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The Attack on the Church in St. Martin-de-Fontenay 31 July - 1 August 1944

Major Jacques Dextraze,
“D” Company, Fusiliers de Mont-Royal

Editor’s Note: General J.A. Dextraze, “J Dex” to Canada’s post-war army, served as Chief of the Defence Staff from 1972 to 1975 but in 1944 he was a 24-year-old company commander in Les Fusiliers de Mont-Royal (FMR). This account of the action carried out by his company on 1 August 1944 offers a graphic description of the challenges confronting the Canadians during the battles for Verrières Ridge. This attack was conducted in the context of Montgomery’s orders to “keep up the pressure on the Caen area...to make easier the task of the American armies fighting hard on the western flank.” (27 July 1944)

The church at St. Martin-de-Fontenay had been seized by the enemy in the aftermath of Operation “Spring,” 25 July 1944. The FMR successes on 31 July allowed 2nd Division to begin the advance of 8/9 August, Operation “Totalize,” from a secure startline.

Though written in the first person, this report was drafted by Captain Joe Engler, the historical officer assigned to 2nd Canadian Infantry Division. It was his job to collect important documents and records, as well as to conduct interviews with the fighting soldiers which would allow later historical narratives to be accurately written. Engler had the dubious distinction of being the only historical officer to be killed in action when he drove into an ambush on 1 October 1944.

**Account of the Attack on the Church
in St. Martin-de-Fontenay by “D”
Company, Fusiliers de Mont-Royal,
31 July-1 August 1944 as told by
Major Jacques Dextraze to Captain
Engler at St. Martin-de-Fontenay,
3 August 1944.**

My company, “D” Company, had new reinforcement officers and its strength at this time was 80 all ranks which resulted in about 72 fighting men. In three platoons I had two officers, a sergeant, a corporal, and a lance corporal. The company was protecting the left flank of the battalion and was about a thousand yards away from our own troops on either side. One platoon was in the house 02546075 and in the garden to the left of the house. Another platoon was behind in the orchard to the NORTH

of the house. The third platoon was behind and to the right of the other two platoons.

Our information was that there were about twenty men in the church, the church yard and the surrounding hedges. The intention of the brigade commander was that my battalion, Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal (FMR), would seize and hold the church which previously had been attacked several times unsuccessfully.

I was resting with “B” Echelon in CAEN for three days and was planning to go that evening to BAYEUX to have dinner with a French family there. That afternoon, out of mere curiosity, I attended a brigade “O” Group, heard the discussion concerning the attack on the church and probably presented too many ideas for my own future comfort. As usually happens with people who say how a thing should be done, I



Photo by Daniel Gurvich, Library and Archives Canada (LAC) PA 146281

Jacques Dextraze (second from left in sheepskin coat), holds an Orders Group in a house in Munderloh, Germany, 29 April 1945. At the time Dextraze wrote the report on the action in St. Martin-de-Fontenay he was a major commanding "D" Company of Les Fusiliers de Mont-Royal, but by the end of the war he had been promoted to lieutenant-colonel in command of the regiment.

was finally given the job. At 1800 hours my commanding officer (CO) ordered me to report to the unit which was several miles forward. I arrived by 1930 hours completely out of the picture as I had been left out of battle (LOB). I was told the battalion plan and the CO's intention that my company should attack and hold the church and churchyard. I got to my company about 2200 hours. Its situation was that the road running EAST and WEST through ST MARTIN-DE-FONTENAY to VERRIERES was no-man's-land. The orchards NORTH of that road were our front, although some enemy snipers were hidden in buildings NORTH of the road and to our right for several days. SOUTH of the road, in the church 025607, in the cemetery surrounding it, and in the large walled orchard to the SOUTH, and in the buildings WEST of the church, the enemy had his positions. On each flank and on his front he held high ground giving him excellent observation on our every moment.

My recce was made in three-quarters of an hour before last light from the house, from the exit from the house, and along the road to the right of the house. This last recce along the road was dangerous as Jerry was throwing grenades over the wall every five or ten minutes. I had an air photo and studied it for a few minutes but soon darkness came and I could not see nor did I dare show a light.

My first view of the situation made me feel that we could never take and hold the place. After

my recce I finally called my "O" Group and explained to each what I wanted done. Because of the closeness of the enemy and the nature of the attack, surprise was of great importance. Also, because I had so few NCOs, I felt obliged to explain my plan personally to every section leader and to impress individually upon him what I intended.

My intention was to capture and hold the church, the cemetery, and the church-yard at all costs.

