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Outside the Box

A New Perspective on Operation Windsor – The rationale behind the attack on Carpiquet, 4 July 1944

David Patterson

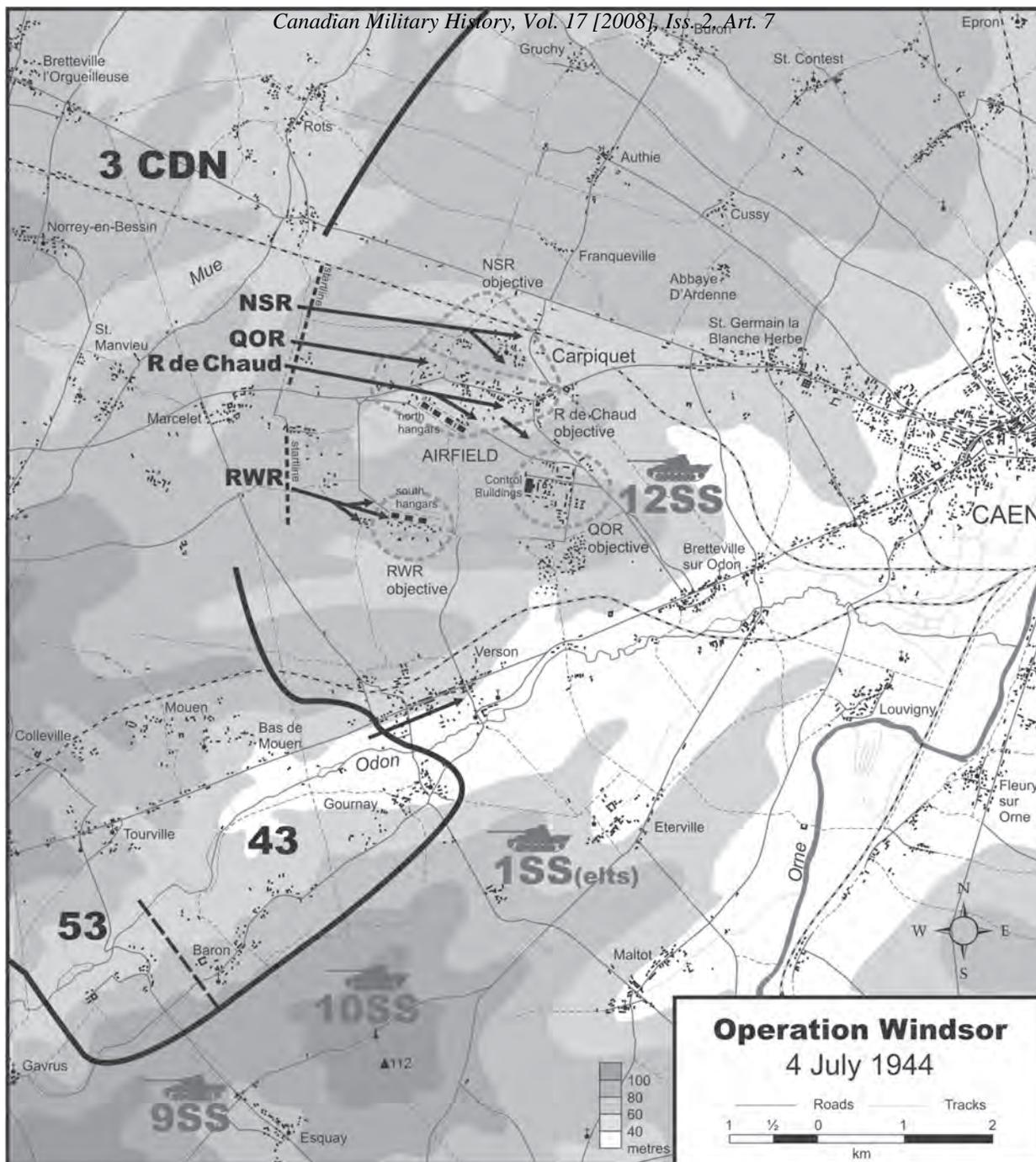
“1 British Corps had ordered 3rd Canadian Division to take both the airfield and Carpiquet village as a prelude to...a three-divisional assault directly on Caen.”¹

“As a preliminary, the 3rd Canadian Division would attack on 3 July [sic] to secure Carpiquet airfield and the approaches to Caen from the west.”²

