

1999

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, Colonel "The Toronto Scottish Machine Gun Battalion in Normandy (July–August 1944)."
Canadian Military History 8, 4 (1999)

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The Toronto Scottish Machine Gun Battalion in Normandy (July-August 1944)

**as given by Colonel Johnson,
Commanding Officer to Captain Engler
near Bourgheroulde, 29 August 1944**

The battalion's activities in NORMANDY do not reveal any new techniques or unusual procedures or expound any new doctrine. Their main result is to vindicate in action the teachings from instructors and from pamphlets used in England.

The battalion contains three medium machine gun companies each with three platoons, each containing four medium machine guns. The characteristics of this weapon are a long narrow beaten zone and the ability to fire indirectly as well as directly over considerable ranges. Carriers add a certain additional mobility but the machine guns and their ammunition must be manhandled when required. In their employment it must be remembered that they are not suited to close country and when they are used in areas of this sort a careful reconnaissance is required so that they may be placed in the most advantageous position. For this, a good plan is essential so that the long enfilade fire may be made use of interlocking over a wide front. If this is to be done quickly, it should be done at a reasonably high level where liaison is not required between units. It is also wise to use these weapons to secure a volume of fire where their long range and narrow beaten zone can be employed most effectively rather than to disperse them and thus be forced to use many of them in less advantageous positions. For this reason the brigade commanders should consider terrain carefully and be prepared to retain the machine guns as a brigade reserve or to allot them entirely to one battalion if necessary.

An alternative to this has occasionally occurred where brigades have sub-allotted their company with one platoon to each battalion, presumably for the sake of fairness. The battalion commander has been, of course, glad to receive any additional weapons to assist him in his operations and has accepted them whether they were really able to be used efficiently or not. In turn, battalion commanders have been tempted to sub-allot them with one gun per coy or more often to place them far forward where he has naturally been most concerned with protection. The company commander, thus saddled with machine guns where no proper fields of fire are available, has tended again to place them with his most exposed platoons where they have performed the functions of local defence alone. Thus, a zone of medium machine gun fire covering the divisional front or its most exposed areas, has been converted into a series of isolated medium machine gun positions not mutually supporting, and with poor fields of fire. The guns themselves have been sited far forward where they have been needlessly exposed without performing a justifiably effective role. In the advance the medium machine guns have two functions to perform. They can support the infantry with fire before their attack and during its early stages can cover enemy positions with effective fire. Then their role appears to be to wait until the infantry have consolidated on their objective and then to come forward and be positioned in readiness for a deliberate counterattack. Only thus is it possible for proper reconnaissance to be made in order to place the



Photo by M.M. Dean, NAC PA 166807

Above & right: Bren Gun Carriers of the Toronto Scottish Carrier Platoon ready to move into action near Tilly-la-Campagne, France, 8 August 1944.

weapons on the ground with proper fields of fire and proper support and protection. The alternative is to bring the medium machine guns forward earlier where they have to be positioned often in the dark without any real reconnaissance and where they thus can not perform their function effectively. The practice has occasionally occurred of placing medium machine guns in "F" Echelon well forward even when there has been no plan drawn up for their immediate use. Thus they have had to stand mortaring and shelling casualties needlessly and often have been brought forward into dangerous areas only to wait while hurried and incomplete reconnaissance has been made for their positions.

The defensive battle permits time for placing these weapons very carefully and for digging them in with great care. The thing requiring attention that their DF and DFSOS tasks be interlocked with artillery and mortar plans, having regard for their characteristics.

The battle at VERNON provides an excellent example of the use of machine guns in defence. Here the machine guns fired at extreme range



Photo by M.M. Dean, NAC PA 132656

and were carefully given tasks which fitted in with those given to the artillery and the mortars. **All** these tasks appeared on a single trace and during the holding of the line from 11 to 19 July the machine guns fired very often and very effectively.

During the advance the machine guns have been used for effective fire to protect the flanks particularly during the advance SOUTH to cover the river at ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE and at BRETTEVILLE-SUR-LAIZE. During the advance on the night 7/8 August 1 platoon commander



Photo by D.I. Grant, NAC PA 1711

Above: Canadian soldiers train with the Vickers Medium Machine Gun in England, April 1944.

Left: Sergeant Ben Landriault of the Toronto Scottish Carrier Platoon, Normandy France, August 1944.



Photo by M.M. Dear, NAC PA 141857

paid dearly by forgetting the rules of the textbook in the area SOUTH of ROCQUANCOURT. He there brought forward his platoon without making an adequate reconnaissance and without having them dismount at a suitable distance in rear of the enemy. Instead they came straight forward in their vehicles to an orchard near the airport and suffered heavy casualties when they ran into an enemy tank.

The experiences so far indicate that the machine guns should not be used when the country does not permit giving them proper fields of fire. They should be used on as high a level as the situation permits and care should be taken in timings so that they are not brought forward until they are required and until adequate preparations have been made for placing them.

The mortar company, with its four platoons and four mortars per platoons has proved an efficient and valuable weapon. Its chief lack is range. At present it is outranged by enemy mortars and thus is ineffective in a great deal of counter mortar work. Its characteristics include a wide beaten zone, 150 x 250 yards. Because of its very wide beaten zone and because of its value in bringing down devastating fires it should be used in concentrations on the targets most suited to it rather than be dispersed and have its effectiveness frittered away in penny packets. Again the moral seems to be to make use of it on the highest possible level.