Method

Medium machine guns (MMGs) were to protect the exposed left flank from H until H plus 20 sweeping along the edge of the road from the southeast corner of the church orchard EAST to the sunken track 028607, and road junction to the left.

Artillery - One field regiment from H until H plus 20 fired on area from point 020606 EAST to point 025605. This included the high ground at the end of the orchard 400 yds in front of my position. 3-inch mortars from H until H plus 20 was to fire 400 yards left of the church along the road running EAST-WEST.

Infantry - 16 Platoon was to remain where they were in the large L-shaped building NORTH of the road and NE of the church. They were to act as a firm base for our operation and were to give light machine gun (LMG or Bren) covering

fire. This house is a three story house and the upper story overlooks the larger part of the church-yard. Eight LMGs were sited in it. Two were to engage the hedge on the left of the church-yard. Six others were to engage the orchard, the church, and the cemetery surrounding the church. In addition to giving this fire support the platoon at all costs was to maintain this firm base.

18 Platoon was to form up in the yard to the left of the building. At H plus 2 they were to cross the road, mount the little wall on the SOUTH side of the road, and enter the field (02566069) turn right and using fire and movement get through the breach in the wall and clear all the ground SOUTH of the church as far as the SOUTH wall of the yard. The leading section of 18 Platoon, when it went through the gap in the wall, would turn left and head straight SOUTH along the hedge to take out an MG in the SE corner of the church-yard which could not be covered by fire from the house. The other sections were to head WEST across the orchard and clear it from the NORTH end, near the cemetery, to the SOUTH wall.

17 Platoon had varied tasks, No.4 Section was to take out an LMG situated in the NE corner of the churchyard 02546070, when the first round of supporting artillery fire fell. As equipment this section took No.36 grenades, rifles, and one LMG. The Section, after getting

the MG post inside the orchard in the NE corner, was to remain at that corner and cover the road WEST of that point. Their forming up point (FUP) for taking the MG out was directly across the road from this MG. 5 and 6 Sections were to form up behind our HQ building where 18 Platoon was ready to go at 0445 hours. They were to follow 18 Platoon into the church-yard, clear the cemetery, the church and the area around it.

One hour was devoted to getting the men noiselessly into this court-yard flat on their bellies with the noses of the leading men almost on the road.

Consolidation

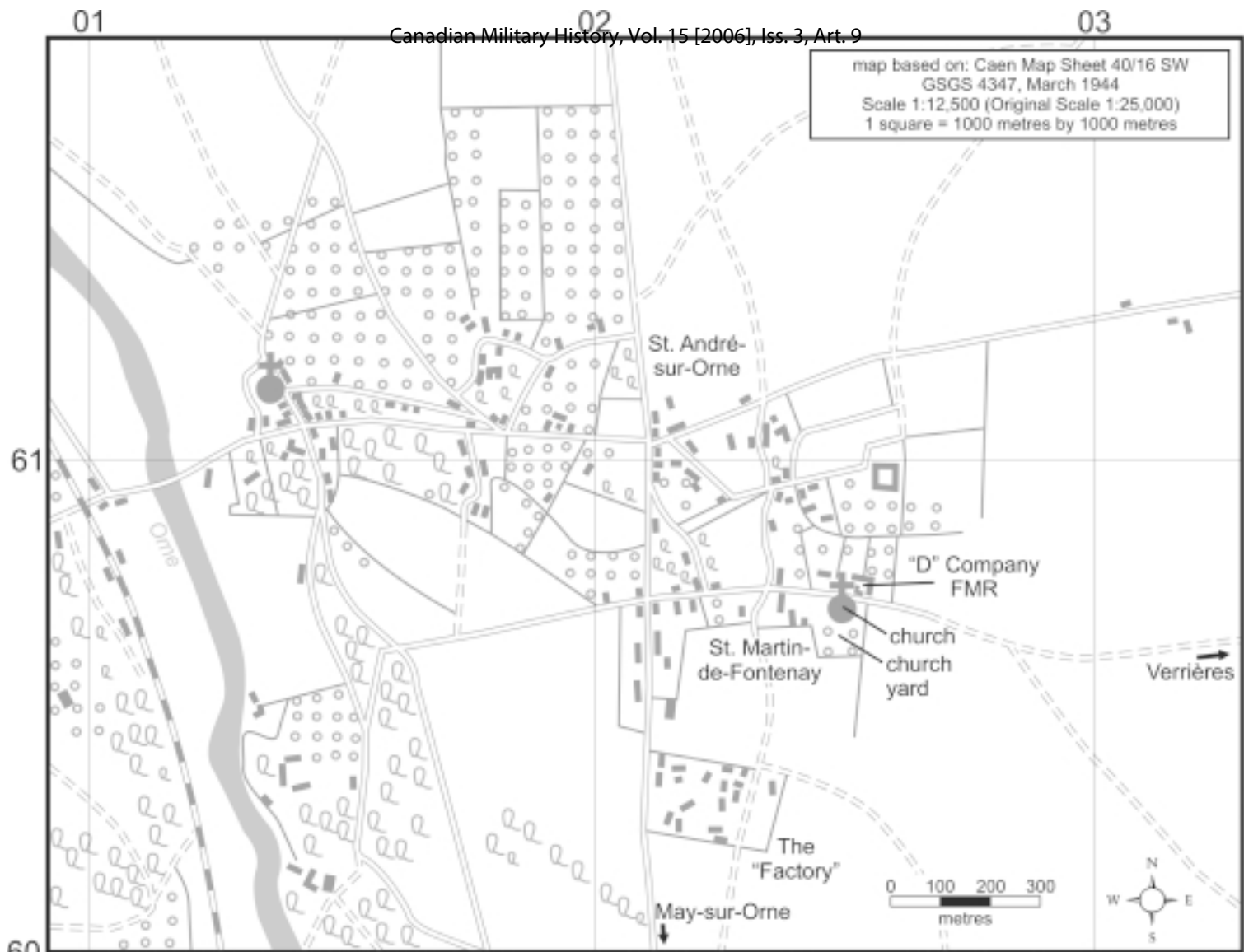
On consolidation 16 Platoon was to continue at and around the house. 17 Platoon was to put two sections in the right at the corner of the church-yard covering the road and having Brens 30 yards in front of the church and sweeping it. 18 Platoon, after clearing the whole church-yard, was to withdraw NORTH and take up positions SOUTH of the church not more than 50 yards and not less than 30 yards from it. This was in order to secure safety from shelling and at the same time economize my small force.

