

4-26-2012

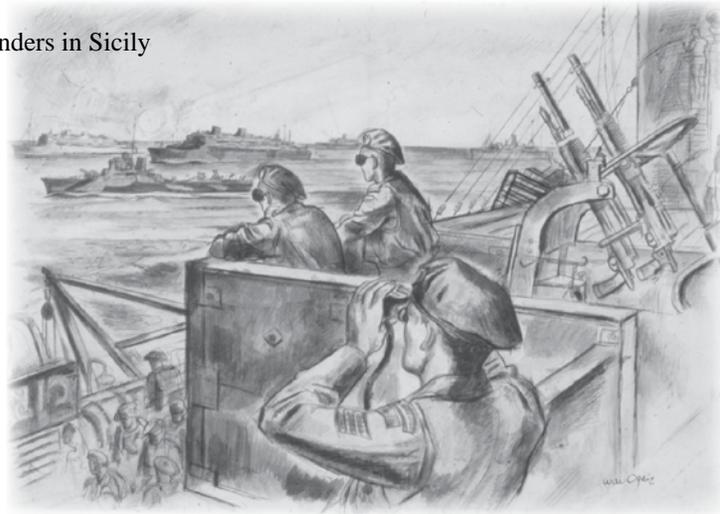
The 48th Highlanders in Sicily

I.S. Johnston

Recommended Citation

Johnston, I.S. (2003) "The 48th Highlanders in Sicily," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 12: Iss. 3, Article 5.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol12/iss3/5>

This Feature is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.



The 48th Highlanders in Sicily

**Account by Lieutenant-Colonel I.S. Johnston, Officer
Commanding 48 Highlanders given on 14 August 1943 at the
Battalion Rest Area near SCORDIA**

As far as we are concerned the Sicilian campaign which ended for 1 Canadian Division about five or six weeks ago, commenced on Easter Sunday, 25 April 1943, when our Church Parade was cancelled by Brigade and a conference of battalion commanders was called. We were warned for special training in an unknown place and were told that the battalions would revert to the old four rifle company establishment and that we would generally prepare for operations. Previous to this we had already commenced mobilization. We then spent another week at EASTBOURNE during which time we formed the fourth rifle company, disposed of extra equipment, cleared out all category men and doubtful physical cases, and completely overhauled equipment. We then went to INVERARY where we trained on Combined Operations without any particular type of country in view, for one week. From INVERARY we went to AUCHINLECK where we completed re-equipment and commenced receiving special equipment such as pack saddles, anti-malarial equipment, mosquito nets, light bicycles, etc. We still had no idea of where we were going. While still at AUCHINLECK we sent away all

men over 40 years of age (about 30) and these were replaced by younger reinforcements. It is an interesting fact that at that late date we had a very large turnover of personnel and received quite a number of untrained men. It was at this stage that we received our first reinforcements most of whom came from other regiments and divisions. At AUCHINLECK we took part in exercise WETSHOD which involved spending five days on board HMS GLENGYLE. During this exercise a landing on a shallow beach based on actual operations was carried out. After WETSHOD I was called to LONDON and briefed on the operation which we have just completed.

Preparations continued in AUCHINLECK and about 10 June the first group of troops with vehicles were dispatched to LIVERPOOL, MANCHESTER and GLASGOW. The battalion itself left AUCHINLECK on 13 June after having been told that it was going off on an exercise and we embarked on M.V. DERBYSHIRE lying in the GAIRLOCH on the same day. About five days later we participated in Exercise STYMIE I. We laid off ARRAN for several days and then returned up the RIVER CLYDE to the TAIL OF THE BANK and stayed there for about another week. We actually set sail for the operation on 28 June.

