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The RCRs in Sicily

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The RCR in Sicily

Account given by Major T.M. Powers, second-in-command Royal Canadian Regiment, on 18 August 1943 in battalion rest area near SCORDIA, SICILY

On 10 July Zero was to be at 0200 hours, but owing to the roughness of the sea (a heavy swell due to the gale of the afternoon before) Landing Craft Assault could not be used. Two Landing Craft Tank were, therefore, brought alongside and they were loaded with much difficulty and much loss of time as these craft proved to be quite awkward to handle. As a result, it could not push off before 0400 hours. We finally landed at 0500 hours some 700 yards to the right of the position we should have landed upon due to miscalculation. These LCTs had aboard them seven DUKWs each and as the LCTs grounded the DUKWs drove up to the beach laden with troops.

Our original plan was to have 'C' and 'D' Companies to act as a beach clearing force. Both these companies were under my command with Captain I.A. Hodson (Officer Commanding 'C' Company acting as second-in-command). Owing to the fact that the landing was unopposed the Force commander altered the plan in that one company only was used to check the beach for enemy and mines. 'D' Company, therefore, proceeded immediately inland and contacted 51 Highland Division on our right who had come in earlier and had established a bridgehead. 'D' Company then proceeded in the direction of MAUCINI capturing twelve Italian soldiers en route. On completion of checking the beach 'C' Company proceeded directly up the main road towards MAUCINI following 'B' and 'A' Companies respectively as the rest of the battalion plan included the destruction of the coast battery at MAUCINI by 'B' Company. The capture of the battery and the spiking of the guns was completed in some 20 minutes without casualties. The battalion then proceeded on towards PACHINO airfield. 'A' Company taking up the lead from MAUCINI proceeded across the PACHINO airfield without casualties to the

northwest corner. 'C' Company followed up and proceeded diagonally across the northeast corner. 'B' and 'D' Companies were held in reserve on the south side of the aerodrome. At approximately 1200 hours an enemy coast battery commenced shelling the portion of the battalion resting south of the aerodrome. This battery was pin pointed by Captain Liddell of 'A' Company who attacked and captured it. In this action 'A' Company lost two killed and three wounded but captured 250 Italian prisoners who, it is estimated, could have held out for least two days if they had the heart to fight. The Officer Commanding, Lieutenant-Colonel R.M. Crowe, and myself proceeded in the Commanding Officer's carrier to 'A' Company's position and on being informed by Captain Liddell that there was a threat of counter-attack on his left front 'D' Company was ordered to attack and seize the small feature in square 9592 which overlooked 'A' Company's position. At approximately 1500 hours 'D' Company made a rapid approach march across the aerodrome up the road running east from it, deployed, and attacked the feature and captured it at 1630 hours. In this skirmish Lieutenant A.W. Roy and two Other Ranks were wounded and one Other Rank killed. The defenses on this feature were well organized and bullets seemed to come from it from all sides and it was remarkable that our troops who were new to battle suffered so few casualties. At approximately 1800 hours 'B' Company was ordered forward and the battalion consolidated on north and west perimeters of the aerodrome remaining there for 24 hours. At 1400 hours, 11 July, we commenced marching and reached ROSOLINI by march route without incident. At ROSOLINI a portion of the battalion was loaded on to a squadron of tanks from 12 Canadian Tank Regiment (Three Rivers Regiment) which had come under command and also on to unit transport which had by this time caught up, and proceeded west about

74 *Canadian Military History*, Volume 12, Number 3, Summer 2003, pp.74-80 The original of this document can be found at the National Archives of Canada, RG 24 Volume 10880..

four miles, overtaking the remainder of the battalion which had previously gone up this route. At approximately 0300 hours, 12 July, the remainder of the battalion embussed on transport pooled by 1 Canadian Infantry Brigade and proceeded northwest to a position four miles east of RAGUSA where the high ground was occupied at 0530 hours that morning. It was five minutes by artillery who had moved up behind us, following which a patrol of the Royal Canadian Regiment carriers would proceed into the town to demand its surrender. This was carried out and on the arrival of the patrol in the town it was discovered that there were some seventeen Americans in the town and that it had already been in occupied by U.S. Forces.

