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First Deployment of the 14th Field Regiment, RCA D-Day – Bernières-sur-Mer – 6 June 1944

Wesley M. Alkenbrack

The shore was coming on fast now as we came through the pounding surf of shallow water, but in our tense anxiety of starting engines and final movement checks as the ramp fell in a great swirl of rushing water we had no time to observe the activity around us. Nor could we know how the rest of the Regiment had fared along the shore.

In our final moments of excited departure we were keenly aware that we had escaped at least one hazard we had feared - the explosive devices planted on steel tripods in the shallow water we had come through, designed to detonate and blow up any vessel that bumped into them on the way in. We knew some other landing craft had not been so fortunate.

As for the total scene, it was already approaching a state of madness brought about by too feverish activity in too small a space. The beach was a veritable kaleidoscope of rapid sight and sound, beach masters and their staffs desperately trying to move and hasten the mass of traffic now pouring ashore from stranded craft mingled with shouts and the revving of racing engines. Over all this bedlam hung the sinister reverberations of distant explosions somewhere beyond the town.

At our point of landing the beach was dominated by an immense concrete bunker with a wide seaward slot from which the muzzle of a heavy coastal gun appeared. Apparently this weapon had been neutralized just previous to our landing. It was a formidable weapon, and had it not been silenced would have destroyed anything trying to land on that beach.

The principal menace was two high buildings which towered over the beach, one a dwelling and

the other a station which served a coastal railway which ran along the shore. Their high windows were ideal posts for snipers and they had indeed been used for that but both had apparently been cleared just before our landing.

As the bow door of the landing craft splashed in the shallow water to release us we rapidly clawed our way over the beach shingle and we were ashore at last.

But immediately a hazard loomed – the congestion of vehicles on the beach with only one narrow exit in the low sea-wall for the traffic now piling up on the sand. The wait for our turn to leave the beach seemed endless as our anxiety increased, for we had been repeatedly warned that the beach itself was the most critical area of danger.

But eventually our chance came; as we scrambled up through the roughly blown gap in the wall we met a group of German prisoners being escorted by grim-faced infantrymen, a few less of the enemy for all of us to confront in what lay ahead.

We were glad to get off the beach, but as we swung up into the town our relief on moving was short lived. It seemed that everything must advance through the town by way of this street, a road lined by grim stone buildings and the congestion we met on the beach was not to be compared with the jammed condition that faced us now!

It should be recalled that our SPs [self-propelled guns] were carrying extra and unusual loads which temporarily rendered them clumsy in movement as well as critically vulnerable to enemy fire. It was necessary that every vehicle





"Evelyn," No. 2 of Fox Troop, 14th Field Regiment, Southampton, England, 4 June 1944. This is a marvelous, unposed study of an M7 preparing to land on D-Day. Some of the 114 105 mm rounds carried on the M7 are visible, as is the end of the stack of rounds for drenching fire on the run-in. The "Porpoise" sled or "stone boat" contained a further forty-eight 105 mm rounds and 15,000 rounds of .303 ammunition for a total of 282 rounds per gun, or 1,128 on each LCT.

which came ashore be carrying a maximum load of everything which could aid the assault and our SPs had been pressed into service to help supply other arms.

Slung between our tracks and secured by clevises to the front corners of the chassis was a wide steel "stone boat" about 16 inches high, containing .303 rifle ammunition for the use of the infantry. While this grotesque device gave no great difficulty as long as the vehicle was moving straight ahead, backing up could be difficult and a sharp turn of the vehicle was virtually impossible.

There was a further feature of this extra-loading that was infinitely more perilous and which was to cost us dearly that morning. On the rear decks over the motor compartments were lashed canvas-covered cases four feet high containing mortar bombs and land mines for the use of other arms.

It is frighteningly obvious that our SPs were highly lethal bombs if we encountered enemy fire before we could rid ourselves of these impediments. In the desperate emergencies of the moment and our haste to get clear of the beach and town no time or thought was given to relieve as of these deadly loads and it was in this



awkward and perilous condition that we crossed the beach, made our cumbersome way through the breach in the sea-wall and moved through the town.

