneaking, back-shooting, double-crossing devils. Only one thing good for them. Chicken for supper, a very tough rooster that kept crowing all night. Am reading "Esquire," from your box, and we're under a barrage. Ev Gorman just came in. I must close and go out with him. Please forgive if letters are short - shall do better soon as we get a rest break.

After securing Carpiquet, the North Shores moved a couple of kilometres south to drive a German rear guard from the small western suburb of Caen, Bretteville-sur-Odon. With this accomplished, on 13 July, the regiment at last left the front lines for three days' rest at Gambes, further north. Here MacDonald had a brief time to relax, refit, catch up on sleep and on letter writing. On 15 July, from the rest area he wrote in response to a request from his wife for information on what life in the front lines was like:

We all realize now how sweet life is - just to sit in the sun and read, or think of loved ones.... A good chance to get caught up with letters, and write to next-of-kin of some men.

I honestly don't want to think too much of the past, or of my time spent in the lines. I could tell you lots, but hate to think of it. However, thought if I gave you a description of one day only, you will know what it's like. Want to know what I wear in action? Well, my vermin-proof battle dress, dark pips, a pair of binoculars round my neck, helmet, skeleton web with mess tins, water bottle, gas cape, compass and ammo. Always carry a Sten and extra mags and a knife (big 'un). Then smokes and matches, and I'm set up for a week or two or three. If it's chilly I slip on my fleece-lined vest. Have made myself a pair of patrol shoes - the sneaky kind. Took your fleece-lined slippers

and ran a thong around the edge and tied in front, so no danger of slipping off; very comfortable for weary feet and very good for night patrols.

Now let's see. You want a day at war with a Rifle Company and men who have either been in for weeks, or else are fresh from England and first day in lines. Starts in the evening. Threatened tank attack, didn't materialize. Constant shelling and mortaring. Platoon well dug in and Jerry 300 to 400 yards away. Coy HQ [company headquarters] in an old barn; lost most of the building that night - only four casualties though.

The town behind us is a mass of rubble, a few cows, sheep, hens, etc. running around. More animals decaying in nearby fields. Permanent stench. The morning fairly quiet - just shelling and only one hit on the house. Rocket shell got four men in a trench. In p.m. I started to check Company area. Visited Ernie Garber's platoon and found the road to them, and they themselves, under heavy mortar fire. Their positions were dug just back of a big wall with gaps in it for observation and fire. H.Q. in an old house. Located enemy sniper on ridge and started back for Bren gun. Mortars hit the building ahead, and the runner and I crouched while the building tumbled. On to Company; machine-gunned while crossing open farmyard. Missed us. Back to Garber, to come under mortar fire again. While observing upstairs, heard cries below and found Ernie, his sergeant and two corporals badly wounded. Two have since died. Dressed the wounds and sent them to R.A.P. [regimental aid post] by Jeep.

Took over platoon and came under a barrage. Men were windy, nerves at breaking point. Checked all trenches while Jerry knocked out parts of wall. Was buried partially three times in trenches. Had just got to them when I heard the wail and whine of a near one and jumped into a trench. The wall caved in on top - three times. Dug out one man. Three men went windy and one nuts entirely. Got two pacified and two evacuated, using strenuous methods.

Got caught in one trench; two men were praying fervently while the shells hit the wall and exploded just behind us. Spent six hours



Photo by H.G. Aikman, NAC PA 131396

This photo of the factory area at Colombelles shows the devastation of the area. 19 July 1944.

there, then a break, and took one bad case to Company. Was pinned down in the barn and couldn't budge. Two guys gave trouble. End of building disappeared and door blown in. Went back to platoon through Calamity Lane; another toppling house. Got hot tea out to the men. The day seemed like years, and no sleep. Curled up in my gas cape next morning.

There is so much more to it. Wondering how long nerves will last - trying to plan the next move. It's all in a day's work, but now it all seems like a dream, a nightmare.

When the North Shores returned to the front on 18 July, they immediately became involved in Operation "Atlantic." According to this plan, British and Canadian forces were to break

through south of Caen and gain control of the country there to use as a springboard for a breakthrough to Falaise further south. The North Shores were this time thrown into the battle to the east of Caen in an attack on the town of Colombelles and other suburbs to the southeast of Caen. Their specific objective was a steel mill bristling with high chimneys immediately southwest of Colombelles, which they had secured by 9:30 p.m. MacDonald wrote the next day:

Take the largest steel mill in Hamilton, drop thousands of tons of bombs on it, shell it, and then pour infantry through it, do a lot of scrapping, and what have you? Well, we now have it. Yesterday was a big day for us; gained a lot and only had a few casualties.

Captain Harold S. MacDonald photographed when on leave in London, late winter, 1944-1945.