At 1130 hours on the same day (12 July) the battalion proceeded by march route, still in the northwesterly direction, arriving five miles

northeast of RAGUSA on the main road, remaining in this position until 2200 hours that night. At 2220 hours a further march was undertaken to a position one mile south of GIARRATANNA GOLFI. The high ground encircling this town was occupied by us from 0200 hours, 13 July, until 2400 hours, 14 July. At 1200 hours, 14 July, the 1 CIB area was visited by General Sir B.L. Montgomery and the Royal Canadian Regiment and 48 Highlanders formed up in an open field. General Montgomery shook hands with the battalion and company commanders and the Regimental Sergeant Major. He then proceeded to a forward position occupied by the Hastings & Prince Edward Regiment. After this visit the companies returned to their defensive positions. At midnight, 14 July, the battalion then proceeded embussed through VIZZINI northwest to GRAMMICHELE where it halted at 1900 hours, 15 July. We debussed in the town

General Montgomery stands on a DUKW while speaking to Canadian troops on the Pachino peninsula, 11 July 1943.



Photo by Frank Royal, NAC PA 130249



Powers: The RCRs in Sicily

Entrance to Vizzini, Sicily
by Major William Abernethy Ogilvie

CWM AN 19710261-4524

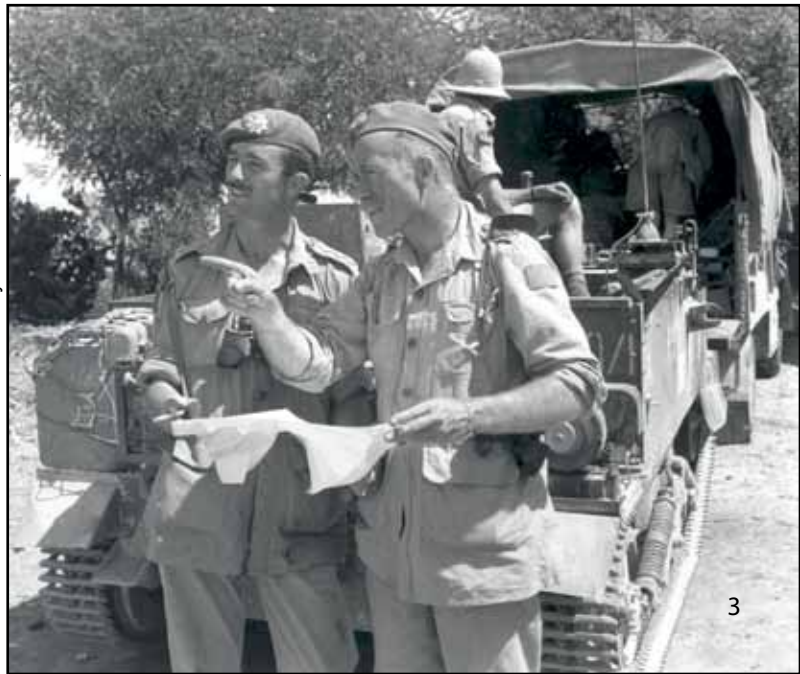
and commenced to clear the road to the west with 'A' and 'B' Companies and battalion headquarters north of the road and 'C' and 'D' Companies south of it, proceeding in a westerly direction over a distance of from 4000 to 5000 yards and arrived at a position about 2 1/2 miles east of CALTEGIRONE where the battalion remained from 0200 hours until 1900 hours, 16 July. During this clearing 'D' Company captured twelve Italian prisoners. At 1900 hours, 16 July, the battalion embussed on unit transport plus Royal Canadian Army Service Corps troop-carrying vehicles which had come under command for this purpose and proceeded through CALTEGIRONE stopping outside of SAN MICHELE di GANZARIA from 2200 hours, 16 July, until 1445 hours, 17 July, this town having been cleared by the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment. At this time we proceeded again embussed through SAN MICHELE di GANZARIA driving to a position northwest and north and one-half mile southeast of PIAZZA ARMERINA in square 3364. The battalion remained in this position from 1950 hours until 2345 hours, 17 July. At 2345 hours the battalion proceeded embussed to the north taking up 3 CIB's position and were on the objective in a northeasterly direction overlooking the valley. The attack was very slow having been held up by German medium machine gun and mortar fire.

The advance continued at approximately 0800 hours, 18 July and the battalion attacked with two companies up ('C' and 'D' Companies) until half way to VALGUERNERA, at which time 'A' and 'B' Companies passed through and proceeded to the high ground overlooking the town.