Operation Windsor never seemed to fit. Why, one asks, would the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division launch a major operation to seize Carpiquet village and airfield a mere four days before I British Corps started the much larger three-division Operation Charnwood to seize Caen? It seemed a distraction from the main effort – a needless diversion of resources. This view was reinforced by the standard interpretations of the battles as reflected in the two introductory quotations: Windsor as a prelude to Charnwood. I had succumbed to what I will call the black box syndrome. I looked only within the analytical framework established by countless historians from C.P. Stacey to Terry Copp³ to John A. English, and, like them, saw Operation Windsor as a precursor to Operation Charnwood. It was upon visiting the battlefield in 1997 and 1998 with the Canadian Battlefields Foundation student study tour that I gained a more complete understanding of the battle. For it is only on the field itself that one can understand that Operation Windsor had very little to do with Operation Charnwood, and so much more to do with Operations Epsom and Jupiter. Epsom is familiar to any scholar of the campaign, but Operation Jupiter, the 43rd Wessex Division attack on Hill 112, is more obscure. It was the ground that showed me the link which was reinforced by a close review of the I British Corps

operations log. In this article I will try and show that the traditional interpretation of Operation Windsor has suffered from a “Canada-centric” bias that fails to relate the ground to the battle and assumes that all that precedes Charnwood must be setting the stage for that battle. First a review of the traditional interpretation is required.

Traditional interpretations of the 4 July 1944 battle for Carpiquet airfield, known as Operation Windsor, have linked the battle with Operation Charnwood, which followed the action at Carpiquet four days later. [For the details of Operation Windsor, see the shaded box on the next page.] Windsor seems pointless, particularly as the 8th Brigade captured the remaining objectives of Operation Windsor with relative ease on 8-9 July, the same objectives it was unable to seize on 4 July. Why was the 4 July battle necessary? Some interpretations imply it was a wasted effort and that the entire area could have waited until 8-9 July to be captured with little effect on the greater battle for Caen. This is the interpretation of Terry Copp and Robert Vogel in *Maple Leaf Route: Caen*, for example. They state that “It is not clear why General Crocker, who was to command Charnwood, ordered the 3rd Canadian Division to capture Carpiquet before the main attack.”⁴ Furthermore, although



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acknowledging the efforts of the 43rd Wessex Division that coincided with Operation Windsor, they do not extend that link to the subsequent assault by the West Country troops in Operation Jupiter on 10 July. John A. English, for his part, is very critical of the conduct of the battle and in particular the failure of Major-General R.F.L. Keller, commander of 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, to involve himself more closely in the planning and execution of the assault. He does not challenge the received wisdom that the battle was a prelude to Charnwood, focused, as his study is, on the nature of command in the Canadian army in the Normandy campaign. Michael Reynolds, in his hagiographic study of

the I SS Panzer Corps, is more concerned with the stand of a small force of panzergrenadiers against the firepower of the Allied army than in any examination of the reasons for the operation: "It was considered to be an essential prerequisite to the capture of Caen itself," Reynolds asserts.⁵ Reginald Roy in his 1984 study of the Normandy campaign maintains this link to Charnwood but also introduces another motive, that of acquiring the airfield at Carpiquet.⁶ This reason, though valid on D-Day when Carpiquet airfield was indeed an objective of the 3rd Canadian Division, had by D+30 been largely overtaken by the construction of airfields in France.⁷ Finally, the recent study of the operations of the North

Operation Windsor – an overview

Eighth Brigade, strengthened by the addition of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles, was to attack with the support of 21 regiments of artillery, the tanks of the Fort Garry Horse, and three squadrons of Flails, Crocodiles and Petards from the 79th Armoured Division. Two squadrons of Typhoons and HMS *Rodney's* 16-inch guns were used to soften up the target before the attack. All of this additional firepower made for an impressive barrage, but it did not prevent the Germans, who had every square yard of the area plotted for artillery fire, from wreaking havoc with the infantry. The four battalions had to cross more than a mile of open country. When Allied artillery opened up at 0500 hours on July

4th the Germans instantly shelled the startline and continued to rain down high explosives on the men who struggled forward through the wheat fields.

The North Shore regimental history calls Carpiquet “the graveyard of the regiment” because the battalion sustained its heaviest casualties of the war on July 4th. But the North Shores were lucky compared to the Royal Winnipeg Rifles. The Winnipegs had suffered so many losses on D-Day and in Putot that their casualties on July 4th, which were almost as high as the North Shores, were just another horror to be endured.

Reading the war diaries and after-battle narratives of the



A Sherman tank of the Fort Garry Horse at Carpiquet, 8 July 1944.

survivors of Carpiquet is a chilling experience. Major J.E. Anderson of the North Shores spoke for everyone when he wrote,