Ahead lay tanks, guns and vehicles of all sorts as far as we could see, a bottle-neck of classic proportions and its most fearsome aspect was that it was unmoving.

What was holding up our advance? It could be conjectured that some reconnaissance was necessary before we could pour out into the fields beyond, although events a short time later proved that no such precaution had been carried out.

We sat there under increasing anxiety without information or orders as those grey stone walls echoed with occasional sounds of distant explosions from the beach or elsewhere, augmented by shouting, motor noises and clanking steel equipment. What most surprised us was how little damage the fire from the sea had wreaked upon the town, amplified now by the shock of seeing town folk pouring out of their houses to welcome us with joyous smiles, seemingly none the worse for their ordeal and carrying great jugs of Calvados, a very hard apple cider which we were to find was their traditional drink. This was a momentary diversion, but not for long; this was one occasion when the need for survival trumped strong drink!

Lance Bombardier Walter Cooper, 14th Field Regiment, checking 105 mm M1 high explosive shells in his Landing Craft, Tank (LCT), Southampton, England, 4 June 1944. These are for the "drenching fire" program, to be fired from the landing craft during the initial run-in: 120 rounds per gun. Note that the rounds in the foreground have "7" chalked on them, the maximum charge for a 105 mm round. These rounds would be the first to be fired. Empty shipping tubes have been stacked to keep the rounds secure. Normal safety restrictions on ammunition storage had to be waived to allow it to be stowed like this – and casualties from accidents were expected. In the event, none happened.

They said that they had taken to their cellars when the bombardment began and made no mention of casualties. They informed us that the main element of the enemy had withdrawn from the town when it came under fire.

Had their greeting been less excited and our acceptance of it more critically questioning we might have discovered that the garrison had left a remnant nearby, a clever ruse that was to cost the Regiment dearly that morning.

A feature of our vehicles was a metal box labelled "Emergency Rations" and as we became increasingly edgy sitting helplessly there I thought something to eat might divert the tension; accordingly the box was opened and proved a gourmet's delight as we feasted from tins of tiny

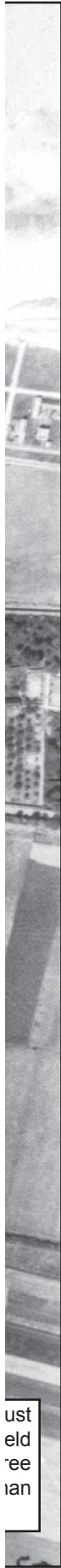


Photo and caption courtesy of Marc Milner, LAC PA 191020





LCMSDS Air Photograph Collection



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sardines, tasty biscuits and pots of strawberry and raspberry jam. And still we sat helplessly with no explanation of the hold-up.

For some time the Régiment de la Chaudière had landed and were now threading their way on foot around our massed tanks and SPs as they moved steadily past us to debouch on the landward side of the town. In fact, we were supporting them with our fire, which made our stalled advance all the more puzzling. I recall our envying the Chauds for their ease of movement in getting out of the sinister strictures of the town.

Watching the infantry, moving through our packed column reminded us of our own role and we began sensibly to wonder which of the Regiments guns would form our first gun position. At present we were a perplexing mixture with no way to restore order.

The firepower of the Regiment, consisting of six troops designated A, B, C, D, E and F and with four guns each, was in some disorder in the packed column. That scramble up from the beach had been a matter of whoever got there first and the Troops were still mixed up as we faced that first action.

However, this presented no difficulty whatever. Any four guns could be grabbed to form a troop, the necessary basic formation of four guns working smoothly as a unit. And in the event this was exactly how it happened when finally the log jams eased and the mass began to inch slowly ahead.

Although the formation of that first Troop was mixed, the command was in the hands of the gun position staff of "C" Troop, consisting of Garth Webb, Gun Position Officer (GPO) and his Ack Doug Allen. His signaler was Ken Darling. As a participant, Doug Allen gives us a very clear description of the incident.