Was just wakened by my signaller who thought he saw a Jerry. It wasn't. Am sitting on rubble, my back against a crucible or iron vat. Have two days growth of beard (water is at a premium this side of the River Orne), am filthy, my sten, binoculars and helmet beside me. Company is in factory buildings trying to get some sleep. Looking out and up and over and sideways, just masses of twisted iron and concrete rubble, white dust everywhere and men all look like ghosts from an Egyptian grave. Just waiting for word to move.

Got ourselves a bunch of prisoners yesterday, two Russians amongst them and a bunch of Poles. Appears Jerry withdrawing takes all his SS Panzers and Hitler Youth, and leaves mainly his forced soldiers - Russians and Czechs and Poles - with a smattering of German pure-Aryan n.c.o.'s and officers to maintain discipline and control. We've been knocking off their leaders, and the others are quite docile and anxious to kamerad.

One young Polish German air force boy was a batman for a whole platoon all day yesterday. Carried our Piat bombs and Piat and helped boys with equipment. They really didn't want to turn him over to the battalion P.O.W. [prisoner of war] cage. Others are quite insolent, but a bayonet in their hide makes their eyes roll.

There's a battery of our guns about 100 yards away. Rather noisy. 'Twas funny yesterday. Best laid plans have to be changed, and our job was changed and a nearer objective given. Ev Gorman with his platoon did his task and kept on moving to original objective, which had been cancelled because of opposition and disposition. Ev was missing all last night and turned up at 7 this morning. He had gone right through and cleared and occupied the whole town that was originally the Bn. [battalion] objective. Got 15 prisoners, shot a few more and generally did o.k. I held an investiture and we made a presentation. They now call them Gormans' Guerillas, and it's a joke that they took Bn. objective. However, mind you, Bn. didn't appreciate it.

Got into our hole at 1.15 a.m. after a Hun bombing. Only two machines but they went thru like proverbial B's out of hell. Well, tried to get an hour's sleep on the hunks of concrete. 'Twas funny to hear the assorted curses and remarks as guys sat or lay on rocks and girders and what not. Was chilly and Robbie and I huddled together. Found our hole had been at one time a blast furnace.

Here it is 5.30. Where has the day gone. You should see what I see: Ev Gorman just coming in from a recce. Big grin on his face. He showed up behind a big broken wall and pasted me with bricks. Funny looking sight. But then we're all funny looking sights.

You said your conscience twinged you when you compared your mode of living with what we have. That mode of living and rights of freedom are just what we are fighting to preserve. I want you to have my share of everything - then you can hand it on to me when I get back.

On 20 July 1944, MacDonald was given command of the carrier platoon with orders to get it "straightened away," as there were discipline and drinking problems. The carriers comprised the largest platoon in the unit, which he had described earlier as composed of

approximately 65 men (double that of an ordinary rifle platoon), a dozen or more Bren carriers - armoured and tracked - one truck, a dozen motor cycles and four jeeps. So you can see it's quite a set-up. They need a firm hand always, as they're inclined to consider themselves above ordinary rank and file because they're mobile.

He and the Company Sergeant Major talked it over and decided the best course of action would be to break a few N.C.O.s and promote some others.

There'll be repercussions, I expect, but I'm just determined enough to go on with the job. I'm sorry, though, to leave D company, as we had a good set-up and I enjoyed action with them.

Just now we're sitting in the kitchen of a once-neat farmhouse. Some of the ducks, rabbits, chickens and goats are still here. There are two little goatees or kids - gee they're cute. The ducks have a spot of water now and they're more than happy. It poured here today and we're all soaked to the skin. You should hear the noise around us, a battery just a few hundred yards away shaking the house and a louder din in the distance. Gotta move again; looks as though we'll have a crack at him. You know it's just like hunting: once you find good shooting, one hates to leave. Same with the Hun, we like to follow right along.

From Colombelles, the North Shores moved to Bourguébus, six kilometres south of Caen, where they remained, under constant enemy shelling, for six days. Bourguébus, he wrote on 21 July, was:

another desolated town - blasted to bits - just rubble. Had to follow a convoy. So many road diversions that the lead vehicle went astray, so I cut off on my own. 'Twas pouring, and the mud of France as depicted in the "Old Bill" sketches is just 20 some years

thicker and deeper. Got in at night without much ado, a few shells and that damnable six-barrel job of theirs. Great respect for their '88s and mortars. Found a dugout and spent the night knee deep in mud, and one end of a dugout caved in. Awful sight the next morn at 5 when I went to see my boys in their posts. Checking the posts and trying to boost morale after casualties, that's part of our job - can't think of our own hides when our boys are getting it. Had a wash and shave last night - felt good after three days of muck and mud.

