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# Hoffmeister in his Proving Ground Sicily, July-August 1943

**Douglas E. Delaney**

*Because he [Hoffmeister] was there, I no more thought of running and hiding....I just felt, "he'll take care of me." He's there too. It's just like flying in an airplane; you've got to have confidence in the pilot. If the plane falls, he falls too. You just felt, if he's here I guess I should be too; otherwise I might have crawled under a truck or something.<sup>1</sup>*

Sergeant Denis Meade, MM on being Lieutenant-Colonel Bert Hoffmeister's Radio Operator during the Sicilian Campaign.

Lieutenant-Colonel Bert Hoffmeister proved himself in Sicily. In the Campaign to wrest the Italian island from the Axis Powers, he fought with skill and courage. Both were important; commanders not only have to be technically competent at managing the men and resources under their command, they also have to be able to do it when shells are falling and soldiers are dying. In the combat crucible of Sicily, Hoffmeister demonstrated his ability to do both.

He had come a long way since joining the Canadian Active Service Force in 1939. During his first twelve months in England, he floundered as the Canadian Army struggled to mobilize itself almost overnight. As he was not learning much that would help him lead men into battle, his personal anxiety heightened, ultimately culminating in a nervous breakdown in January-February 1941. After his recovery, he toiled as a company commander, gathering what skills he could on numerous Field Training and Command Post Exercises<sup>2</sup> as the army gradually got better at training itself. For four months, starting in December 1941, he continued with his on-the-job training regimen as a staff learner in the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade (2 CIB). But his formal military education really only took off when he attended the Canadian Junior War Staff Course (April-August 1942). At the Royal Military College in Kingston, he learned a formalized manner for planning, organizing,

monitoring and executing military operations – a skill set that he put to good use after he became Commanding Officer of his beloved Seaforth Highlanders of Canada in October 1942. Numerous training exercises throughout 1942 and the first half of 1943, including two sets of amphibious exercises in Scotland, helped hone his hard won skills prior to Operation HUSKY, the Allied invasion of Sicily. By the time the Seaforths set sail for the Mediterranean as part of the 1st Canadian Infantry Division (1 CID) attached to General Sir Bernard Law Montgomery's famous Eighth Army, Hoffmeister was as ready as any battalion commander could have been for his first battlefield test.

For nearly nine days following initial landings at Pachino Beach on 10 July 1943, the Seaforths pushed inland through Modica, Ragusa, Grammichele, Caltagirone and Valguarnera. The heat was oppressive, but the Italian resistance was light, and the battalion managed to cover most of the hilly and rocky terrain on foot, and quickly.<sup>3</sup> Eventually though, reluctant Italian opposition gave way to determined German delaying action as the enemy attempted to buy time for a withdrawal of its forces from the island. Then the fighting got hard.

In a valley near Valguarnera, Hoffmeister very nearly marched his entire battalion into an ambush of German mortar and machine gun

Photo by Terry F. Rowe, NAC PA 132779

Lieutenant-Colonel B.M.  
Hoffmeister, commanding officer  
of the Seaforth Highlanders of  
Canada, August 1943.

fire. Just as he was deploying his companies to the high ground, away from the vulnerable valley floor, the Germans opened fire. The ambush caught Hoffmeister's lead company in a vicious cross fire that immediately felled 18 soldiers. The unit chaplain recounted the carnage in his diary:

I had a good view of the accuracy...of the enemy's aim. Vicious bursts of flame & clouds of dust, dirt and rock flew into the air to the left and right of us....Wounded were being brought out and I attended the dying. Boys I had known well were among the victims, torn and bleeding beyond all hope of recovery. Mortars continued to drop steadily and with nerve wracking accuracy.<sup>4</sup>

Getting the trapped company out of the killing zone was going to be difficult.

In the middle of the *mêlée*, Hoffmeister moved about the battlefield, reconnoitering positions for observation (to find the enemy) and fire (to shoot at the enemy), directing the action to foil the ambush and extract the trapped company. Neutralizing the German action required the coordination of friendly artillery and mortar fire on the enemy infantry, as well as the forward positioning of the battalion's anti-tank weapons to counter German tanks.<sup>5</sup> By using the tried and true method of firing on the enemy to "keep their heads down" (and prevent them from firing back)<sup>6</sup> and manoeuvre,

Hoffmeister eventually extricated his forward company and withdrew them from the enemy's killing zone. In short, he found the enemy, he won the firefight, and he moved his troops to safety. This was simple to say, difficult to do; but Hoffmeister did it at considerable personal risk. It was not a quick affair either. Several intense and harrowing hours passed before the battalion was able to disengage itself with most of its members – and its morale – still intact.

Aside from the casualties, this particular action was significant for the fact that it demonstrated Hoffmeister's fondness for being well forward and conducting his own reconnaissance. Why did he do business that way? Without question, he wanted to get a better appreciation of the situation from which to anticipate problems (like where the enemy might strike next) and make tactical decisions (like how to counter the next enemy move). But his actions also had another important effect: stiffening the morale of his subordinates. In the course of conducting his own reconnaissance, Hoffmeister had to dodge tank and small arms fire.<sup>7</sup> Many soldiers witnessed Hoffmeister's apparent lack of concern for his own safety, and undoubtedly passed their observations on to their mates.<sup>8</sup>

Hoffmeister realized, or came quickly to realize, the effect of a leader's personal courage in war. Syd Thomson (who later commanded an

infantry battalion under Hoffmeister during the Battle of Ortona) said it best:

During a sticky battle, morale is as important, if not more important than good tactics. On the scale of 1 to 10, morale will go from 4 to 9 just by the appearance of a senior commander in the line when and where the bullets are flying. Bert understood this.<sup>9</sup>

Hoffmeister expected this sort of example from all his officers and showed no mercy for those in whom it was lacking. One officer who cowered during the engagement at Valguarnera – taking his subordinates with him in hasty retreat – Hoffmeister relieved immediately after the event.<sup>10</sup> That officer may very well have been capable of making good tactical decisions; he had probably done so in training. But this was war – an infantryman's war; it took more than sound management skills, regimental pride or charisma to make organizations work. It took courage. Sections, platoons, companies and battalions were comprised of individual soldiers who were subject to the same fears and apprehensions as any other human beings. Yet soldiers in combat had to face those fears more intensely, and more often. Good commanders, like Hoffmeister, carried soldiers beyond their