As we moved sluggishly ahead we still had received no indication of what to expect, but as we cleared the built-up area of the town I saw several guns make a sharp right turn past the massive corner of a high stone wall ahead of us and appear to enter a field. As my SP, Dog 4, reached the same point I got a hand signal from a point man to follow them.

That first gun position is more thickly treed today but the foreground then was clear of growth; farther in the distance it had been recently planted with young trees, perhaps as an orchard. However, there was no growth high enough to impede crest clearance and the field was serviceable enough for our purpose.

The broad view of our immediate front appeared harmless enough – an open panorama of farm fields and growing crops lying in the bright sunshine of a warm June morning.

But that scene was deadly deceptive; what we could not know was that some six or seven hundred yards directly to our front and strategically placed to cover all exit from the town, was an 88 gun, the deadliest weapon in the enemy's armory. It was deeply dug in and skillfully camouflaged, waiting for us.

Following the point man's direction, Dog 4 SP reached the corner of that high stone wind wall surrounding some farm buildings. There were three guns ahead of us moving into the field and obviously we were to be the fourth gun.

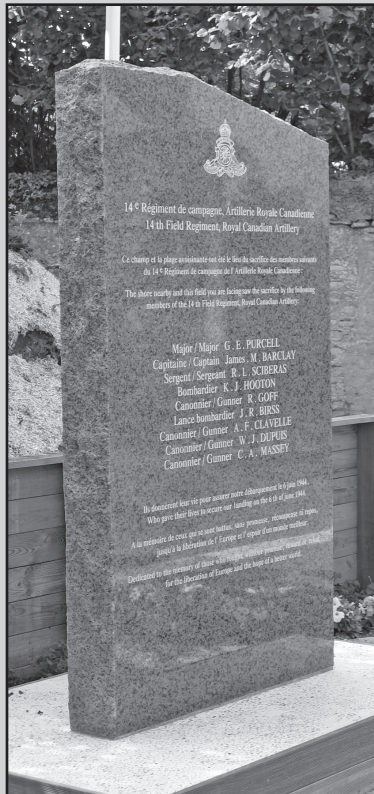
Over on our left an Ack had set up a director and was preparing to pass the angles to the guns while the gun position officer was well out in front giving arm signals indicating the gun sites and the approximate zero line direction. In the foreground and in front of what was to be the line of guns sat C tank, the "C" Troop GPO's vehicle.

As we quickly assumed the familiar drill that would distribute us to our action sites the four guns were in order:

| | |
|----------------|-----------|
| Art Evans | Charlie 2 |
| Ed Crockett | Able 3 |
| Bob Sciberas | Able 4 |
| Wes Alkenbrack | Dog 4 |

Evans' gun had reached its site and was sending a man to the director to get the reading he needed; Crockett's and Sciberas' were still moving on.

It was at that moment that the hidden 88 began its deadly work. Clear above the noise of our labouring engines and clanking tracks came



Photos by Kevin Eyre

In the Spring of 2006 veterans of 14th Field Regiment made a pilgrimage to Normandy to unveil a monument in memory of the nine members of the 14th Field Regiment, who were killed in action on D-Day, 6 June 1944.

Left: The monument.

Below: Veterans of 14th Field Regiment at the ceremony: (left to right) George Lynch-Staunton, Garth Webb, Ross Baker, and Ken Darling.

the shrieking, grinding screech of an armour piercing shell meeting steel plate at incredible velocity as Evans' gun took the first hit.

As smoke billowed up from the stricken vehicle and the gun crew leapt from the deck to hit the ground, with equally swift accuracy the second gun, Crockett's, was struck with the same result and was similarly abandoned by its crew as more smoke and fire arose.

With those first two guns crippled and burning it was obvious that our deployment was rapidly falling apart.

Though stunned at the scene ahead of us, we on Dog 4 were still coming on, tensely preoccupied with our clumsy turn around the corner of that wall with that dammed stoneboat squealing against our churning tracks.