The English think this is Hell, but to us it's just more of a nuisance. Those of us who came through Carpiquet can take any of this stuff coming at us - of course one has to take all possible precautions, but it's nothing to Carpiquet. That now seems like a nightmare.

Of a dinner he had with fellow officer, Claude Savoy, he wrote:

I fixed a bunch of onions and we had potatoes and carrots from our nearby garden. Our dugout is a typical one - flies, mosquitoes, lousy straw and red ants, food, ammo, gas capes and weapons. My signallers are sleeping. Hey, the revolt in Germany is a boost to morale. It could indicate that now the army officers realize the futility of continuing this resistance. Mon dieu, they haven't a chance. The Hun on the other side of the field tries every ruse to make us disclose our position, but we'll just wait till he gets within grenade range then, ah then....Shall have a spot to drink now - tea, of course. Been staying away from the wine here. Only vice now is smoking and that is an essential habit for all of us now. Ha! they're laying some stuff on us now - but they're still missing us.¹

Later, during one of the snatches of sleep between intervals of shelling, he wrote to Marjorie about a dream he had had:

You seemed to drop out of the heavens for a flying visit, wearing slacks and a turban-headband, and your camera...Took you around our defensive positions and every once in a while had to give you a shove towards a slit trench when stuff hit nearby.

You were with me for over an hour, and then vanished again... You're with me constantly.

The next day another meal was on the way:

Here, Dickie Knowles, my batman-gunner is frying meat patties - bully beef, onions, potatoes and crumbled hard tack. They look and smell very good. Two sigs are dozing, Brad, my motorcyclist orderly is reading, and my corporal driver mechanic is just a-sitting and cursing the Huns. A lot of flies around and they bite too. A nuisance. Nothing new in, just the same from day to day - one day quite tough and the next day o.k., and so it goes, never changing. The Hun is just on the other side of a field, and there's a lot of shelling and noise.

In the shelling they'd lost "some of our canned foods and petrol and water. However the Hun lost more, so the score is still in our favour."

Soldiers of the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade, possibly from the North Shore Regiment, wait along the side of a road while Shermans move past. Near Caen, 18 July 1944.



Photo by H.G. Aikman, NAC PA 129128



North Shore commanders hold an "O" Group before the attack on Colombelles, 18 July 1944. l. to r. - Major R.B. Forbes, Major Bill Sullivan, Lieutenant "Bones" McCann and Company Sergeant-Major "Bun" Wilmot.

Photo by Ken Bell, NAC PA 177597

trench now. Still got to go the rounds and see my guys in the trenches. Dislike running around lines after dark and dropping every few feet! A guy works up a sweat, but got to look after the men and inspire all confidence and certainly can't do that if one hangs behind and they get the idea you dislike and won't go around checking. Hope I get a chance to sleep tonight.

But it was not to be. As he wrote at 8.30 the next evening:

a hard, long day. Working all last night, had an hour's nap this morning and a wash and shave, even a chance to wash the upper body... However a fellow can get just so dirty and then nothing matters. A good wash and air the shirt and tunic and boots and then re-dress and knot the muffler around the throat and I'm all ready. Just finished getting things straightened away and spent a few minutes talking to my n.c.o.'s, and now a cup of tea and to bed. Dammit. Rations just came in, and, a bugbear, splitting them down - a job that Coy should do, but too GD lazy. A poor show.

Yesterday saw a girl, a real flesh-and-blood 25-year-old. An attractive thing. Her parents owned the mass of rubble I'd had earlier as HQ. At one time it was a lovely French colonial home - her father was mayor of the town. Her jewelry was, and is, buried in the cellar where we had our abode - now if we had found it then, 'twould have been too bad. After she told us, of course we couldn't touch it. We all flocked around this gal, was good for morale; she's a nurse in

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Caen's hospital. Lost one sergeant, one corporal and two men today. It's depressing.

The North Shores were at Bourguébus from 21 July to the night of 26 - 27 July, when they moved back to Grentheville. Just after the move, he and the fellows shared a nervous laugh about the night's harrowing events.

Had to move at 4 a.m. and bring my carriers across an open space of about 300 yards, right in front of Jerry - a spot that's been mortared and shelled by the Hun regularly. Got all across but one, and it stuck in a crater. I sent another out to tow it. The first one threw a track, and then the second one did that too. Guys rushing around and I had to go out and take over.

Funny how scared one is till he forces himself to forget fear; then the snipers and shells just don't matter. Jerry heard us and threw up flares to see us better by and machine-gunned us heavily - but he's an awful shot. Finally got out safely. Those were anxious moments, but a laughing matter afterwards.... We just made some hot chocolate. Melted up a bunch of ration bars and stirred it all up. Not bad.