During the actual landing the 48 Highlanders

Top left and right: *Convoy en route to Sicily* by Major William Abernethy Ogilvie

CWM AN 19710261-4484 & AN 19710261-4483



Photo by Frank Royal, NAC PA 163668

Vehicles of the 1st Canadian Division being hauled up from the beach near Pachino, Sicily, 10 July 1943.

were detailed to act as reserve battalion for 1 CIB. At about noon 9 July as we were passing MALTA a heavy sea blew up and we doubted whether the operation would come off. One company of the Hastings & Prince Edward Regiment together with 40 Royal Marine Commandos were the assault troops and left the DERBYSHIRE on time having loaded into landing craft at the davit heads. Landing Craft Infantries and Landing Craft Assaults then came alongside to take off this battalion and certain other troops. Owing to the heavy swell these craft had difficulty in coming alongside and actually were not fully loaded by the time that we were supposed to touch down at the beach. However, when we were completely loaded we reported to the GLENGYLE at about dawn and brigade held us up for about an hour before we were ordered in as apparently the assaulting battalions had been equally delayed. We were ordered to land on ROGER GREEN I beach and we directed the Navy on to that point and attempted to land on the extreme right of that beach but we touched down on the sandbar. We

were able to pull off this sandbar and attempted another landing on the left of ROGER GREEN I where we again touched down but again found that we were on a reef. We tried to pull ourselves off this reef and tried for ROGER RED beach and saw that other LCIs were having equal difficulty there. We had some strong swimmers carry a line into shore for the men to pull themselves along but these became fouled with two Landing Craft Mechanizeds that had broken down near the beach. Eventually we hauled some passing LCAs and DUKWs and transferred the troops to them and we were carried over the deep water to the beach itself.

There was no small arms fire on the beach during all this delay and we saw only two shells land in the water anywhere near us. After the landing we had a little difficulty correlating the ground with our ideas gained from maps, models and pictures. We gained our first objective without contacting any enemy. Our only difficulty lay in crossing the sand dunes with the mortar and

wireless handcars. We remained on our objective that night during which we were entertained by a fireworks display when the enemy attempted to bomb beaches and harbour from the air. Intentionally or otherwise they dropped one bomb in 'D' Company area but without causing any casualties.

On the following day (11 July) we made for BURGIO which we reached without encountering the enemy and where Lieutenant-General Sir Oliver Leese, General Officer Commanding 30 Corps, paid us a visit. From there we received orders to march to ROSOLINI which we entered with the Italians who surrendered to the tune of 45 PWs. We spent a very uncomfortable night in the town due to the town being on fire in many places coupled with a horrible stench which seemed to pervade everywhere and on top of this it had turned quite cold. During that same night the Royal Canadian Regiment passed through us on vehicles followed by the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment and then ourselves leaving at about 0500 hours, 12 July. We had no vehicles for this march having loaned all of ours to the Royal Canadian Regiment. All that day (12 July) we marched to the area of MODICA. Our heat casualties during this march were severe and we had a very large number of stragglers, but we found a fairly cool area with water where we rested until about midnight and

then continued to march on to GIARRATANIA. Here we spent the night and the surrounding hills to take up positions. Altogether we were in the GIARRATANIA area for about three days and it was here on 14 July that General Sir Bernard L. Montgomery gave his personal talk to the Royal Canadian Regiment and 48 Highlanders on a combined parade.

On the night of the 15 July we left GIARRATANIA at about 2400 hours and moved just south of VIZZINI where the 51 (Highland) Division had been halted. We were thereupon turned off the road on orders from the Brigade and rested in a field. The following morning (16 July) at first light we passed through the 51 (Highland) Division and were then in occupation of VIZZINI, preceded by the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment. Up to this point we had had no fighting, although we did have some contact with the Italians who had packed up in all cases. It was at VIZZINI that we heard for the first time of any troops contacting Germans. At the next town, GRAMMICHELE, the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment ran into some definite trouble but they were able to clear the enemy from the forward reaches of the town by 1200 hours. I was called upon by the Brigade commander to furnish a recon patrol and carriers to enter GRAMMICHELE and see if it was entirely cleared of enemy. Since our carriers had gone down with the CITY OF VENICE, I borrowed

German prisoners captured by Canadian troops near Valguarnera, 17 July 1943.