In the kaleidoscope of the rapidly changing scene our impressions were fleeting and confused. The man on the director and several others were now on the ground and we were marginally aware that extra personnel not involved in the deployment had very sensibly hit the ground beside the stone wall behind us.

Although almost unbelievably, in neither case of those first two guns had those lethal bomb 70

loads on the racks over the engine compartments been struck, at this point whatever grim luck we had had finally ran out in a shocking stroke of unimaginable violence.

As we finally cleared the corner and moved into the field Sciberas' gun in front of us erupted in a massive and hideous sheet of red flame and the concussion of that explosion leapt from it in a shock wave of paralyzing force.

There was no smoke to veil the disaster - one moment there was that vast sheet of flame and the next moment revealed the stark and utter disintegration of what had been 30 tons of moving steel, now strewn on the ground like scattered garbage - the gun barrel and bits and pieces of steel plate and the remnants of tracks and heavy castings blown here and there, and not the slightest evidence that six men had stood on the deck of that SP when sudden disaster came.

Dog 4 had stopped by then and as we stood transfixed in stupefied horror a vehement shout came from the group huddled by the wall behind us to break the spell "Alkenbrack, get back," it was Captain Buchanan, Dog Troop Commander, "get the hell back out of there!!!"

What possible good backing up would do at that point was less than useless to ponder



but it broke us loose from our paralysis - it was something to do and he didn't have to shout twice.

I jumped over the side and the crew followed me. Stumbling to the front of the vehicle I made hand signals to the driver, Bruiser Burke, to back up. It was only then that the stunned realization came that in our haste to jump ship Bruiser had made no move to follow us. He was still at his post in the driver's seat, his tense white face staring at me through his narrow window, waiting for orders. A brave man, Bruiser - the rest of us were clear and might have stood some chance when the next shot came, but deep in the hull there he stood no chance at all.

As I signalled desperately, he went into reverse but as he revved up the only result was a grinding squeal of steel against steel as the tracks churned uselessly against the sides of that forgotten stone boat. He came ahead fractionally and tried to reverse again but with the same result. We were grinding there helplessly and all the while we were subconsciously waiting for the next round and wondering why we were still alive.

To add to the fearful frustration, small arms fire was sizzling around the field like a swarm of bees, apparently rifle ammunition overheated and exploding in those first two SPs, now briskly burning.

In a final desperation I shouted to Lance Bombardier Buck McDonald to get down and unhook the clevises that secured that cursed stone boat. Once we had rid ourselves of that we were able to back up and get out of our predicament.

Although we didn't realize it amid the noise and confusion of those last few minutes that the 88 did get in one last round and one last hit, too, and it was on us. Fortunately, it was only a minor hit that tore the lid off the tool box on the left rear corner of the vehicle just above the tracks and then went on to tear a hole through the stone wall behind us.

Apparently before the layer on that 88 had a chance to correct his aim, the Chaudières in their advance closed in on the gun and captured or killed the crew. But for those of us on Dog 4 it was as close as that! One thing I remember; later

in the summer when we exchanged our SPs for 25-pounders, the lid of that tool box had never been replaced.

We were a badly-shaken bunch as we took stock of our losses and gave our wounded first aid as we quickly evacuated them to the beach area. The town and our immediate front were now apparently cleared of the enemy and as the remainder of the Regiment debouched from the town we rejoined them and learned of what our initial losses had been on the beach behind us.

Fortunately, the urgent need to move quickly inland and gain ground left us no time to dwell on the shock of our initial losses. Leaving the burning wreckage of that first action behind us as we collected ourselves, the re-united Regiment began a concerted move south on the road to Beny-sur-Mer to find whatever awaited us.

One story remains to be told - one of accomplishment on that day of many reverses. Earlier in this account we left the tank GC (gun position officer Garth Webb's vehicle) sitting in the foreground of the action. Alone in the tank was Ken Darling, "C" Troop's gun position signaler, waiting for orders.