Later still, on 27 July, he continued: "Just finished a letter to you, but then got two from you, was thinking of you and thought I'd start another. Getting dark and I'm darn near dead for sleep." Of Marjorie's news that she had told off an opinionated older man back home who had scoffed at the fighting being faced by soldiers in the present war compared with what he and his colleagues had faced in the 'Great' War, he wrote that she had done

the right thing. My gosh, to think we're all going through Hell for complacent people like that. You know this war can't be compared to the last in death, horror, nerve-racking shelling - all the modern machinery of war and methods of slaughter. However enough of that. Shall write more tomorrow - can't see what I'm writing.

And on the next day:

Last night, just after I'd finished writing, Jerry came over so we had to adjourn to a cellar with one of my sections. Had a good night's sleep for a change. First in a week. A strong shelter with lots of straw and a luxury, two blankets. Lost my one blanket a long time ago. Now you're likely asking 'Where's his bedroll?' Well, all that stuff stays away back in B Echelon and only comes up when we are in a rest area. We've had ours up once, for 3 days, since we've been here. We consider ourselves lucky to even have a blanket.

Up at 6.30 this morn - a hard job to rise and shine. Got breakfast myself, then a wash and shave, bathed my feet and, another luxury, a pair of clean socks. Had my n.c.o.'s in for a few instructions, and then down to battalion. On way down the road was again struck by the desolated appearance of this village, as with all other towns we've taken and occupied. A village typical of thousands in Canada, this one about the size of the Narrows [Cambridge Narrows, N.B.]. Not a whole house or barn. A few lower floor rooms intact but all looted or ravaged. Dead cows in barnyards. A pond by the roadside with ducks forcing a passage through the scum like an icebreaker in the St. Lawrence. Then the church with remnants of gay flags across the front, evidently decorated for some occasion when caught in the maelstrom of war. A cheery note is a road sign with an arrow indicating the Paris road. That's one road we're definitely on - then to find the road to Berlin. The Russians have found it, now for us.

Got the men working on carriers and getting straightened away. My despatch rider, Brad, is getting dinner, even made some gravy. This is a funny game. Jerry shells whistling overhead and complete

nonchalance in here - except for Dickie Knowles, my batman, who is constantly saying "Is that ours?" He's a comical cuss and good for morale. That is the big thing - keep morale high if possible and prevent men from going windy.

Near them at this time was the British 7th Armoured Division, which had become famous as the "Desert Rats" in the struggle against Rommel in North Africa. "The Desert Rats on our front say Africa was never like this," he wrote. "In a month they would have two or three days similar to every day on this front." But, he added, "it's just a game, and we're on the winning side."

For the Allied pilots that were continually coming to their aid, he was full of gratitude.

If I ever run into Typhoon pilots I shall go down on my knees before them. They've given us an awful lot of support and saved us from some bad attacks. One example: quite a while ago I observed 6 Tigers, carefully camouflaged, on a crest opposite our position, obviously planning a breakthrough. Phoned in a report and within 12 minutes 12 Typhoons came over and rocketted hell out of them - a beautiful sight.

Seems like I always find time to write about supper time. Boys are mixing up some kind of a brew, a can of cheese melted and mixed with mashed potatoes, then bully beef and onions mixed together -- for dessert a can of marmalade pudding, and, of course tea, the backbone of the army.

On 29 July word came through that the unit was to be moved further back for a prolonged period of rest. "Hey, guess what?," he wrote on 31 July:

The war's over for a few days. They finally realized the 3rd Division were not total supermen and, being human, could stand just so much. After all, when one finds about 200 original men in a battalion of, well, a far greater number, we must re-group and reorganize. Came back yesterday. I led the battalion back, right thru all the towns we fought so hard for. As always, had casualties first part of the way - shelling. Caen is just rubble - first good look at it; before, it was

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obscured with smoke and dust. An awful mess, really pitiful.

Once back in the rest area, though,

it seems incredible there's a war on, it's just like a picnic in an oatfield and along hedges. Got a tarpaulin rigged and my bed up. Farmers at work and all aircraft overhead are ours, no Wailing Willies or Moaning Minnies overhead, and around us no snipers, and no flares, and no tense expectation of counter-attacks. Life is good. Got my outfit at work bright and early and nearly everything is finished - am away ahead of schedule. Planned all moves last night while riding down, and now a glorious day to work in - cloudless sky, even got our dugouts dug this a.m.

Am now sitting in rear of carrier writing on a mapboard. Looking at various towns brings back bad dreams. One man just came to ask what I could do about his mail - none for three months; shall check up on it tomorrow. Should have a 2 i/c in platoon, but unless one gets an experienced carrier officer they're just a hindrance and don't earn their money. Hence I run it alone with the aid of Sgt. Oliver.