A Canadian patrol makes its way through the streets of Valguarnera, 19 July 1943.

three carriers from the Brigade Support Group (Saskatoon Light Infantry) using their drivers under the command of one of our officers, Lieutenant McLaughlin, with the balance of the crew coming from 'B' Company. This patrol was to report back by 1400 hours and it did reporting the town clear. In the meantime orders had come through from the General Officer Commanding of the Division to advance by 1400 hours. We did so with a section of carriers leading, a squadron of tanks from 12 Canadian Tank Regiment (Three Rivers Regiment) carrying a company of infantry, a platoon of engineers, together with a detachment of anti-tank guns and the remainder of battalion embussed on motor transport. Because the supporting arms had all been involved in the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment's show, we could not get this column moving until 1500 hours by which time no Forward Observation Officers or engineers had reported. We lead off with the same three carriers and crews that had done the recon. When about two miles out of GRAMMICHELE the leading carrier in which Lieutenant McLaughlin was riding came across a burned-out enemy vehicle which it by-passed, thereby touching the soft shoulder at the side of the road, passed over an enemy mine and blew up. Before the engineers had evidently reported, our own pioneers had been sent forward with this detachment to deal with further enemy mines. They, together with the engineers, who had arrived by this time, reported the road cratered ahead with probable mines. The battalion thereupon debussed and moved across country on either side of the road and by sunset were still several miles from CALTEGIRONE, our objective. The engineers who had been left behind on the road then caught up with us and reported no further

mines, so we went back to the road and moved at a much quicker pace. At about 2400 hours we were ordered not to enter the town but to bivouac on the side of the road. However, at 0200 hours, 17 July, we received instructions to occupy the town before daylight. In the meantime the tanks and certain other vehicles had joined us and we entered the town of CALTEGIRONE at about 0400 hours without opposition. That day (17 July) we moved on through SAN MICHEL and PIAZZA ARMERINA towards VALGUARNERA embussed. It must be pointed out that at this stage of the campaign transport was very scarce and every available vehicle was used to carry troops. When the occasion demanded it some rode on anti-tank guns, Sherman tanks, even the water-wagon and various odd Italian transport which we had picked up on the way. This involved bringing ammunition and other important supplies forward to one dump and leaving as many as three to four dumps on the route according to the priority of equipment.

South of VALGUARNERA a right flanking movement was attempted at which the Royal Canadian Regiment and Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment fanned well out on the high ground to the east of the town. The 48 Highlanders also moved into the high ground about two miles east of the main road where we took up position opposite a ridge from which the enemy were able to observe our movements and position and thereby mortar us. These positions had been taken up shortly after dawn (18 July) and in the afternoon we were ordered to patrol the high ground before us to determine the extent of the enemy's positions. Two platoons from 'D' Company were sent forward as fighting patrols

to this ridge where they found quite a number of enemy positions and which they were able to attack with considerable success and drove the enemy from the area. These two patrols suffered comparatively light casualties in these actions.

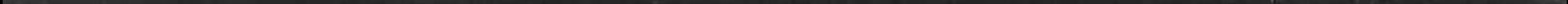
While in the VALGUERNERA area we heard that ENNA had fallen and that our attack was shifted to the axis due north of us. 48 Highlanders were ordered to approach ASSORO by the morning of 19 July across country on either side of the road to STAZIONE di DITTAINO, which we did, moving on the high ground wherever possible. Along this route we encountered minor resistance which we overcame without casualties. As we were about to wheel to the left on the road to ASSORO we were halted and the Royal Canadian Regiment passed through us. We then took up position on the high ground south of the railway track which runs south of ASSORO from west to east. That night the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment passed through us and entered the town of ASSORO where they were cut off.

The following afternoon (20 July), leaving 'A' and 'C' Companies as a firm base, 'D' and 'B' Companies were sent forward toward ASSORO. No.17 platoon came under fire on the right of the road after which numbers 16 and 18 platoons eventually followed by 17 platoon found a covered line of approach near the power station. By nightfall both companies went out of wireless communication but were subsequently found to be on top of the hill covering the approaches to ASSORO and were brought back into communication with each other. At dawn (21 July) 'B' and 'D' Companies were able to clear the enemy from this hill thus permitting the engineers to fill in a road crater which had prevented the supporting arms from getting their