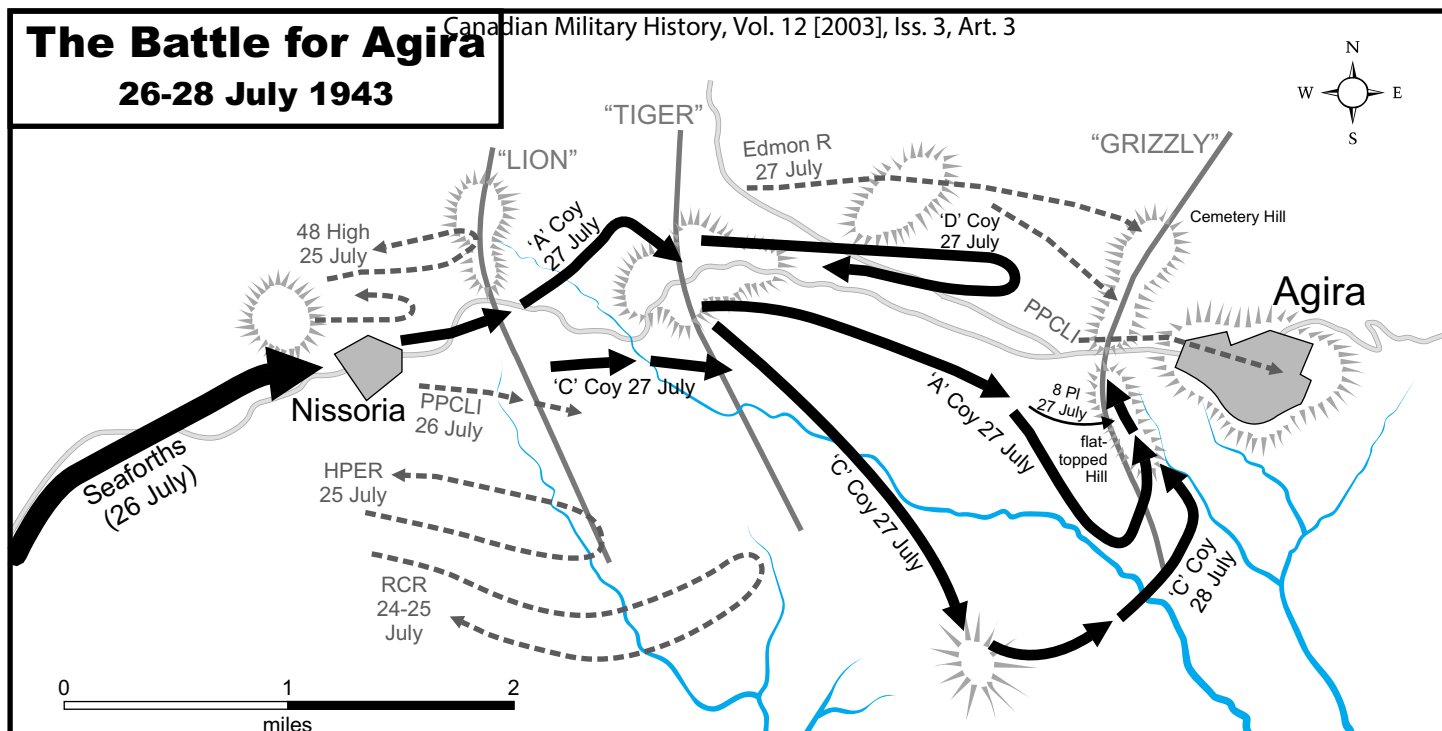
apprehensions and convinced them that they were all on the “same airplane.”

The Battle for the Sicilian mountain town of Agira provides another useful study of Hoffmeister as a battlefield commander learning his craft. By 21 July, the Eighth Army's drive north had stalled as a result of strong German resistance on the Catania Plain, and Montgomery accordingly adjusted his plan to unhinge the German defenders at Etna. To set the conditions for a 30th Corps breakthrough west of Mount Etna, Montgomery ordered all Eighth Army formations to adopt a defensive posture (to avoid casualties they could not afford) and tasked Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds' 1 CID “to continue without restraint directed on Adrano.”<sup>11</sup> The initial stage of the 1 CID eastward drive saw 1 CIB advance from Leonforte to the eastern edge of Nissoria between 23 and 26 July. From there, 2 CIB took the lead.<sup>12</sup> (see map on next page) Its commander, Brigadier Chris Vokes planned for the PPCLI to capture the first ridgeline (codenamed “Lion”) east of the town of Nissoria and advance to the next set of high features, known as “Tiger.”<sup>13</sup> Once “Tiger” was secured, Vokes wanted the Seaforths to advance and capture the next set of hills, known as

Canadian soldiers patrol the main street of Agira, July 1943.

# The Battle for Agira

## 26-28 July 1943



Map drawn by Mike Bechthold ©2003 based on map contained in Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*

“Grizzly.” Artillery concentrations on the immediate objectives and air strikes on the town of Agira in depth provided additional support to weaken German resistance and “keep the enemies’ heads down.”

For his part, Hoffmeister made efficient use of the available time and resources to prepare his battalion for battle. Shortly after receiving his orders from Vokes at 0900 hours on 26 July, he issued a “Warning Order”<sup>14</sup> to initiate preparations for battle. He advised his company commanders that they were on two hours’ notice to move their sub-units to an assembly area<sup>15</sup> immediately west of Nissoria.<sup>16</sup> In succession, company, platoon and section commanders passed on the direction, and soldiers shed themselves of all but the essential weapons, supplies and equipment. While these administrative activities took place, Hoffmeister completed his own tactical appreciation of the mission and formulated his plan. By 1200 hours he was ready to give orders.

Again, his plan – conveyed by verbal orders – was uncomplicated. Supported by the direct fire of tanks from a firm base on “Tiger,” Hoffmeister would advance his battalion with two companies forward; “A” Company (now under command of Major “Budge” Bell-Irving) would be north of the main road, while “C” Company paralleled it to the south. Hoffmeister anticipated that he and his tactical headquarters would follow right on the heels of the lead

companies. Behind him, the reserve companies – “B” and “D” – were to follow, astride the main axis, ready for reinforcing or exploitation tasks.