He was pleased the men had told him that they liked the way he had changed the outfit:

[E]vidently they like to be kept busy and kept in the picture. A lovely breeze, rifle coys digging in, motor cycles round about, a show on in the Recreational Tent, cows grazing between vehicles. Up front any such animals walking around are turned into steaks and such, and reply to questions is always, I, or we, just saw it step on a mine or booby trap and it's a shame to waste it!

Reporting on a recently arrived box with its contents, MacDonald requested his wife to "please cut out pipe tobacco for awhile...cigarettes are preferable in the lines - a quick smoke and then on."

On 3 August, still in the rest area, he reports:

Am working the men a bit now but nothing strenuous, so's they will be rested. Funny, we all thought we weren't too tired, but after two good nights' sleep we feel in the pink.

It's hot. Went without dinner tonight - too hot to eat heavy stew. Had a bath night before last, Mobile Bath. Have seen a show at Aux[iliary] Services, and letters from you ... we appreciate all our blessings.

Stomach flu was making the rounds, and Hal had a touch of it on 5 August when they were inspected by the Corps Commander, Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds. MacDonald was not overly impressed:

Inspected by a Big Shot today, and as I was acting Coy Cmdr [Company Commander] got to shake hands with him. He asked a few asinine questions, as they are supposed to do. Seems odd to have come out of lines and have to blanco and perk up - but I'm in favour of it. Builds up pride in unit to see a smart Bn. on parade, and to think how scruffy they looked a few days ago.

A couple of days later, he sat with his back against his carrier's suspension, oat fleas swarming around and biting. Three hundred cigarettes had just arrived from home, mailed 20 May and re-addressed many times. He and his friends had returned to the Mobile Bath and "surprised the bodies again." The news was good: "if Jerry keeps on backing up this will be over in a matter of weeks. Looking at a map, it's a far cry from the little black line we had when I joined the unit."

On 8 August the North Shores left the rest area to return to the front. They travelled back over the same ground along which they had earlier advanced east of Caen, prompting MacDonald to reflect: "This is beautiful country. It's a crying shame to lay waste these homes and gardens and roads and churches. Got a few Huns and have had a hectic few days." The unit formed part of a column travelling southwest. At Cormelles, just south of Caen and about four kilometres north of Bourguébus, an appalling event occurred. The North Shores lost 37 killed and 78 wounded when they were accidentally bombed by aircraft of the United States Army Air Force.² He had his carriers parked on a hillside road, near Cormelles, because an "O" or Operations Group had been called at Division, and they had to wait for a signal from their colonel to move again. In the valley below them, some heavy guns were pounding away. As they sat there, a big flight of U.S. B-17 bombers came



Photo by Ken Bell, NAC PA 129139

Canadian vehicles burning near Cormelles after the accidental attack by American bombers, 8 August 1944.

into view, and they felt good to know they were getting lots of air support. Suddenly the Flying Fortresses turned to start a bombing run. Then they realized the aircraft were headed towards them. After receiving letters from Marjorie inquiring anxiously about news reports that they had indeed been bombed by friendly aircraft, MacDonald elaborated in a letter of 18 August:

Hon, I was there - in the middle with part of my carrier platoon. My jeep was there also and afterwards 'twas funny to hear the tired sigh of the shrapnel-riddled tires as the last breath of air left them. I've seen blood and death on battlefields but not as concentrated as that day. When we got up you could reach out anywhere and pick up limbs. It was frightful and I know our men would have killed those pilots if they had been available. It was very demoralizing, as that was our first day up from the rest area. However that is just another of those bad dreams we go through and forget.

After this devastating ordeal, the regiment moved on again, southeast, to Bretteville-le-Rabet, only to undergo yet another grim experience. As part of Operation Totalize, a major thrust conceived by General Simonds to break through the German positions and press south to Falaise, the 8th Brigade had been

ordered to clear Quesnay Wood, about a mile south of Bretteville. The attack began after dark on the night of 10-11 August, when the two assault battalions, the Queen's Own Rifles and the North Shores came up against heavy mortar, machine gun, and artillery fire and, subsequently, German tanks. After a few hours, the Canadians withdrew. On the morning of 11 August, sitting on a ration box: "in the complete shambles" of a barnyard Hal wrote:

Had another bad dream last night, or it seems like a dream now. Ha, and they say the Hun is definitely licked! Would like to see some of those so-called beaten ones. Lost the two men I had the most respect for, senior officers, and also one of my best friends. Never do I want another night like last night, a guy feels so damn helpless. A section of my carriers and men committed to action and not a damn thing one can do but dodge stuff and think and listen to reports.