From the forward edge of a big hill Major J.H.W.T. Pope, second-in-command of the battalion, who was with a forward company, noticed that a section of the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment which had become lost from its battalion was pinned down in a draw by enemy fire. Major Pope proceeded down the hill, rallied this section and brought it to a place of safety. While extricating this section he noticed a blockhouse some 300 yards ahead and beyond, on the south edge of town, three German Mk IV tanks. After his return to the top of the hill he acquired a PIAT and five bombs from 'A' Company, took a section of men and proceeded back down the hill. When within range he fired two bombs at the blockhouse, badly damaging it and killing all the occupants. He then proceeded by a right flanking movement around some houses to the southeast edge of the town until in a position to fire at the tanks. He fired two bombs at the nearest tanks but neither of these bombs exploded. He then withdrew towards the position occupied by 'A' Company and while proceeding over a rise in the ground one of the tanks opened up with machine gun fire killing him and two NCOs of 'A' Company. The battalion consolidated in a position south of and overlooking VALGUERNERA and remained there from 1600 hours, 18 July, until 2300 hours, 19 July.

The battalion moved forward on foot from VALGUERNERA on 20 July to a position in and around the road junction in square 4085 where the battalion deployed and attacked northwards towards ASSORO commencing at

Photo by J.H. Smith, NAC PA 114510



Brigadier Chris Vokes (right) conferring with Major P.R. Bingham of the Royal Canadian Regiment, July 1943.

Photo by Jack H. Smith, NAC PA 151748



Gunners from the 7th Battery, 2nd Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery firing their 25-pounder gun at enemy positions near Nissoria, July 1943.

0700 hours and arriving at a position in square 3888 where the companies took up positions on the tactical features with their foothills leading towards ASSORO. During this attack 'A' Company consisted of a squadron of tanks, nine of which were knocked out by running into an enemy minefield. Here the battalion was shelled and mortared throughout the day and at dusk it was joined by its F Echelon. The battalion remained in this position until 2200 hours, 22 July. On the night of 21 July two companies, 'C' and 'D' Companies, formed a carrying party and carried a full day's rations and ammunition forward and up the mountain of ASSORO to the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment who had been some 30 hours without food. This operation which had been co-ordinated by myself was under the command of Captain Hodson and took place from 2345 hours, 21 July, until 0600 hours, 22 July. There were no casualties. This reflected credit to the troops who took part in such a venture. All told, one hundred men stripped of their ammunition and equipment carried on their backs Everest packs, bandoliers of ammunition around their necks, service biscuits in their pockets, and with such loads climbed up exceedingly steep inclines. In case the enemy were still in position on the southern slopes of ASSORO protection was provided in the form of a company but as events turned out there was no opposition during the venture.

At 2200 hours, 22 July, the battalion moved embussed up the steep winding road to ASSORO. It debussed behind the 48 Highlanders at an area approximately one-half mile to the west of ASSORO. The 48 Highlanders came under heavy enemy fire in square 3692 as the battalion took up this defensive position, which was completed by first light on 23 July. The battalion remained there until 1145 hours, 24 July, at which time it proceeded north and east in an approach march toward ASSORO. The brigade plan at this time was for the Royal Canadian Regiment to advance due east and capture AGIRA. This did not materialize, however, owing to the exceedingly strong enemy resistance on the high ground east of NISSORIA. Zero hour for the attack was set at 1500 hours and at Zero minus 10 a series of artillery concentrations opened up and the Royal Canadian Regiment advanced with two companies forward, 'D' Company north of the road and 'C' Company south of the road, followed by 'B' and 'A' Companies respectively. Battalion HQ with Lieutenant-Colonel Crowe advanced along the axis of the road followed at approximately 100 yards by myself as acting second-in-command and the Adjutant and personnel of Rear Battalion HQ. The advance continued right into the town of NISSORIA which had been evacuated by the enemy. Battalion HQ had arrived there at approximately 1700 hours. During the advance 'D' Company suffered



Personnel of the Support Company, Royal Canadian Regiment, riding on mules used to transport supplies and casualties. In the vicinity of Regalbuto, 3 August 1943.

casualties from enemy artillery and mortar fire. Lieutenant T.F. McCrossan was wounded, Company Sergeant-Major Steenson was killed and several junior NCOs and men were killed and wounded.

During this action the Medical Officer, Captain J.M. Heller, assisted by the Chaplain, Honourary Captain R.A. Wilkes, distinguished themselves by the rapid treatment and evacuation of the wounded under murderous enemy fire. It must be pointed out that at this time the battalion was subjected to heavy enemy fire because as it advanced eastwards it had on its left and to the north an open flank wherein the enemy was dug in and made persistent use of his mortars and machine guns.