Preparations for battle continued into the afternoon.<sup>17</sup> As Hoffmeister met with Brigadier Vokes at 1500 hours, subordinate orders made their way down the chain of command, from company to platoon to section to individual soldier. On his return, Hoffmeister issued a quick set of confirmatory orders, before the battalion left Assoro at 1600 hours. After a relatively short route march, The Seaforths arrived at Nissoria, complete and ready to enter the fight, four hours later.<sup>18</sup> In only 11 hours, Hoffmeister had received his orders, formulated a plan, disseminated that plan to a battalion of 700 men, and conducted a four-hour preliminary move in preparation for battle. Concurrent with these activities, companies “topped” up on ammunition and water, troops ate and took whatever rest they could, and the companies integrated newly-arrived reinforcements.<sup>19</sup> Drills for the passage of information and the efficient use of time were slick.

By the time the Seaforths arrived at the western outskirts of Nissoria, the PPCLI was well engaged with the enemy, and Vokes had a difficult decision to make. Early reports had indicated that the PPCLI had captured “Lion” and were advancing on “Tiger”.<sup>20</sup> Based on that, Vokes had decided to commit the Seaforths to capture Grizzly at 2300 hours. Unfortunately, the

situation bore no resemblance to what the PPCLI reports had indicated. It was much worse. Not only had the Patricias failed to secure “Tiger,” they had not completely cleared “Lion” of enemy,<sup>21</sup> a fact that only became clear to Vokes sometime between his decision to send the Seaforths after “Grizzly” and midnight. Understandably, the incomplete and conflicting reports forced Vokes to rethink briefly his decision to launch the Seaforths into the battle. But he did not deliberate long. At midnight, Vokes reconfirmed his bold call for the Seaforth attack on “Grizzly.”<sup>22</sup>

Because Hoffmeister’s plan was simple, it required little alteration, despite changes to the tactical situation. Thus, with a minimum of fuss, the Seaforths stepped off, commencing their move through Nissoria at midnight. Once clear of the city’s eastern limits, the battalion adopted the same advance formation prescribed by Hoffmeister in orders at noon on 26 July.<sup>23</sup> But few plans survive first contact with the enemy, and this one was no exception. On the right flank, “C” Company ran into rock-solid resistance and became engaged in a firefight that lasted until daybreak on 27 July. On the left, machine guns and tanks near “Lion” halted Bell-Irving’s “A” Company as well. Calmly, and on his own initiative, Bell-Irving decided to use the hours of darkness to bypass the immediate enemy at

“Lion”, and carry on to “Tiger” by a more circuitous route.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, as Bell-Irving remembered, the company became completely disoriented in the dark:

I was to say the least in a state of indecision [while lost] – perhaps blue funk would be a better phrase – not knowing where we were or what to do – hoping the coy strung out behind us would not sense my feeling....The Nebel [mortar] went off almost right in my face....This forced decision....[W]e turned right and made for the high ground....The fact that this was our objective was pure chance.<sup>25</sup>

By good luck and grace, the company eventually had fumbled its way onto “Tiger” by first light on 27 July and fought a spirited battle to clear the objective of two German tanks and a platoon of infantry.<sup>26</sup>

“A” Company scored a pivotal success. The capture of “Tiger” unhinged the entire German position north of the east-west road, forcing the remaining enemy to withdraw. From atop their objective, Bell-Irving and his soldiers could see a “large number of Bosche infantry...moving back from the North end of the ‘Lion’ feature in an East then Northerly direction.”<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, all they could do was observe the retreating Germans because Bell-Irving’s force did not at that point have weapons with the range to fire on them. On hearing this, Hoffmeister

**Left:** General Sir B.L. Montgomery invests Major H.P. Bell-Irving with the Distinguished Service Order for his actions at “Grizzly” during the attack on Agira. **Right:** Canadian jeeps pass a line of burnt-out German vehicles on the road between Nissoria and Agira.

reinforced the position with the battalion anti-tank platoon, artillery Forward Observation Officers (FOOs), and, later, tanks to bring direct and indirect fire on the enemy fleeing "Tiger."<sup>28</sup> Shortly thereafter, he added another rifle company to consolidate "Tiger" and fend off any enemy counterattack.

There is no evidence that Hoffmeister considered pursuing the retreating enemy at this point, and there are two reasons for this. First, Simonds cast the 1 CID plan in the doctrinal mold that called for attacks in stages, the consolidation of gains, movement only from firm bases,<sup>29</sup> and the use of all available firepower to support any resumption of the advance. This thinking was part of the "bite and hold" that bit and held both the Canadian and British Armies.<sup>30</sup> In a May 1943 letter to "All Comds and COs 1 Cdn Div," Simonds had emphasised the importance of operating from firm bases. Although he had stressed that it had "to be impressed upon all troops that their objectives [lie] inland and that the capture of the beaches was only a means to an end," the enemy propensity for counterattack dictated a deliberate approach:

[E]very operation must be launched from a firm base – a tactical feature strongly held. During an advance or attack successive objectives must be firmly established. The sequence on reaching an objective will be:

- (a) Reorganize in tactical dispositions to suit the ground.
- (b) Patrol beyond the objective.
- (c) Dig in.
- (d) Using the objective as a firm base, seize advantageous ground beyond or to the flanks."<sup>31</sup>

Objectives were goals in themselves, not necessarily means to ends. Pursuit operations re-started advances, they were not occasions to abandon the deliberate approach and seize opportunities to rout retreating enemy before they could regroup to fight another day.

