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Operation "SPRING"

by

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G.O.C.

Canadian Forces in the Netherlands

31 January 1946

Lieut-General Guy Granville Simonds wrote this account of Operation "SPRING" in response to a statement written for the Minister of National Defence by the Official Historian C.P. Stacey. The statement was based on a detailed study of the battle which Stacey completed in late 1945.

Whilst I agree with the proposed text of the statement of the Minister of National Defence, I have the following comments to make which may help to a better understanding of the background of operation "SPRING".

Of all the operations of the war the "holding attack" is that least understood by the layman for casualties seem to be out of all proportion to apparent gains. It is also, for the same reasons, the most trying for a commander and his troops. Yet to achieve great and decisive results against a skilful enemy, the hostile reserves must be drawn in, pinned and worn down before the real "coup-de-grace" can be delivered. In all military history, to force an able commander to expend his reserves there has been discovered no alternative to the "holding attack." To effect its purpose, such an attack must be directed against an objective about which the enemy is highly sensitive and for the protection of which he is certain to react. In the Normandy bridgehead the "CAEN Hinge" was just such an objective and it was inherent in the operational conditions of mid-July that any attack directed against it would meet violent opposition and consequent heavy fighting.

Conditions at the time of operation "TOTALIZE" - the "break through" south of CAEN - were very different from those at the time of operation "SPRING". Between the 25 Jul and 7 Aug the Germans had to shift reserves to meet the American break-out at AVRANCHES and the advance of 12 British Corps of Second Army towards the upper ORNE had forced a further reduction of the German strength south of CAEN. In my original appreciation and outline plan for operation "TOTALIZE", I considered a "break through" contingent upon these conditions and I stated:-

The plan is submitted on the assumption that the right wing of Second Army has secured, or imminently threatens to secure, a bridgehead east of the R. ORNE, thus loosening the enemy grip on his northern pivot.

As is now well known, the plan of the C.-in-C. F.M. (then General) Montgomery, was to draw in and pin the enemy on the latter's sensitive eastern flank thus creating a situation favourable to the break out on the western flank. Every formation in the Anglo-Canadian Armies had to bear its share in the series of holding attacks on the eastern end of the bridgehead. The task was to draw the German armoured strength east of the ORNE and to hold it there until the American attack at AVRANCHES gained momentum. This was successfully achieved and the troops who bore the brunt of the heavy, unspectacular fighting

south of CAEN deserve just as much credit for the final result as do those who made the obvious gains at the other extremity of the front. General Eisenhower gave this as his own view in a public statement, which I know to be sincere.

The Objective

The ultimate objective for operation "SPRING" was the high ground north of CINTHEAUX - the key to the German main defence system south of CAEN and a necessary stepping stone to our advance down the CAEN - FALAISE road. Based upon the enemy strength as known prior to the attack, the attainment of the objective was feasible and the attack might open an opportunity for deeper exploitation.

There were two alternative approaches for the attack - astride the CAEN - FALAISE road or on the axis SOLIERS - BOURGUEBUS. In the latter case the left flank was very exposed and the left wing of the assault would have to move over ground offering no cover. More important still, a partial success on this line of attack would not improve our tactical position. An attack astride the CAEN - FALAISE road had its right flank exposed to fire from enemy positions on the west bank of the ORNE, but the built up area ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE - MAY-SUR-ORNE offered a good deal of cover and even a partial success astride this axis would give us the very important VERRIERES ridge. I therefore decided to attack astride the CAEN - FALAISE road. It was later, in operation "TOTALIZE", that the break-through was made along this same axis.

Timing

In operation "ATLANTIC", carried out in conjunction with 8 British Corps operation "GOODWOOD", 2 Canadian Corps had gained the initial bridgehead east of the ORNE opposite CAEN. At the end of this operation we held the northern reverse slopes of the VERRIERES ridge. From the crest of the ridge the Germans overlooked nearly the whole of the bridgehead on the east bank of the ORNE. The deployment for any major attack had to be done in darkness.



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With troops which had not much battle experience it was, in my opinion, essential to give them as much time as it was possible to allow, for forming-up. Deployment could not start until after dark and it was equally important in my mind that the timing of the attack should be such that we should be in possession of the crest of the VERRIERES ridge before daylight. These conditions left very little latitude in the choice of "H" hour.

Support

The assault was launched under support of a very heavy field and medium artillery barrage with superimposed concentrations on known centres of resistance.

Assessment of the Operation

I find analysis of an operation like the attack of the Black Watch at MAY-SUR-ORNE a most

distasteful task for it means criticism of some, who, whatever mistakes they made, made them in good faith and paid the supreme sacrifice in the course of their duty.