In NISSORIA a squadron of tanks came under our command and while we were in forward positions the commander of the 2 Field Regiment Royal Canadian Artillery, Lieutenant-Colonel Haig, and the commander of the 12 Canadian Tank Regiment (Three Rivers Regiment), Lieutenant-Colonel Booth, were well up forward to witness the proceedings. As the attack progressed and fighting became confused three companies had proceeded wide to the left flank and forged ahead thereby by-passing a certain amount of enemy resistance. The fourth company, 'D' Company, remained on the north side of the road and fought

its way with great courage up a particularly steep feature which was strongly held by the enemy.

"Down in the valley, RCR led the 1 CIB attack with a squadron of 12 Cdn Tks under command. The Battalion plan was to send two rifle companies forward, marching off the road, to take NISSORIA. The other two companies were then to follow through and take the high ground east of the town. It was twelve miles to AGIRA so it was expected that if there was opposition, the Hastings & Prince Edward Regiment would probably pass through them to complete the final phase of the operation. At 1400 hours, the forward companies crossed the start line with the Battalion Commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Crowe, proceeding along the road abreast of them. NISSORIA was reached and cleared according to plan, but at the eastern edge of the town the advance troops came under heavy enemy machine gun and mortar fire which indicated that the main German positions were on the hills immediately to the east. Unfortunately, at this crucial point, when it was necessary to coordinate the further attack of the four rifle companies, wireless communications began to break down and it became necessary to relay messages from one company to another. One company was ordered to continue the advance on the left or north side of the road onto the enemy-held hill feature while the other leading company continued to

advance to the south of the road where brisk fighting ensued. Thinking that the latter company had succeeded in securing the enemy position, Lieutenant-Colonel Crowe ordered the remaining two companies to "push on" in the same direction. Up to this point the advance had been covered by good fire support from the Brigade Support Group. When NISSORIA was reported secure, "F" Echelon vehicles and advance Battalion Headquarters moved forward to an olive grove on the outskirts of the town where they were subjected to heavy enemy artillery fire during the rest of the day, but fortunately casualties and damage were not excessive. Actually the three companies had passed up a valley to the south of the road, by-passing the enemy positions, and had continued on in the direction of AGIRA. As a result, Lieutenant-Colonel Crowe and his party walked right into the enemy area. The Battalion Commander, a corporal and two privates were some distance ahead of the rest of the party when the Germans opened fire. Calling out "RCR," Lieutenant-Colonel Crowe pressed on hoping to reach his troops. An enemy machine gun then opened fire and wounded him. He proceeded, however, to engage the enemy with a singaller's rifle, but was killed by another enemy bullet. Two of the three other ranks were also killed while the third was wounded and presumably taken prisoner. The rest of the party managed to withdraw to the town."¹

On 26 July, the battalion moved back to the LEONFORTE area and relieved the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. On 27 July at approximately 1600 hours Lieutenant-Colonel Crowe, whose body had been recovered earlier in the day, was buried with a simple but impressive ceremony. The battalion stayed in this area until 30 July. On this day we moved embussed from LEONFORTE to an area just east of AGIRA. We were the last unit in the column following brigade HQ and the Brigade Support Group, and as we came down from over the slope of AGIRA on the eastern side and proceeded along this winding switchback road we were heavily shelled by enemy fire. The only casualties were

Captain I.H. Hodson (acting second-in-command) and Lieutenant McAskell of 4 Canadian Recce Regiment (4 Princess Louise Dragoon Guards) (attached). We took up a position in an area two or three miles east of AGIRA and remained there during the attack of 231 Brigade, which had come under command of 1 Canadian Division, on REGALBUTO. On the following day, 31 July, the Royal Canadian Regiment were ordered to proceed to attack REGALBUTO. An approach march of six to seven miles was made and we proceeded via a track south of the feature, which lies immediately west of REGALBUTO and which was then in occupation by elements of 231 Brigade, and continued into the outskirts of REGALBUTO on the southwestern side which, being unoccupied, was supposed to have gone ahead in the early hours of darkness with the intention of drawing out enemy fire and tapping out their positions, had failed to accomplish this. The battalion plan, therefore, was to send one company ahead at Zero (Zero was 0200 hours) followed at 30 minute intervals by the second and third companies. The object was for the first company to draw fire to pin point enemy positions and then capture a knoll overlooking the remainder of the feature. The second company was to advance on their right if the first company succeeded, proceed to the top of the ridge, swing east and proceed followed closely by the third company clearing out whatever enemy would be encountered. There was a very deep gorge running through this section of the town with houses on both sides of it which were not evident from the map, and these caused considerable delay for all companies in getting across to attack up the feature.