Second, Hoffmeister was well aware that the division plan called for an airstrike on the town of Agira following the capture of "Tiger." For that reason, he sought Vokes' permission to "consolidate [on "Tiger"] in view of the Aircraft program."<sup>32</sup> Given the friendly fire disaster of Leonforte six days earlier,<sup>33</sup> this was understandable; pursuing the enemy, in view of

the planned air attack, would have exposed the Seaforths to the bombs of the Desert Air Force. Vokes agreed. To allow for the air attack on Agira and keep his troops a safe distance from friendly fire, the brigadier established a new "bomb line"<sup>34</sup> and passed it up the chain of command. At 0740 hours he advised Hoffmeister: "Aircraft will attack Agira. Stay at Tiger until 1200 hrs."<sup>35</sup>

With that, Hoffmeister began planning the next stage of the attack. At mid morning, he sat on the heights of "Tiger," surveying the ground that led to "Grizzly" and Agira. It was an ideal vantage point from which to make a plan and pass on orders; but before he turned his full attention to those tasks, he ordered that rations be delivered for the tired and hungry soldiers of his rifle companies. The human factors were as important as the technical. Hoffmeister then conducted a quick appreciation of the tactical situation, made his plan and then held his orders group<sup>36</sup> at 1300 hours. Like his orders for the first stage of the attack, these were simple, and the ability of the company commanders to survey the ground over which they would execute their tasks made the conference a quick affair. Hoffmeister commenced his orders at 1:00 pm and the lead companies crossed the start line<sup>37</sup> 60 minutes later; it could not have taken him more than 10 or 15 minutes to pass on his plan.<sup>38</sup> He called for another "two-up" assault. "D" Company, advancing left forward, was to capture "cemetery hill" north of Agira. "A" Company, advancing right forward, was to seize the "flat-topped" hill south of the main road. "B" and "C" Companies were to be held in reserve, to reinforce or exploit the efforts of the forward companies, whichever was most appropriate. To support the infantry assaults, artillery and air attacks would "soften up" the objectives prior to the advance.<sup>39</sup> Then, once the advancing troops commenced their move eastward, the direct fire of machine guns, two squadrons of tanks, and anti-tank weapons on "Tiger" would supplement an artillery barrage to support them.

Again, however, enemy action forced quick revisions to the original plan. Shortly after the troops stepped off, extremely heavy fire from a well-fortified enemy position on "cemetery hill" halted "D" Company. Confirmation of this development only reached Hoffmeister by runner because mortar shrapnel had destroyed the company commander's wireless.<sup>40</sup> Fortunately,

**no crop**

**bleed to top**

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*Mule Train Leaving Area Near Agira, Sicily* by Major William Abernethy Ogilvie

such slow means of message passing did not cause any undue delay in decision-making. Having watched the tactical situation develop from a series of vantage points, and having witnessed the volume of fire that spat out of "cemetery hill," Hoffmeister had already ascertained that "D" Company's objective was too strong to be taken by a single company. Not wanting to reinforce failure, he ordered Captain E.W. Thomas to withdraw his company, and reassigned him to a reserve task. The course of events had, by this point, convinced Hoffmeister to direct his main effort toward the right flank. Bell-Irving's "A" Company had advanced rapidly to the base of the "Grizzly" feature. Leaving one platoon to provide a firm base, Bell-Irving took his other two platoons to the south, where they scaled an undefended cliff and executed a spectacular right flanking attack that caught the enemy completely by surprise. "A" Company routed the numerically superior German force, killing 75 and taking 14 prisoners.<sup>41</sup> It was a tough fight, but by 1700 hours on 27 July, Bell-Irving had consolidated the 50 remaining men in his company on the southern tip of Grizzly and was preparing for the inevitable German counterattack.

"A" Company had created an opportunity and Hoffmeister attempted a repeat of the rapid

reinforcement action that had been so successful on "Tiger," but the consolidation of "Grizzly" proved much more difficult. At 1500 hours, he had ordered "C" Company to outflank "Grizzly" to the south and provide direct fire support to "A" Company with anti-tank weapons. Unfortunately, the going to the south proved difficult and, to make matters worse, radio communications soon failed, eliminating Hoffmeister's ability to quickly redirect "C" Company straight onto "Grizzly." That option out of reach, Hoffmeister turned to his reserve, "B" Company, which he hastily mounted in carriers and launched toward the center of the objective; but mortar and machinegun fire stopped it cold.<sup>42</sup> Compounding Hoffmeister's frustration, his fourth manoeuvre element, "D" Company, was still out of radio contact and too far from "A" Company to have an immediate impact on the situation. Thus, it was an understandably anxious Hoffmeister who scurried about the battlefield, attempting to get a better picture of the situation, and trying to reinforce "A" Company. As darkness descended, what he had perceived as an opportunity ripe for exploitation was deteriorating into a problem of just "holding on."

Hoffmeister had few cards to play the night of 27/28 July, but he played them with skill. Once



communications were re-established with "C" Company, he ordered that sub-unit to continue by way of a southern route to "Grizzly." While the weary troops of "C" Company plodded on by way of a long right hook, Hoffmeister provided what support he could to Bell-Irving's little bridgehead with direct and indirect fire. He personally picked the artillery targets and, at one point, he subjected the northern edge of the "Grizzly" feature to a 30-minute concentration of mortar fire to rid it of enemy.<sup>43</sup> Mostly, and much to his consternation, he waited.

The next morning, the situation improved. After a night of sporadic German probes and counter-attacks, Bell-Irving's beleaguered force was heartened by the arrival of a single and very tired platoon from "C" Company. Bolstered with these reinforcements, "A" Company attacked and cleared the remainder of the "flat-topped hill" feature, south of the main east-west road. By 0850 hours, 2 CIB controlled the objective. Simultaneous with "A" Company's success, The Edmonton Regiment, which Vokes had

committed the previous day, took "cemetery hill" from the north. The capture of "Grizzly" cleared way for the PPCLI to enter Agira on the afternoon of 28 July. The battle for Agira was over.

The assault on Agira was a 2 CIB triumph, but it was Hoffmeister's battalion that played *the* major part in prying Agira from the enemy. Despite a number of difficulties and strong enemy resistance, the Seaforths had created opportunities – on "Tiger" and on "Grizzly" – and had enjoyed some success in exploiting them, untidy though those victories may have been. Two days after the battle, Hoffmeister marked the regiment's accomplishment when he had the regimental Pipe Band beat the retreat through the streets of the captured town, an event that was broadcast round the world by the British Broadcasting Corporation. For his part in the battle, Hoffmeister received the Distinguished Service Order, the citation of which reads:

For outstanding leadership which enabled the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, during two days

The Seaforth Highlanders pipe band playing "Retreat" in the main square of Agira, July 1943.

of fighting on 27/28 July 1943, to reach their objective near AGIRA. During the final battle communications were difficult. With complete disregard for his own safety, this officer made his way from Company to Company, under heavy fire, and personally directed the attack.<sup>44</sup>

It should be noted, however, that Hoffmeister's accomplishments at Agira did not come as a result of any tactical innovation or doctrinal departure. In fact, his actions conformed completely to higher plans and reflected the doctrine that had been taught at Staff College and practised in training: he limited his objectives; he operated from firm bases; he sequenced his attacks in phases; and he consolidated his objectives before moving on to exploit his gains. That Hoffmeister did not stray far from established doctrine should come as no surprise. He had only been in combat for just over two weeks. But he was learning fast.