Keyed up as we all were, Ken's concern became anxiety as the enemy's fire began. His first thoughts quickly focused on the tank's vulnerability as a sitting target. Leaving the turret he descended into the driver's seat and drove the tank far to the flank of the field. His bold action under fire no doubt secured the tank from harm.

Ken's cool courage won him a mention-in-dispatches award and the distinction of an oak leaf on his medal ribbons, the first award for bravery given to any member of the 14th Field Regiment.

Wesley Alkenbrack was born in 1918. He was a member of the militia before the war and enlisted for active service in June 1940. He served as a gun sergeant in the 14th Field Regiment of the Royal Canadian Artillery throughout the Second World War. After the war Mr. Alkenbrack returned to Napanee, Ontario, where he became a partner in the R.W. Kimmerly Lumber Company.



CMH Mailbox

(continued from page 4)

granted. Even Eisenhower had to consider Theatres other than the European one in which he was operating. This is perhaps the disconnect many experience in interpreting what military commanders have “said” and what they “meant” when they are heard to say: “It was an order.” Commanders know that some are sacrificed that others may live; this is an integral part of combat, but something a commander cannot share with his men. The real reason why commanders “follow orders” is because they know they are only a part of a greater good!

Sincerely,
Mac Savage

* * * * *

Dear sir,

I totally agree with Terry Copp in his Winter 2007 article “21st Army Group in Normandy – Towards a New Balance Sheet” that historians and even veterans need to look at 21st Army Group from the ground up. Not only does this apply to tactics and doctrine but also much of the Allied uniforms and equipment.

For instance if we look at German armour, practically everyone worships at the alter of the Panther or the Tiger I and is quick to downplay the US M4 Sherman as a “Tommie cooker” or that it has inferior armour or armament. A quick look at German armour, beyond the exotic camouflage patterns and

huge guns will reveal vehicles that consistently suffered from mechanical unreliability, vehicles that needed special preparation for rail shipment, vehicles that once damaged or needed repair required vast amounts of time to do even the most rudimentary maintenance and vehicles that due to their over engineering could only be produced in limited quantities (6,000 Panthers, 1,300 Tiger Is). The M4 Sherman, the staple of Canadian armoured regiments, on the other hand, had poorer armour and armament when compared to the Panther or the Tiger, but the vehicle was designed and manufactured (40,000) by companies such as Ford and General Motors who understood reliability, transportation and ease of repair.

When it came to standardization the Germans were completely out of the picture. Looking at just German manufactured main tanks, they were fielding four different tank models, Panzer III, Panzer IV, Panther and Tiger, none of which were standardized. The US M4 Sherman relied on standardization and even though it went through several upgrades and changes, it still maintained a high proportion of interchangeable parts with previous models.

The same can be said for clothing and equipment. Again we begin to see problems once we look beyond the appealing styles and the eye catching camouflage patterns and actually study the German clothing. In this case we see clothing that is inferior in manufacture

to Canadian clothing with the Germans using cheaper replacement materials and slave labour to produce their clothing whereas in Canada, brand name clothiers were filling military clothing contracts. We also see a myriad of German clothing designs all being produced at the same time to suit the whims of specialist units whereas Canadian clothing was based on a system of layering and the use of clothing designs that had universal applications. A quick look at German Second World War field equipment reveals designs based on leather, a material that had been replaced by cotton webbing as early as 1908 by the Canadians.

The arms industry is perhaps the one area in which the Germans truly excelled and they can be credited for producing some very modern and innovative small arms and light weapons that eventually went on to influence other weapons such as the AK47 assault rifle (from the MP44) or the M60 machine gun (from the MG42). One can say though that these weapons were developed due to a need to simplify the manufacture of small arms and to provide weapon systems suitable for defence.

By looking beyond flashy designs and eye-catching camouflage, we can see a German arms industry that was hamstrung by conflicting requirements, lacked production capabilities and materials and focussed on complicated designs.

Ed Storey
Nepean, ON