transport forward. During this operation both companies suffered casualties. When the hill was cleared 'A' and 'C' Companies and battalion headquarters were able to push forward and the battalion took up position on the main road west of ASSORO where it was mortared and shelled by the enemy throughout the day. Because of this no supporting arms could reach the battalion. By nightfall (21 July) the battalion was concentrated and prepared to move forward to the road junction north of ASSORO and east of LEONFORTE in square 3594. As it prepared to leave for this road junction it came under heavy shelling and 'D' and 'B' Companies again suffered casualties. After some confusion the battalion assembled on the road and moved in the order - 'D', 'B', 'C' and 'A' Companies. 'D' Company on reaching the road junction reported it clear and 'B' Company thereupon moved forward and through 'D' Company to take up its position. When this occurred both companies came under heavy machine gun fire. By nightfall (22 July) it was difficult to estimate the numbers and positions held by the platoons of the enemy and there was some confusion as to the positions held by the platoons of these companies. Accordingly both companies were ordered to withdraw which they did reporting the presence of at least three tanks in hull down positions and machine guns and infantry in the area. During these actions the 18 sets of both companies had failed. Captain Lynn was the last to withdraw from his company position and a party of men who went back to find him reported that the enemy were withdrawing. Accordingly the battalion moved into the area and took up its positions at about first light (23 July). Throughout the day and that night we were shelled and mortared in these positions without casualties and on the following day (24 July) we were relieved by the Edmonton Regiment and

A Sherman tank from a Canadian armoured regiment moves across a dusty Sicilian plateau, 3 August 1943.





A 3-inch mortar crew firing on enemy positions north of Nissoria, 28 July 1943.

proceeded on foot behind the Royal Canadian Regiment in the direction of NISSORIA. The plan was that the Royal Canadian Regiment should move with their left flank on the road and the 48 Highlanders should move astride the road behind them. The Royal Canadian Regiment contacted the enemy sitting on the ridge east of NISSORIA. The 48 Highlanders were ordered into a position on the high ground west of this town and that night the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment were ordered to pass through to take the ridge where the Royal Canadian Regiment had been held up. Both these battalions lost contact with each other and suffered heavy casualties. It was accordingly planned to put the 48 Highlanders into the attack with a barrage supplied by concentrations from Divisional artillery support at 1800 hours the following day (25 July).

During the morning of 25 July the position in front of us seemed quiet and a troop of 4 Canadian Recce Regiment (4 Princess Louise Dragoon Guards) was able to pass through the town and onto the ridge without contacting the enemy. It was accordingly felt that the enemy had withdrawn. Two patrols were sent out from 'C' Company and they reported back at 1300 hours that they had found enemy tanks and an 88 mm gun on this position. It was too late at this time to lay on an artillery barrage. The Royal Canadian Regiment and Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment had both reported the enemy on the face of the ridge in caves. Medium machine gun fire from the Brigade Support Group was thereupon arranged together with artillery