Every man carried entrenching tools and a pick or shovel tied to their back. Each man wore

A soldier from Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal on a patrol through the destroyed village of May-sur-Orne, 9 August 1944.



LAC PA 114507



To assist in planning his attack on the Church and Church yard in St. Martin-de-Fontenay, Major Dextraze would have had access to a 1:25,000 scale map and aerial reconnaissance photographs, very similar to map and air photo reproduced here. The specific locations given by Dextraze in his report (6- and 8- figure map grid references) can be plotted on the map above.

skeleton web and carried a 50-round bandolier, two grenades, one tin of bully-beef, a package of hard-tack, and a 24-hour emergency ration. Most of this fitted into the Bren pouches, and the Bren magazines themselves were inside their tunics. My HQ remained in the house with 16 Platoon. H-Hour was 0530 hours, 1 August 1944.

During the night and early morning I briefed each of the NCOs personally and every section leader as well. I finished this job at 0400 hours. I had each section leader view his startline and the place where his section would form up before the attack. I slept from 0400 hours till 0430 hours.

The forming up went just as I had ordered. This took one hour. The courtyard is very small and within grenade range of the enemy positions.

At this time it was covered with broken tile from nearby roofs. Essential to the success and even to the safety of my company in this phase was absolute surprise and absolute silence. Thus it took a full hour to place all my men in position in this dark and noisy and crowded courtyard.

An original portion of the plan was to have a section of pioneers blow holes in the wall along the road at each end of the NORTH wall of the church-yard. After my recce I cancelled this part of the plan because it would have meant suicide for the pioneers and loss of surprise in our attack. We would have had to go over the wall into the road, cross the road and go through the holes in the wall into the church-yard, all in moonlight with Jerry's small arms fire enfilading the road. This would have been disastrous. PIATs had already been tried but their effect on these

This air photo, taken on 18 July 1944, shows the Church and Church yard in St. Martin-de-Fontenay captured by "D" Company, Les Fusiliers de Mont-Royal on 1 August 1944. Dextraze would have carried an air photo very similar to this during his recce of their objective on the evening before the assault.



walls was only to make a small hole large enough only for firing through but not for assaulting through. If the enemy had not been so close we could have used this method of attack. We would have been subjected only to the sniping from a distance. As it was, being close, we were subjected at all times to grenades and rifle and automatic fire lobbing at us and sweeping us. Just while we were starting to form up one enemy

LMG moved up right in the front of the door of the house. We had to push him out with grenades before we could form up. We covered what noise we could not avoid making as we formed up by small arms fire which would not be in so great a volume as to arouse his suspicions. He just fired whenever he heard a noise or in reply to our fire.