In view of the eleventh hour reinforcement of the German positions east of the ORNE, as revealed in the early stages of the attack, there will be doubt whether the original objective was attainable. In the forenoon I made the decision not to launch the two armoured divisions but I ordered 7 Armoured Division forward to reinforce the success of 4 Cdn Inf Bde and to make certain that the important gain of the VERRIERES ridge was not lost. The capture of the ridge in operation "SPRING" established the firm base which later made possible the mounting of operation "TOTALIZE" under much more favourable conditions.

I have stated above that in face of enemy strength as revealed by the attack there will be doubt as to whether the original final objective was obtainable. The whole plan was fully discussed with and approved by General Dempsey, G.O.C.-in-C. Second Army (under which 2 Canadian Corps was operating) both before and after the operation. I considered at the time (and I have found no evidence since to change my view) that the objectives of MAY-SUR-ORNE, VERRIERES AND TILLY-LA-CAMPAIGNE could and should have been taken and held without heavy casualties and that in the event, the casualties of certain units were excessive. That we failed to capture and hold MAY-SUR-ORNE and TILLY-LA-CAMPAIGNE and that we suffered what were, in my opinion, excessive casualties was due to a series of mistakes and errors of judgement in minor tactics.

I do not express the above view with the object of directing criticism on officers, some of whom lost their lives in this action or later. I would prefer not to make a statement and certainly not be quoted in this connection at this time, but as a matter of historical record, when this operation can be examined in all its aspects, I feel under an obligation to express my frank opinion.

I have introduced many divisions into their first battles - Canadian, British, American, and Polish and I am convinced that no amount of training can compensate for actual battle experience. It seems that nothing but the actual experience of battle will forcibly imprint on men's minds the great importance of certain tactical measures, no matter how often they have been reiterated in training. On many occasions in summing up on training exercises, and as final reminders on visiting units on their arrival in the bridgehead, I personally emphasized the great importance of:-

- (a) The security of the start line before an attack.
- (b) The necessity of closely following artillery supporting fire.
- (c) The importance of mopping-up which required a detailed search of the ground.
- (d) The quick establishment of a firm base to meet the inevitable counter-attack.

Non-observance of some or all of the above tactical measures was in my opinion the cause of failure to secure initial objectives and of unnecessary casualties in operation "SPRING".

Security of the Start Line

In mobile operations there is no continuous "front" but a firm base is established on a series of pivotal localities. Between these localities both sides are free to patrol - especially during darkness. The best German troops were always very aggressive and good at this patrolling. Therefore, before an attack it was essential to patrol the area forward of the start line to ensure that German patrols had not infiltrated between the forward localities, and having made certain the area was clear, to station strong standing patrols to prevent hostile patrols from penetrating and interfering with the forming-up of assaulting troops. In operation "SPRING" though mobile patrols were sent out and reported the start line clear, certain units did not leave standing patrols on the ground to cover deployment. In fact, German patrols did penetrate and this was the cause of some confusion during deployment and delay on the part of some units in crossing their start line.

The Necessity of Closely Following Artillery Supporting Fire

With good troops in field defences the neutralizing effect of the most intense artillery supporting fire is only temporary. The better the troops the quicker is the recovery following the cessation of shelling. It is therefore most important that assaulting troops should cross the start line on time and press home the assault on each successive objective immediately covering fire lifts. Some latitude is allowed by arranging for a barrage to dwell for a specified number of minutes on the "opening line", but if this pause is prolonged it gives the enemy warning of the direction and frontage of attack. From my appreciation of events at the time, I am certain in my own mind that there was a period during the attack on the morning of 25 Jul when MAY-SUR-ORNE could have been entered and cleared without heavy casualties. Owing to inexperience and failure to appreciate the vital importance of time and how fleeting are such opportunities, the favourable period was allowed to pass unexploited.

The Importance of Thorough Mopping-Up

This is perhaps the hardest of all lessons to teach other than by experience. Until the soldier has actually witnessed it, it is hard to

realize the complete absence of obvious evidence of the presence of the enemy in an area which he may actually hold in considerable strength. The best German troops were very clever at concealment and also knew the value of withholding fire so as not to disclose their positions too early. When a hostile locality was entered under supporting covering fire, it was necessary to properly organize at once a detailed search of the area to clear out the lurking enemy. The various reports that MAY-SUR-ORNE was cleared by troops who had penetrated well into the village, showed that this detailed search had never been properly organized and thorough.



It has been a source of deep regret to me that a fine battalion like the Black Watch suffered so heavily in this attack. I would prefer to make no statement on the subject for I dislike even suggesting criticism of those who lost their lives, but if a statement is required from me as a matter of record, I consider that the losses were unnecessarily heavy and the results achieved disappointing. Such heavy losses were not inherent in the plan nor in its intended execution. The action of the Black Watch was most gallant but was tactically unsound in its detailed execution.