Everyone was edgy from the heavy shelling, then our battalion struck the armour - which wasn't supposed to be there. Then the embarrassment of having to withdraw under covering fire. Normally the North Shores didn't withdraw from anything, but this was an impossible job for infantry.³



Two commanding officers of the North Shore Regiment: Lieutenant-Colonel Donald B. Buell, DSO (left) photographed four months after being wounded at Quesnay Wood on 9 August 1944. Lieutenant-Colonel J. Ernest Anderson, DSO (right) took over command of the regiment after Buell was wounded.

Shells were dropping around him and he had to stop writing, to continue much later in the day: "Got off my compo box to hit a slit trench and my foot was asleep. Went head over heels. Stop laughing!" One of their recent prisoners was "just down from Norway - fed up, and a sister-in-law in Ottawa and one in P.E.I. I still contend it's a waste of time bringing them in, unless of course they definitely surrender. Yes, I've heard that song 'Luger Luggin' Ludwig' - rather good." [The next words of that wartime song are "Lay that luger down."]

Just talking about press reports. Our unit has done one hell of a lot and yet not a mention. Papers praise the Chauds for taking Carpiquet. Maybe some day we'll be able to tell the story. I hear some awards are out, two of them posthumous. Had a good supper. Two cans of meat and vegetables, two cans of diced vegetables, and mixed fruit pudding for dessert. Oh yes,

and tea of course. Don't care for compo tea - has milk and sugar mixed with it.

It's a funny life, and how one stands it is a marvel. Toot Moar was in a while ago. He's getting really down - one of the originals and it is hard to look around and see so few of the old gang left. I put on hot water and got him a wash and shave, and even a haircut; made him feel a lot better. It's little things we do for each other that makes this old world livable.

By 12 August he was writing in a cowshed with good strong walls, his carrier at the door and signallers beside him. The support company commander, Otty Corbett, was asleep nearby, with sergeant, orderlies and drivers all around.

We are a happy family. I've a great bunch of n.c.o.'s and am finding I can put utmost dependence on them. Am also finding numerous roles to put the carriers in

to do their utmost, and every show we survive I learn more.

We got in the early hours of this morning under a heavy barrage on the road. Those 88's are vicious little guns - great respect for them, though so far I've only had close shaves. Not just luck, but many of my men believe in prayers and it has and will help us. 'Tis odd how tough the first 48 hours back in lines can be. Nerves are tense and tempers are short. Now, nothing bothers us, but it's always the same. If we have things quiet for a couple of days or have a few days to re-group, it's hell going back in. Now, under constant fire, we are steadied down and all is well. But it's hard to think of casualties and the familiar and respected men we won't see around again. One wonders about their families, what a shock to them.

He continued on 13 August:

Now if only the Hun would stop shelling the road beside our house. He's knocked a hole in the roof and messed up the yard. A fairly quiet day - getting ready for things to come. Have developed an almost fatalistic attitude; we all have. Wonder if we'll get any sleep tonight? Got to bed at 12 last night and the darn sig went to sleep and I had to get up three times to answer field telephones. Third time I lost my temper - he was sleeping on the handset and I couldn't find it.

On 14 August, he reported that there had been great doings since he last wrote and that he had had the chance to use his ideas for employing the carriers in action. At this time, Canadian forces were pushing south towards Falaise in hopes that they would meet elements of the American Army coming north and thereby trap a sizable portion of the German Army in the developing 'Falaise Pocket'. During this drive, Operation Tractable, the North Shores were involved in a massive attack, their part being to cross the Laison River northeast of Falaise, get up to a ridge of high ground beyond and take the little town of Sassy.

MacDonald's letter of the 14th, the day after Sassy's capture, was written as he sat under an apple tree in an orchard, eating apples.

Everything was calm, except for Allied guns shelling the Germans. The battalion had covered many miles on foot the previous day, under heavy firing, and