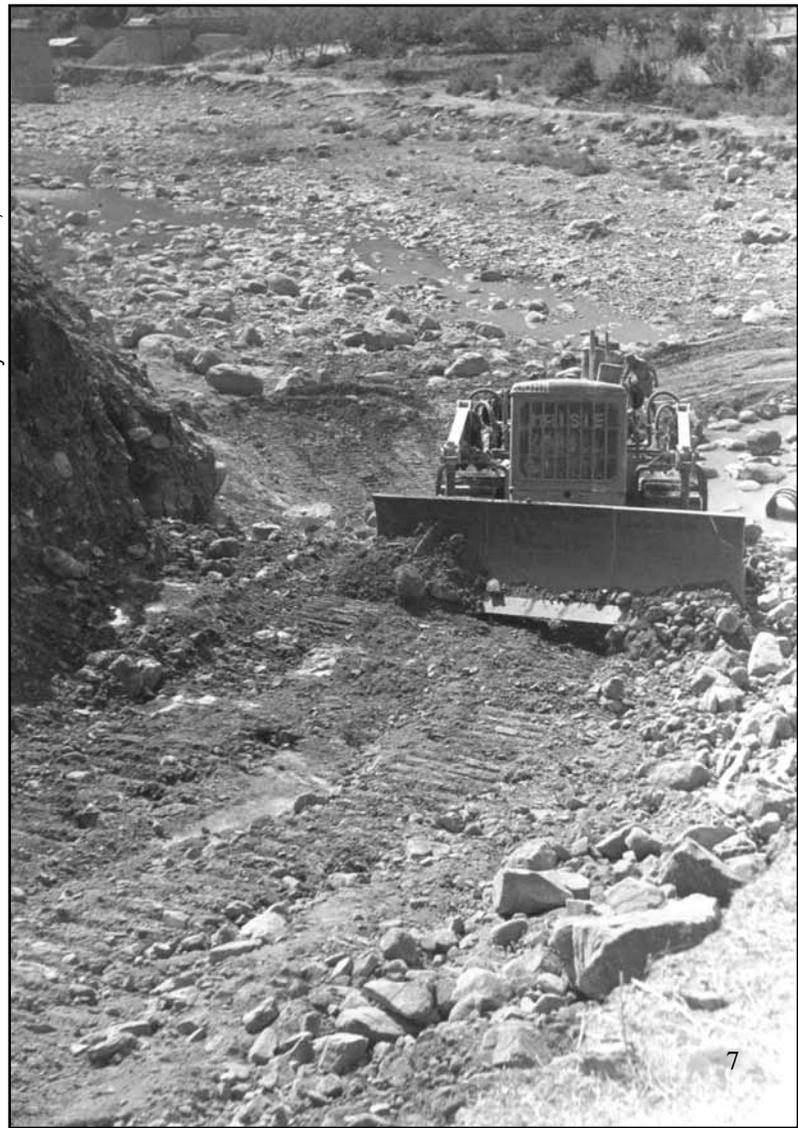
concentrations and this was directed towards the caves. The battalion was ordered to attack at 1800 hours. In view of the condition of the other two battalions, the Royal Canadian Regiment and Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment, the brigade commander ordered that we attack on a one company frontage and, as success was obtained, the other companies were withheld to form a firm base against possible counterattack. It was then decided to attack up a defile on the left of the position with 'D' Company leading who were to wheel out and take the high ground to the north of the feature which was thought to command it. This company was to be followed by 'B', 'C', and 'A' Companies who were to wheel to the right and pass through each other thereby allowing 'A' Company to lay south of the position. The attack went in as ordered with apparently little opposition. During the commencement of the attack the companies were shelled in the forming up areas but without casualties. 'D' Company reported themselves on their objective and 'B' Company was then launched in its attack, followed by 'C' Company. After 'C' Company had gone into the attack 'D' Company reported heavy opposition on reaching their objective. All of this opposition was found to be on the top and reverse slopes of this feature and not on the forward slopes as reported by the other two battalions. The artillery concentrations were to be called down by 18 sets from battalion HQ. This communication failed so the artillery fired a second concentration on a time plan previously agreed upon in the event of such a failure occurring. This turned out to be too early as 'D'

Company had not yet reported on its objective. It was then possible to arrange for artillery fire, as originally planned, to support 'B' Company but the concentration in support of 'C' was laid on twice. 'C' Company failed to take the route following 'D' and 'B' Companies so did not make contact with 'B' Company. After nightfall 'D' and 'B' Companies were both out of communication with battalion HQ. They had failed to attack their objectives and found their positions untenable and they both withdrew. 'C' Company in the meantime had proceeded slowly and laid up after being overtaken by darkness until about midnight when they attacked towards their objective. They found the position closely held by enemy tanks in hull down positions and by other machine gun fire. At about 0200 hours 26 July, Captain Whitelaw, Officer Commanding 'C' Company, reported to battalion HQ and with the consent of the brigade commander was allowed to withdraw with little, if any, casualties. The battalion then took up its original defensive position where it remained during the next two days.