So was the rest of the Division. On 4 August, Simonds suggested to Vokes that a "quick blow [could] be struck" against crumbling enemy resistance southwest of Mount Etna.<sup>45</sup> With the British 78th Division safely across the Salso River near Adrano and Vokes' battalions just west of the TROINA River, Simonds rightly surmised a sharp eastward thrust could seize the high ground on the western bank of the Simeto River and unhinge enemy defences southwest of Mount Etna. Despite the exposed left flank and enemy positions on Mount Revisotto and Mount Seggio, Simonds believed the potential pay-off of uncoupling the German defences dictated that the division could "afford

to take bigger chances." Besides, the undulating ground of the Salso River Valley afforded good protection against enemy observation and fire from the north. This was a departure from the doctrinal practice of establishing firm bases and securing the flanks before commencing an advance. So was the organization Simonds proposed for the task. He suggested Vokes assemble a "striking force" of "12 CTR [Canadian Tank Regiment], One SP [self-propelled] Bty [Battery], One or Two Tps [Troops] AT [Anti-Tank] guns, one bn [battalion] of infantry, one recce [reconnaissance] sqn [squadron]" under Lieutenant Colonel E.L. Booth, the Commanding Officer of 12th Canadian Tank Regiment (The Three Rivers Regiment). Assets such as the squadron from division reconnaissance regiment, the Princess Louise's Dragoon Guards (PLDG) would be placed at Vokes' disposal for the operation. In the end, Vokes kept the anti-tank battery and the self-propelled guns to himself and grouped both the Seaforths and the reconnaissance squadron under Booth.

The composition of "Booth Force" made sense and took advantage of the capabilities of the component arms, given the scattered enemy and the nature of the terrain. The carrier-mounted reconnaissance squadron could move quickly in advance of the infantry and armour, scanning the terrain for enemy. Tanks could manoeuvre effectively in the open and undulating country of the Salso river valley, and their firepower could be used to support the assaulting infantry by subduing enemy positions from longer ranges. Infantry troops offered the

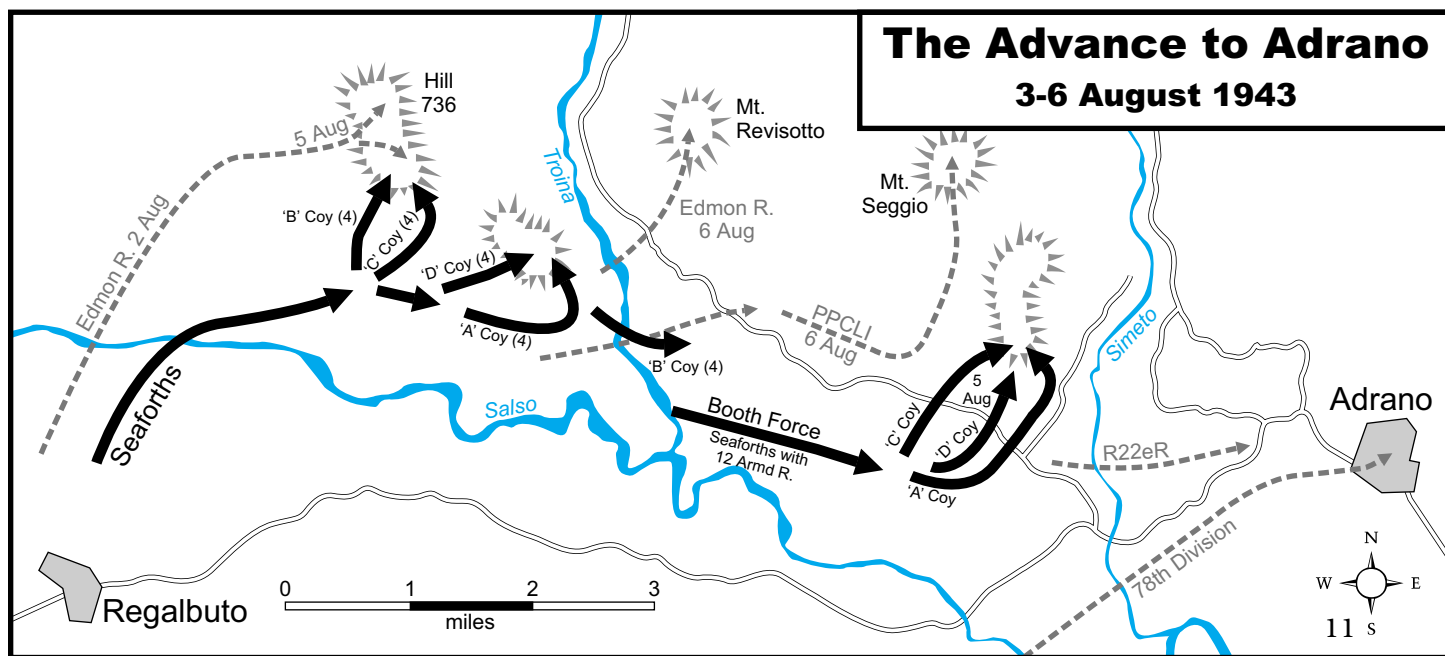
Canadian troops moving through the streets of Regalbuto, 6 August 1943.



ability to operate in any type of terrain, thus providing a degree of protection for the tanks, but they moved at the pace of a foot soldier, not an armoured vehicle. Simonds' idea was a good one, but the question of *how* to make it all work still remained.