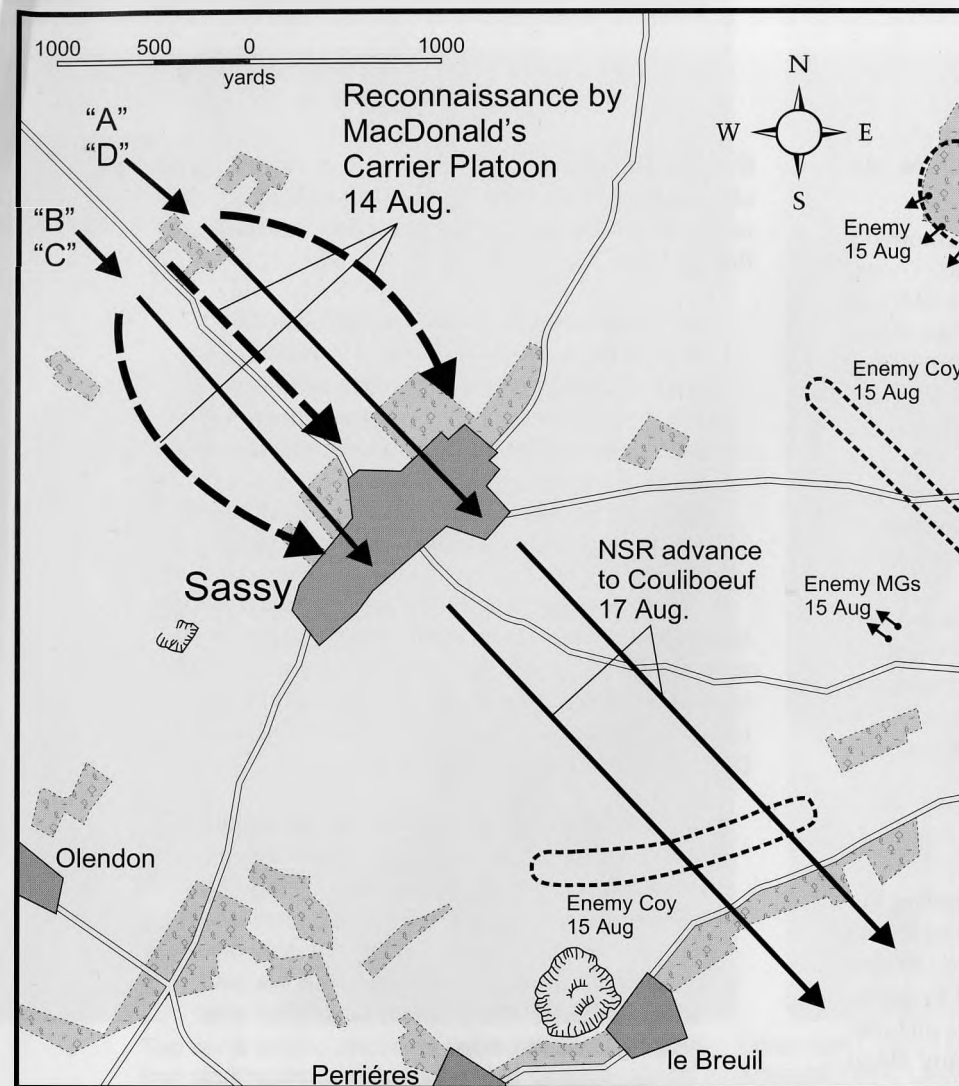
when we got to the river the men were dog tired, a bit demoralized, and it was nearing dusk. I'd had my carrier platoon working on the flank to cover the infantry and draw fire (or that was what it was originally supposed to be, it was more later on). I told the Col. I could recce and contain the high town and let infantry move up quickly and fairly safely.

The Colonel gave him the go-ahead, although MacDonald had been assured by tank crews, who had tried it earlier, that it was impossible to move down the hill into the river valley towards Sassy until enemy fire was neutralized. But after looking over the scene,

I held an O Group with my sergeants and decided to make a run down the hill complete - not in sections - and zigzagging all the way. We got off to a flying start and moved fast all the way. There was only one casualty. A shell landed near a carrier and shrapnel cut a man's hand where he was holding onto the side.

We got to the bottom of the hill and forded the stream, then found we were in an orchard and not enough space to get the carriers through. We found a lone tank not far away who had gotten across the stream on his own, was stranded there and brewing up some tea. Discussed the predicament with its sergeant and he said, 'Don't worry mate', and started up his tank. He pushed the trees down ahead of us to make a path for the carriers. Guess he appreciated our company at that point. He was quite lonely, before.

We got up to the road and bridge, part of which was blocked by a burnt-out tank, and the carriers moved up to screen the infantry companies which were just digging in at the foot of the hill which led up to Sassy. It was dusk and those men were dead tired - completely worn out. The rifle companies said they just could not produce the effort to get up there.



The Capture of Sassy 14 August 1944

MacDonald, though, had planned a text-book manoeuvre he had practised with the carrier platoon during exercises back in England. "It worked like a charm. Carriers were short, so I put in my own as fire carrier. We covered 2000 yards, took 20 prisoners en route, approached the town, fanned out and pulled a pincer movement." On their way through the town they saw:

the Hun still in trenches and buildings, and then we pulled off to the outskirts, and contained it while the Bn. moved up, captured a swack of Jerries, and took over. Twenty Huns came out of trenches just 5 yards away from my carrier - guess they scared us more than we scared them. You know how 'Sassy' some kids are when they're young? A lot more had pulled out to

a wood 1000 yards away and would have reoccupied the town if we hadn't stepped right in with our carriers - we would have been heavily outnumbered.