After AGIRA had been taken (29 July), the battalion was ordered on 30 July to move forward towards REGALBUTO. During the early hours of the morning we moved through NISSORIA and AGIRA embussed. We debussed east of AGIRA and continued the march forward on foot. From a forward observation post the brigade commander gave orders for the battalion to take up a position on a long ridge just west of the REGALBUTO cemetery which was then in the occupation of 231 Brigade who were under command of 1 Canadian Division at this time. Since the town of REGALBUTO was still in the hands of the enemy this approach was across country and there was no open road available over which to bring up any supporting arms. On arrival on the position it was found that two companies of the DORSETS were still in possession of this feature and were in contact with the enemy immediately to their front. Shortly thereafter the two remaining companies of the DORSETS who had been in possession of the ridge north of REGALBUTO, were forced to withdraw into our position. The 48 Highlanders then took up position on the south and that night the battalion was placed under command 231 Brigade but the message to this effect had

never reached me as battalion commander. That evening (31 July) 'C' Company was in constant contact with the enemy. Just before dark the battalion received orders to send a strong fighting patrol to the high ground about two to three miles to the north and 'D' Company was dispatched to take up this position and to be there before dawn, 1 August. On arrival in this position 'D' Company found the east edge to be held by the enemy supported by tanks who were on a low plateau to the south of the ridge. Throughout the day this company was in constant contact with enemy snipers during which it suffered some casualties. Throughout that same day 'A' and 'C' Companies had been in contact with the enemy who had tanks in the town which engaged them with medium machine guns and high explosive fire. Although we still had no supporting arms the enemy tanks did not actually come forward to attack us in our positions. During the following night (2 August) the enemy withdrew from the town.

Photo by Jack H. Smith, NAC PA 168706



A bulldozer of the 1st Field Company, Royal Canadian Engineers cuts a new road across the Salso River near Regalbuto, 4 August 1943.

On the morning of 3 August we sent a small patrol into the town which they reported clear of enemy and subsequently two companies of the DORSETS took the town over. That same evening the battalion was ordered to take up a position on the same ridge that 'D' Company then occupied and it did so being in position by first light, 4 August. That afternoon the battalion was ordered to send a strong patrol to the high ground in square 6196 and another patrol forward to RIVER SALSO. 'A' Company was accordingly sent forward to this position and reached it at about 2200 hours. At 0200 hours the following morning (5 August) the battalion was ordered to take up position on the ridge south of the REGALBUTO - CARCACI road and to be in position by 0700 hours, where we spent the night. The following day (6 August) we received orders to prepare to cross the RIVER SIMMETO and together with the company commanders I spent the day on a recce during which we contacted 78 Division who were on our Divisional right flank at CARCACI. On the return trip our party came under machine gun fire in the avoidance of which our Jeep overturned into the ditch and we were obliged to belly-crawl out of the area thereby rendering us late for a brigade orders group conference. The battalion was ordered to send patrols to cross the RIVER SIMETO and to be ready on a quarter of an hour's notice to move by transport or on foot to a forming up place and to be prepared to form a bridgehead. At dawn (7 August) the battalion accordingly assembled in the 'A' Company forward area and prepared to

move. On receipt of orders to do so the battalion crossed the RIVER SALSO after dark, and by a very difficult march route arrived in the forming up area. The leader of our patrol which had been sent forward reported that the enemy were still on the other side of the RIVER SIMETO and had, in fact, troops on the western bank. This patrol was then sent back to cover the recce by the engineer recce party and the engineers reported that the approach to a bridge in the battalion area was impossible. At 0700 hours the following morning (7 August) the battalion commander ordered another patrol to go out and on arrival in the area of CARACI the 78 Division reported that the enemy had withdrawn from the eastern side of the river. Orders were then received, having been brought personally by the Brigade Major, Major G.E. Renison, to cross the river in the area 1,000 yards north of the aqueduct. On approaching the river the battalion was shelled and suffered light casualties. The following night (8 August) 78 Division attacked ADERNO with a heavy barrage of which some shells landed in the battalion area but caused no casualties. On the following day (9 August) the Division was ordered into Army reserve and on 12 August the battalion in a brigade move proceeded to its present area where we are now resting, re-organizing and training for our next campaign.

The original of this document can be found at the National Archives of Canada, RG 24 Volume 10880.

Canadian soldiers clean up at the end of the Sicilian campaign, near Adrano, 18 August 1943.