Booth and Hoffmeister developed practical solutions, and quickly. Hoffmeister received his orders for the operation at 0200 hours on 5 August, only four hours before the lead elements were to cross the start line, the Troina River.<sup>46</sup> To ensure the tanks could support the infantry with direct fire and that the infantry could protect the tanks from anti-tank weapons in close terrain, they took two unorthodox actions. First, Seaforth soldiers rode on the backs of the tanks, through close country until they made contact with the enemy. Although the infantry were vulnerable in this mode of movement, it did ensure that armour and infantry stayed together, able to provide mutual support. It also permitted the advance to take place at the pace of tanks, not foot soldiers. And second, they integrated communications to ensure a continuous and reliable exchange of information between infantry and armour. Hoffmeister traveled in Booth's tank while maintaining communications with his rifle companies by way of a radio strapped to the tank, and his own tactical headquarters followed closely behind, in the event that he had to dismount. Company commanders did much the same, traveling with the squadron commanders while remaining "netted in" to their platoons.<sup>47</sup>

These arrangements contributed largely to the success of the operation.<sup>48</sup> After a two-and-one-half hour delay due to bridging problems at the Troina, "Booth Force" struck out towards the Simeto River – the reconnaissance squadron leading, followed by "C" and "A" Companies (mounted on tanks), then Hoffmeister's and Booth's headquarters, then "D" and "B" Companies. Through the orange and lemon groves of the Salso River valley, the force crashed ahead at tank speed until it came to a "cement-lined flume filled with water" at around 1100 hours.<sup>49</sup> What was impassable to the tanks without some engineering assistance was relatively quick going for the infantry who dismounted and waded across the flume towards their objectives. Hoffmeister sent "C" Company to the southwest side of the high feature that dominated the Simeto. The troops made it across the dangerous valley floor to the slopes of the objective with the support of tanks (sometimes firing over the heads of the advancing infantry) and artillery.<sup>50</sup> Like an artillery barrage, tank fire kept enemy "heads down" until the infantry scrambled close to the enemy position; only tanks allowed the infantry to get much closer. Tank rounds were more accurate than artillery shells and they presented less of a shrapnel hazard to advancing friendly troops. Moreover, the close communications that existed between squadron and company commanders allowed the infantry to direct the tank fire onto the most dangerous enemy positions. That was how "C" Company made it onto its objective, and much the same



Map drawn by Mike Bechthold ©2003 based on map contained in Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders*

German prisoners being marched into captivity by soldiers of the Seaforth Highlanders north of Regalbuto, 4 August 1943.

cooperation followed when Hoffmeister reinforced "C" Company's success with attacks by "A" and "D" companies from southeast and south respectively.<sup>51</sup> The support was also mutual. Because the Seaforths had scaled bluffs impassable to tanks and fought an extremely tough battle to clear the objective of enemy, the tanks of "Booth Force" could dart to the Simeto without fear of being engaged from the north.

The tactical arrangements developed by Booth and Hoffmeister were not giant doctrinal departures; some of them had been practised on a limited scale before HUSKY.<sup>52</sup> But they did represent a closer level of all-arms cooperation than had been practised to that point in the Sicilian Campaign.<sup>53</sup> The success of "Booth Force" so convinced Simonds of the utility of task-organized groups that he later used them extensively during the 1 CID advances in Southern Italy in September 1943. Like his

superiors, Hoffmeister, too, was learning much in the summer of 1943. His willingness to try new methods for all-arms cooperation, and the jury-rigging of communications equipment to support them, announced an increased understanding of modern arms as well as a heightened level of comfort with his own abilities.

Hoffmeister's uniqueness lay in his direction and control of the battle. His short, simple, verbal orders furnished enough detail to allow his subordinate commanders to accomplish their tasks, but not so much as to stifle their initiative. In short, he told his commanders what to do, not how to do it.<sup>54</sup> As Bell-Irving commented: "T[he] performance [of "A" Company at Agira] depended entirely on absolute freedom of manoeuvre, freedom of time, and delegation of initiative to subordinate officers."<sup>55</sup> Hoffmeister realized that victories in battle

depended, to a large degree, on the performance of his subordinates. At Agira, the key subordinate was Bell-Irving.<sup>56</sup> Hoffmeister also made decisions quickly. Not all his tactical decisions had the desired effect – the failure of “B” and “C” Companies to reinforce “Grizzly,” for example – but Hoffmeister’s penchant for being well forward allowed him to assess the situation as it developed and take rapid action. In other words, before making a key tactical decision he did not wait for information to come to him, he went to it. This proved all the more critical when communications failed. Quicker decisions translated into quicker actions. He was a technically sound battlefield manager.

Still, the question begs to be asked: What made soldiers fight for 36 uninterrupted hours and do extraordinary things? There were many factors: group cohesion, the soldier’s aversion to letting down his comrades, and the state of individual training among them.<sup>57</sup> But the very human connection between the leader and the led was also crucial. Consider the case of Corporal Denis Meade, one of Hoffmeister’s radio operators during the Battle of Agira. When communications failed at a critical juncture in the battle, on his own initiative and under mortar fire, Meade set up his radio on a high feature between Hoffmeister’s headquarters and the companies that were out of radio contact. From

Lieutenant-Colonel B.M. Hoffmeister leads his battalion in the Sicilian Hills to a parade ground for General Montgomery’s visit. Near Militello, Sicily, August 1943.

there, he relayed messages between parties that could speak to him, but not to each other. At one point, after Meade had re-established communications with Bell-Irving's fatigued force on "Grizzly," Hoffmeister joined the radio operator in his exposed position so that he could speak directly to the commander of the isolated company.<sup>58</sup> Realizing that the young corporal was alone and scared, Hoffmeister assured Meade that he would send someone forward to stay with him, which he later did. Then, before leaving the radio relay position, Hoffmeister did something that too few leaders do; he thanked the soldier for his efforts. This affected Meade profoundly. When asked why he took the action that earned him the Military Medal, Meade's response was simple and heartfelt: "I didn't want to let him down."<sup>59</sup> That was the real key to Hoffmeister's success as a battalion commander; he was able to make ordinary people do extraordinary things.