The battalion proceeded in the attack in the following order of companies: 'D', 'B' and 'A' Companies and 'C' Company in reserve and battalion HQ remaining in town on the west side of the gorge. 'A' Company was the first to draw fire which came from two enemy tanks and a medium machine gun which were so sited that they could sweep the main north-south road which ran along the side of the hill. 'A' Company immediately went to ground and sent a platoon on a left flanking movement through the northern sector with the intention of swinging in from the left and knocking out the tanks with a PIAT. This platoon proceeded over the first objective which had not yet been occupied by 'D' Company.

1. Major Powers described this action in another report. For the sake of continuity, the account quoted here has been taken from CMHQ Report 135, "Canadian Operations in Sicily, Jul-Aug 1943. Part II: The Execution of the OPERATION by 1 Cdn Inf Div. Section 2: The Pursuit of the Germans from Vizzini to Aderno 15 Jul to 6 Aug 43., dated 4 May 1945, pp.82-84.

They left a party consisting of a Sergeant and 12 other ranks to cover their rear and proceeded down the hill toward the tanks and dropped off another section. The platoon commander with the remaining section and the PIAT team continued toward the tanks. This party drew heavy fire from the medium machine guns and tanks and were forced to withdraw. Proceeding up the hill during this withdrawal they picked up the intermediate section but could find no trace of the first section left to guard the rear, and they have not been seen or heard of since. It is presumed that this section was surrounded and all the personnel taken prisoners for their weapons and ammunition were found lying about in the area. About 0400 hours the remainder of the party and the platoon commander (Lieutenant M.C.D. Bowman) proceeded down the hill in an effort to rejoin their company but were again pinned down by yet another tank. Lieutenant Bowman quickly withdrew his party over the north side of the hill and proceeded to the upper sector of REGALBUTO which was still in enemy hands, and worked his way through the town without losing any men. He eventually joined the 48 Highlanders who were at that time north of REGALBUTO. After waiting for some considerable time for this platoon to carry out its task against the enemy tanks 'A' Company commander, Captain R.G. Liddell, sent another platoon around by the right flank to accomplish the same mission but again the volume of enemy fire rendered this attack unsuccessful. In the meantime 'D' and 'B' Companies also attempted to get up the hill but in each case could not advance in the face of enemy fire laid down. As first light was breaking all three companies dug in immediately and took cover on the eastern side of the gorge and numerous attempts to get across on the main south road during the hours of daylight failed. After dawn F Echelon arrived on the outskirts of the southern edge of the town but had to be withdrawn owing to heavy enemy shelling which was then in progress. The Officer Commanding anti-tank platoon, Lieutenant E.H. Shuter, came forward with an NCO (the No. 1 of an anti-tank gun) and carried out a recce in order to locate these enemy tanks. On pin pointing one of the tanks word was sent back to F Echelon and an anti-tank gun was manhandled forward into the outskirts of the town in 'C' Company's position. The gun was swung around into position, a

round was placed in the breach but before the No. 1 could fire the enemy tank had opened fire at very close range, the first round striking the gun and knocking it over backwards. Lieutenant Shorter, his No. 1, and members of the crew were wounded and one Other Rank killed. The enemy tank continued to fire on this position with high explosive shells but the wounded members of the gun crew were eventually evacuated under extremely difficult conditions. As it was evident that no further progress could be made that day the order was received from brigade to withdraw clear of the gorge by 2300 hours. The intention was to bring down artillery and mortar fire just east of this gorge. At 2115 hours the battalion commenced thinning out and the withdrawal was completed by 2230 hours. The battalion then marched back to an area some three miles to the rear and remained there overnight.

At 0100 hours the morning of 3 August the battalion was ordered to move forward and take up a position around Mount SAN GIORGIO (?). This move was completed by 0530 hours that same morning. The battalion remained in this position overnight and on 4 August at approximately 1300 hours proceeded across country due east to take up a position on top of Mount CRISCINA. This position was occupied by 1700 hours and the battalion remained there overnight. The following day, 5 August, was spent on this high ground. On the morning of 6 August the battalion moved down from the high ground to the north and then proceeded west to take up the position vacated by the 48 Highlanders in the area in square 5895. That same afternoon at approximately 1530 hours the battalion moved east and north to the lower slopes of Mount ETNA just forward of ADERNO, arriving there at approximately 2000 hours. The battalion remained in this position until 13 August resting and reorganizing, at which time by a long military transport move the battalion proceeded to the present brigade area just south of SCORDIA.

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