Our praise is being sung, and the colonel was terrifically pleased as he could say his battalion had attained their objective without casualties and gained the high ground.

But in the end, "... it was a long, strenuous day, including some heavy shelling, and everyone was dead tired at the end. Death follows and precedes and surrounds us, but everybody is optimistic. Wonder when it will be over"

MacDonald had been both carrier platoon officer and acting support company commander for the past week, and on 15 August was confirmed as company commander - still a captaincy, not a majority as with the rifle companies. By 17 August, he and his unit were advancing two or three miles a day as the Germans withdrew before them. "It's inspiring," wrote Hal, "to be part, and do

part, of this trap closing." The local people, who had been hiding in the woods, were coming back to their villages, "and now it's the big 'Bonjour mon capitaine!' And ah and oh the 18-year-old girls! However most of them have been tampered with by the Hun, so we hear."

Of the commanders back at Headquarters, he wrote:

Hey, these armchair strategists should spend a few days with us and see what obstacles and opposition have to be overcome. It's o.k. to sit back, or even visit a theatre of action up to 10 miles of the front, and then criticise. Nuts to them. The whole operation has been a masterpiece. Certainly we've had bad days due to lack of

information and strengths, but all in all it's well done.

The unit then moved, but with more opposition, into the hill country south of Trun, to the southeast of Falaise. On 21 August, from his current headquarters, another creamery with "thick walls and a good, solid roof - a necessity with us," he had a panoramic view of what had become a "valley of death" and wrote:

Yesterday, Sunday, brought a marvellous yet scarifying view. We are on high ground overlooking the mouth of the gap and down into the valley of death - a true death valley too. The Hun is still pouring in, thousands of them. Our planes and tanks are keeping all under constant shelling; if they insist on holding out - well, they're getting just what they deserve. The villages are all on fire. It all gives one a very queer feeling. Another batch of our opponents just came in, amongst them a Maj [major] whose reaction is 'You have superior leaders, arms, aircraft and weapons, what can we do? 'A common sense attitude. Too bad they don't all reason that way.

I get very tired of battledress and boots, khaki and war and canned rations and all the rest of it. Oh well, by the looks of things it will soon be over.

The pursuit went on, over roads strewn with wrecked and burnt-out vehicles, frequently under shelling from the retreating enemy who hoped to slow the Allies' advance. On 23 August, Hal MacDonald was wounded. "But my lucky star was beaming. Got out of it with a hunk of shrapnel that went in back of my left hand between two bones, nicked them and tendons and settled there. At the time was busy getting my Coy into place and guys under cover, so dressed it and later went to the Doc." MacDonald was ordered back to the casualty clearing station to have the metal removed. But when he told the colonel that he was being sent back, the latter exclaimed: "The Hell you are!" After two and a half months of action, experienced officers were in short supply and he was urgently needed right there on the spot. So it was back to the doctor again. "He calls that kind of work 'butchery', cutting up the tissue and extracting a sizable

hunk. All I have now is a hole in the back of my hand."

So MacDonald stayed at the front, injured hand and all, to find that, although the massive destruction of German forces in the cauldron of the Falaise Gap would conclude the Battle of Normandy, it would not signal the hoped-for end of the war. Although tens of thousands of the enemy had been killed, wounded, or captured, nearly as many more had escaped to continue the fight. Ahead lay more than eight months of hard fighting - the capture of the Channel ports, the clearing of the Scheldt, the Rhineland campaign and stiff fighting in the Hochswald and the Reichswald - in which MacDonald would take an active part. Finally, in early May 1945, he would witness negotiations for the surrender of the German forces on his front. All along the way his informative and absorbing letters to Marjorie continued.

Notes

1. The reference to the "revolt in Germany" is to an attempt by a group of German officers to kill Hitler by blowing up his headquarters in East Prussia. The bomb went off, but Hitler survived and the plotters executed. A good clear account of this affair can be found in Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: Nemesis*, (London: Penguin Press, 2000), pp. 667-73.
2. Will R. Bird, *The North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment*, (Fredericton: Brunswick Press, 1963), p. 359. Most of the statistics and campaign accounts in this paper are derived either from this book or from C.P. Stacey's *The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-45*, (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1966).
3. William McAndrew et al., *Normandy 1944: The Canadian Summer*, (Montreal: Art Global, 1994), p. 143. The senior men MacDonald refers to were Lieutenant-Colonel Donald B. Buell, badly wounded; Major Ralph H. Daughney, killed; Major J.A.L. Robichaud, severely wounded. The second-in-command, Major J. Ernest Anderson then took command.

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