### Notes

1. Interview with Sergeant Denis Meade, MM (Meade Interview), 5 December 2000.
2. A Field Training Exercises was a training event that was conducted outdoors and one in which all levels of command participated. Command Post Exercises, on the other hand, were only meant to exercises commanders and staffs. These "map wars" were normally conducted indoors.
3. National Archives of Canada (NAC), RG 24, Vol. 15256, War Diary (WD) Seaforth Highlanders of Canada (SHC), 10-16 July 1943. A shuttle service, using limited battalion transportation assets and the carrier platoon was used for some of the moves.
4. Archives of the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada (ASHC), Personal Diaries, Memoirs, Interviews, Accounts of Battle (PDMIA), Diary of Major Durnford (Durnford Diary), p.35.
5. There were delays in bringing the fire of battalion mortars (packed on uncooperative mules) to bear on the enemy positions. See Reginald H. Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, 1919-1965* (Vancouver: Evergreen, 1969), pp.174-175.
6. This process of bringing fire on to the enemy in order to nullify the effects of his weapons was often referred to as "winning the firefight."
7. At one point, a German tank fired on Hoffmeister from an extremely short range – it missed. See ASHC, PDMIA. Interview Robert L. McDougall and Major-General B.M. Hoffmeister (McDougall-Hoffmeister Interview), p.6.
8. "Absolutely fearless" is not an uncommon description of Hoffmeister's bravery. MacLeod Collection (Langley, B.C.), Interview (undated) Ken MacLeod with Company Sergeant-Major Jock Gibson; Interview Ken MacLeod with Private Jimmy "Tubby" Keith. Ken MacLeod Collection. "The Canadians in Italy WWII," Vol. 6 (cassette tape). Gibson was a Platoon Sergeant with the Seaforths during the Sicilian campaign. Keith was a Dispatch Rider with the Seaforth Signals Platoon.
9. Royal Military College (RMC), McAndrew Collection, Interview William J. McAndrew with Col S.W. Thomson, Sydney, British Columbia, 6 April 1980 (McAndrew-Thomson) Interview, p.2.
10. Regarding the incident, Hoffmeister explained, "There was nothing wrong with the men, it was purely a matter of weak leadership." He also pointed out that, a few days later, the same soldiers did a "first-class" job at Leonforte. ASHC, PDMIA, McDougall-Hoffmeister Interview, p.7.
11. Army Commander's Meeting - 21 July 1943, Appendix B, to War Diary, General Staff, Headquarters 30th Corps. Cited in G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy, 1943-1945* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1956), p.118. The town of Adrano appears in most contemporary documents as Aderno.
12. For critical appraisals of Simonds' direction of the battle of Nissoria see William J. McAndrew, "Fire or Movement? Canadian Tactical Doctrine, Sicily - 1943." *Military Affairs*, July 1987, pp.140-145; and Michael Pearson Cessford, "HARD IN THE ATTACK: The Canadian Army in Sicily and Italy July 1943 - June 1944 (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Carleton University, 1996), pp.173-179.
13. NAC, RG 24 Vol. 10775, Account of the Battle for Agira As Written by Brig. C. Vokes, Comd 2 Cdn Inf Bde, on 29 July 1943; and ASHC, PDMIA. "Account by Lt-Col B.M. Hoffmeister, OC Seaforth of C On the part that his bn [battalion] played in the Capture of AGIRA, 31 July 1943" (Hoffmeister Account, 31 July 1943).
14. Commanders issued "Warning Orders" to commence preparations for upcoming operations. Typically, the information provided in a "warning order" contained an outline of enemy and friendly situations, a probable mission, and outline timings. Warning orders were (and still are) part of a process of preparation known in the military lexicon as "battle procedure."
15. An assembly area was a location in which a unit or formation waited in preparation to cross the start line for an operation.
16. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 15256, WD SHC WD, 26 July 1943.
17. This is also referred to as "battle procedure" – the process by which a unit prepared for a combat mission. It included a number of activities, many of them concurrent, including the receipt and dissemination of orders at various levels, administrative preparations, coordination, rehearsals and rest.
18. The Seaforth War Diary indicates that Hoffmeister went to brigade headquarters for a 1500 hours "conference" – undoubtedly for a quick situation update. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 15256, WD SHC, 26 July 1943. See also *Ibid.*, Vol. 14074, WD 2 CIB, 26 July 1943.
19. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 15256, WD SHC, 26 July 1943.
20. *Ibid.*
21. The 2 CIB Intelligence Log shows that the PPCLI reported having two companies on "Lion" at 2055 hours and one company "within 300 yds of 'Tiger'" at 2210 hours. Obviously, this was not the case. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 14074, WD 2 CIB, Intelligence Log, July 1943.
22. Hoffmeister, who was at 2 CIB headquarters when Vokes made his decision, received the order to advance at midnight. Five minutes later, to ensure that his troops were ready to move immediately upon his return to their