The church at St. Martin-de-Fontenay is visible in the centre of this photo, taken in 1946. The photograph was taken from just north of St. André-sur-Orne looking to the southeast from the main north-south road running through St. André and St. Martin. The commanding position of the church in the small valley clearly explains the rationale behind the orders given to Dextraze.

From H until H plus 2 all the enemy fire covering the road was neutralized. Then my artillery came down and one shell fell short about 20 yards in front of my startline. It took 15 minutes until I got the fire moved forward and all this time I had to keep my men flat on the ground and absolutely silent, in the tiny courtyard. It was too far away for me to hold the eager men in 4 Section who were to take out the MG at the NE corner of the church-yard. This section went forward according to the original plan and wiped out the gunner with grenades. At H plus 15 the remainder of the attack went in according to the original plan. The officer in charge of the leading platoon was wounded in the leg by small arms fire just as he started out. Corporal Lambert reported the loss to me and I shouted at him to take charge immediately. He carried through the job very coolly as if nothing had happened. Having been briefed thoroughly he found no difficulty in carrying out his orders. The platoon got into the field and to the gap in the side of the wall. 17 Platoon's two other sections went in a few seconds later and did a fine job on the cemetery and the church. One Bren gunner and one rifleman went into the church. They found three Nazis sleeping. High up on the scantlings along each window were three LMGs sited on our position in the house and 45 minutes after zero hour the whole show was completed. The area was entirely cleared and we were consolidating. Quite a lot of slit trenches had been dug in the orchard and around the church and these gave immediate

protection. We used them at once and improved them later.

Half an hour later Jerry counterattacked coming in one section strength. This attack came from the SE corner of the orchard, and was broken up at once. 15 minutes later a second counterattack, two sections strong, came from the opposite corner and this was also smashed. One hour after these attacks he started mortaring us and kept this up for 36 hours almost without stopping.

In the attack itself the company had ten casualties, one of which was fatal. From the shelling after there were about 20 casualties. In addition to shelling us he used self-propelled (SP) guns and aimed directly at our slit trenches and also swept the orchard with MG fire from his tanks. Next day he succeeded in working a MG forward about 300 yards along the road to the left of my position. After the first burst of fire that MG was silenced from our own Brens.

In the attack I had all my gunners put the gas regulator at the largest hole so as to produce the highest volume of fire. Jerry knowing our weapons establishment so well thought it was a whole battalion attack and most of his men began running SOUTH through the orchard where they were mowed down by our overhead fire from the house. We killed or wounded all told about 30 men in the 45 minutes. Since the attack in the last two days we have probably taken 10

more. Two days later, that is on the night of 2/3 August, a platoon put in a counterattack against us. With our Brens all on fixed lines we were protected and covered on all flanks. As soon as the platoon in the orchard opened fire all the other Brens opened and the attack was driven off. In front of our position in the church-yard we have set out a string of No. 75 grenades, tincans from our rations, and altogether erected an obstacle across the orchard. We have made good use of his equipment and now have our own telephones linking Company HQ with the forward platoon in the church-yard. During the first 76 hours after the attack he shelled our HQ with medium artillery. Before he could get a direct hit on the house the platoon and everyone in Company HQ was evacuated except one forward observation officer (FOO) and a platoon commander who were killed while still on the first floor. After knocking the house to bits he stopped his shelling and we were able to come back as we are now with our Bren guns back on fixed lines.

Lessons

Brief NCOs personally when possible or make sure that they are carefully briefed. The old adage, "Win the fire fight," still holds. This must be certain before the attack goes in. In the actual attack itself yell like hell. This keeps everyone cool and in good temper, in fact men start to laugh. Have a simple plan. Site your weapons to cover the enemy fully even if this means exposing yourself somewhat.

Much of our success is to be attributed to the good information which we had concerning

the enemy. Although we are seriously at fault in underestimating his strength, thinking he had only a platoon of about 20 men where there actually turned out to be 45, we did have exact knowledge of his dispositions. This we obtained by our firing during the day and during the period of preparation. It was possible to assign to each Bren gunner a specific enemy position which he was to neutralize.

A soldier from Les Fusiliers de Mont-Royal on patrol in May-sur-Orne, 9 August 1944.

Photo by Ken Bell, LAC PA 131357



This photograph was taken from the northern edge of May-sur-Orne in 1946. The tall building on the right side of the photo is the Church in St. Martin-de-Fontenay while the mine tower in the "factory" area is visible on the left side of the photo.