- location, he had Vokes' headquarters relay a message: "Your sunray [codeword for commanding officer] returning - be prepared." NAC, RG 24, Vol. 14074, WD 2 CIB, Intelligence Log, July 1943.
23. The term "formation" in this instance refers to the tactical deployment of the companies for the advance: two forward and two back.
  24. ASHC, PDMIA, Major H.P. Bell-Irving, "Account of 'A' Company, Seaforth Highlanders of Canada – Attack on Agira, 26-28 July 1943" (Bell-Irving Agira Account).
  25. ASHC, PDMIA, Bell-Irving Agira Account.
  26. There was no direct command relationship between the tanks and the assaulting infantry. Because the infantry did not control the employment of the tanks, the coordination of fire support must have been done "on the spot," first by Bell-Irving and, later, by Hoffmeister.
  27. ASHC, PDMIA, Bell-Irving Agira Account.
  28. On a doctrinal point, one will note how tanks were not used to pursue the withdrawing Germans. Instead, they were employed either to provide direct support to advancing infantry or to "snipe" at the withdrawing enemy. This was consistent with the British and Canadian tactical doctrine at that time.
  29. A firm base is a piece of terrain which is held by friendly forces and which can be used to provide fire support to other manoeuvring elements. In the case of a battalion, a firm base was usually held by one of its companies.
  30. In November 1943, a 21 Army Group publication emphasized the following "Action by the Infantry Battalion Commander on the Capture of an Objective":
    - (a) Defence against counter attack by tanks.
    - (b) Defence against counter attack by infantry.
    - (c) Defence against combined counter attack by both arms.NAC, MG 30, A.G.L. McNaughton Papers (McNaughton Papers), Vol. 156, THE COOPERATION OF TANKS WITH INFANTRY DIVISIONS IN OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS (21st Army Group). The document was circulated army-wide under cover of Trg Cooperation of Tks with Inf Divs in Offensive Ops, HQ First Canadian Army, 25 Nov 43.
  31. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 13725, WD 1 CID, May 1943, Letter G.G. Simonds to All Comds and C Os 1 Cdn Div, 15 May 43.
  32. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 14074, WD 2 CIB WD, Intelligence Log, July 1943. See also *Ibid.*, Vol. 15256, WD SHC, 27 July 1943.
  33. On 21 July, as the Seaforths prepared for an attack on Leonforte, several "drop-short" rounds from the preliminary artillery bombardment landed in the area of Hoffmeister's headquarters, killing four including the unit Adjutant and wounding five others. Hoffmeister, although he escaped serious injury, was blown over and dazed by the incident.
  34. A bomb line was a control measure designed to prevent fratricide during air attacks. Simply put, once a bomb line was established, aircraft could attack forward of it, but not behind it due to the proximity of friendly ground troops.
  35. *Ibid.*, Vol. 14074, WD 2 CIB, Intelligence Log, July 1943.
  36. An orders group (usually called a "O" Group) was a conference at which a commander conveyed orders to subordinates.
  37. A "start line" was the line that troops crossed at the commencement of an advance or attack (H-hour). It was usually an easily distinguishable linear feature – a road, a river, a ditch – that all participating troops can recognise.
  38. *Ibid.*, Vol. 15256, WD SHC, 27 July 1943.
  39. *Ibid.* Agira was bombed and enemy positions on "Grizzly" strafed in air attacks at midday.
  40. ASHC, PDMIA, "Hoffmeister Account, 31 July 1943."
  41. *Ibid.* There were also an unknown number of wounded who escaped.
  42. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 15256, WD SHC, 27 July 1943.
  43. ASHC, PDMIA, "Bell-Irving Agira Account." The War Diary also noted that Hoffmeister personally gave targets to the FOOs. NAC, RG 24 Vol. 15256, WD SHC, 28 July 1943. See also "Hoffmeister Account, 31 July 1943" on the devastating effect of concentrated 3-inch mortar fire.
  44. Hoffmeister Scrapbooks (West Vancouver), Distinguished Service Order Citation, Lieutenant-Colonel B.M. Hoffmeister.
  45. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 14074, WD 2 CIB, August 1943, Appendix 11, Letter Simonds to Vokes 4 August 1943. Vokes placed a marginal note on the letter: "This letter arrived at 2300 hrs 4 Aug 43. Almost identical orders had already been issued by me and arrangements were already underway. No alteration was necessary." Vokes did issue orders at 2000 hours, but the idea for the operation did not originate with him. First, he could not have tasked organizations that did not belong to him, like the reconnaissance squadron. Second, Simonds visited Vokes at 1830 hours to discuss the plan, before the arrival of the letter. See also NAC, RG 24, Vol. 14074, WD 2 CIB, August 1943, Appendix 8, THE BATTLE FOR ADERNO; and *Ibid.*, Vol. 13726, WD 1 CID, 4 August 1943.
  46. ASHC, PDMIA, McDougall-Hoffmeister Interview. The orders that Hoffmeister received from Vokes and Booth ended sometime around 0245 hours. Because he had issued a warning order for the operation before the 0200 hours conference started, his company commanders were waiting for him when he returned to his battalion headquarters. This still left less than three hours to move to the assembly area west of the Troina River, "marry up" with the tanks and make the necessary communication arrangements.
  47. On the communications arrangements, see ASHC, PDMIA, McDougall-Hoffmeister Interview; and RMC, McAndrew Collection, McAndrew/Greenhouse-Hoffmeister Interview, pp.52-53.
  48. On the Salso River action, see Nicholson, *Canadian in Italy*, pp.160-161; and ASHC, PDMIA, Account by Lt-Col B.M. Hoffmeister, OC [Officer Commanding] Seaforth of C[anada] given on 19 August 1943 (Hoffmeister Account 19 August 1943).
  49. Roy, *Seaforth Highlanders of Canada*, pp.193-202.
  50. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 15256, WD SHC, 5 August 1943.
  51. ASHC, PDMIA, Hoffmeister Account 19 August 1943.
  52. RMC, McAndrew Collection, McAndrew/Greenhouse-Hoffmeister Interview, pp.52-53. See also NAC, RG 24, Vol. 14073, WD 2 CIB, 2 Cdn Inf Bde Training Instruction [dated incorrectly as 25 December 1942]. The training actually took place 1-9 December 1942).
  53. Vokes did use a smaller "task force" (one troop of tanks, one troop of anti-tank guns and one company of infantry) to break into Leonforte on 23 July. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 14074, WD 2 CIB, THE BATTLE OF LEONFORTE.
  54. In this, Hoffmeister undoubtedly learned from Vokes. He liked Vokes' manner of giving direction: "I was given



my objectives and how I got there was strictly my own business." ASHC, PDMIA, Roy-Hoffmeister Interview.

55. ASHC, PDMIA, "Bell-Irving Agira Account."
56. In his account of the battle, Hoffmeister duly recognised the "magnificent show put on by 'A' coy [company] under the comd [command] of Major Bell-Irving." ASHC, PDMIA, Hoffmeister Account 31 July 1943.
57. For psychological analyses on why soldiers fight, see Wm. Darryl Hendersen, *Cohesion: The Human Element in Combat* (Washington: National Defence University Press, 1985); Elmar Dinter, *Hero or Coward? Pressures Facing the Soldier in Battle* (London: Frank Cass, 1985); and Ben Shalit, *The Psychology of Conflict and Combat* (New York: Praeger, 1988).
58. Bell-Irving had asked Meade to "fetch" Hoffmeister so that they could speak about the tactical situation. Meade then left his position (and the radio), found Hoffmeister,

and escorted him to his makeshift relay station. Letter Denis Meade to author 16 September 2001.

59. Meade Interview, 5 December 2000.

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