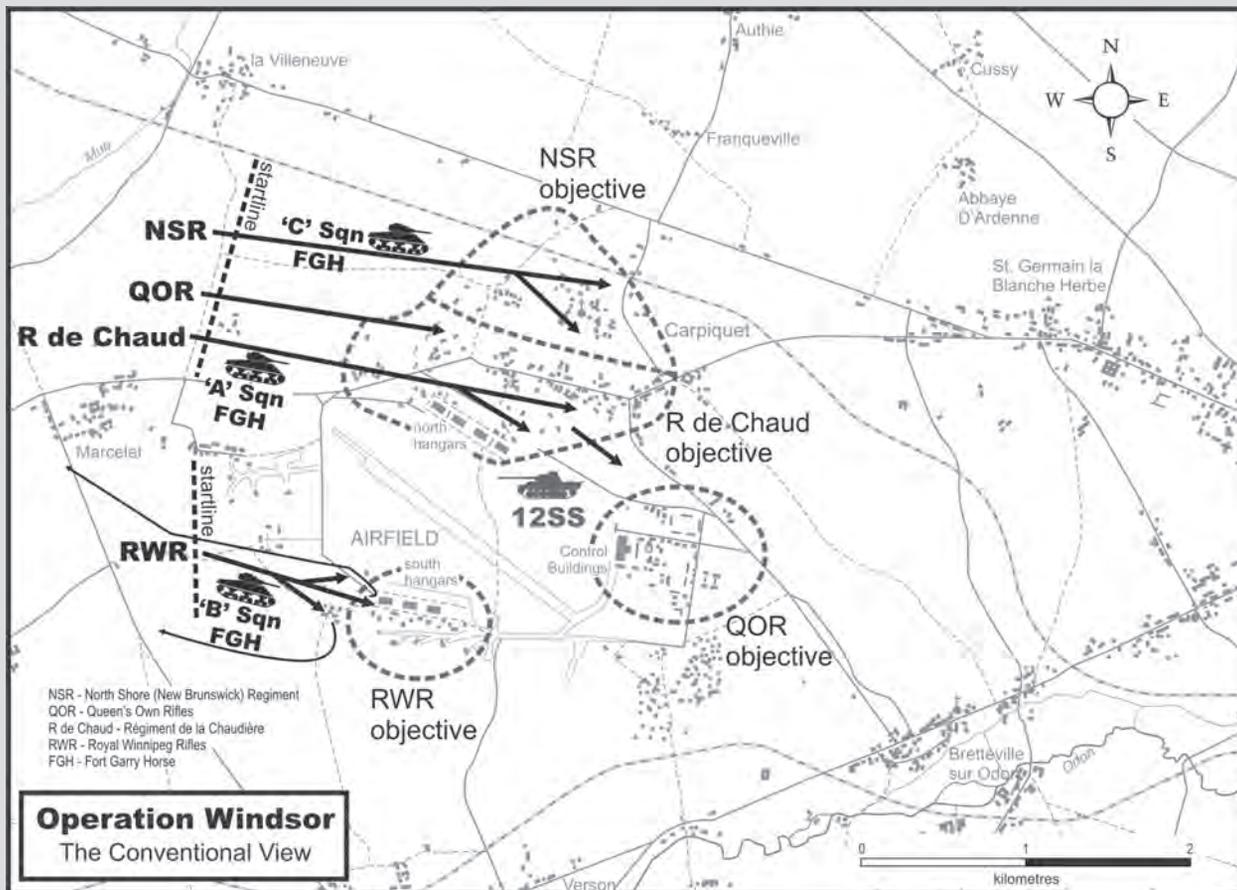
I am sure that at some time during the attack every man felt he could not go on. Men were being killed or wounded on all sides and the advance seemed pointless as well as hopeless. I never realised until the attack on Carpiquet how far discipline, pride of unit, and above all, pride in oneself and family, can carry a man even when each step forward meant possible death.

The men of the assault regiments did keep going forward. The North Shores and the Chaudières occupied Carpiquet village and dug in. They were joined by the Queen's Own Rifles, who were supposed to press on

WLU LCMSDS Air Photo 309/3009



Carpiquet village and airfield photographed one day after Operation “Windsor.” Fires still burn in the village and the damage caused by the attack is readily visible. The south hangars were the objective of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles. Le Régiment de la Chaudière captured the north hangars while the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment secured the village. The Queen's Own Rifles, in reserve, joined the North Shores with the intention of advancing to the control buildings, but this attack was called off.



Map drawn by Mike Bechthold ©2008

to the airport control buildings. But the Royal Winnipeg Rifles had been unable to capture their objectives, the hangars on the south side of the runways. Here the Germans had waited in concrete pillboxes to add heavy machine gun fire to the torrent of mortar and artillery shells. A second attack with tanks and flame-throwing Crocodiles failed to dislodge the stubborn, young SS troops and both the Queen's Own and Winnipeg attacks were cancelled.

For the troops in Carpiquet the fighting could not be called off. Exposed in their finger-like salient they were subjected to continuous fire from a German mortar brigade which was attached to the 12th SS. The Chaudières, defending

the south edge of Carpiquet, were counterattacked by German infantry and Panther tanks. Enemy fire was so intense that they could not establish a minefield in front

of their position. Carpiquet had become a "true inferno," but 8th Brigade held on for four days until "Charnwood" forced the Germans to withdraw.



LAC PA 116513

Canadian troops examine a German bunker on the airfield at Carpiquet, 12 July 1944.



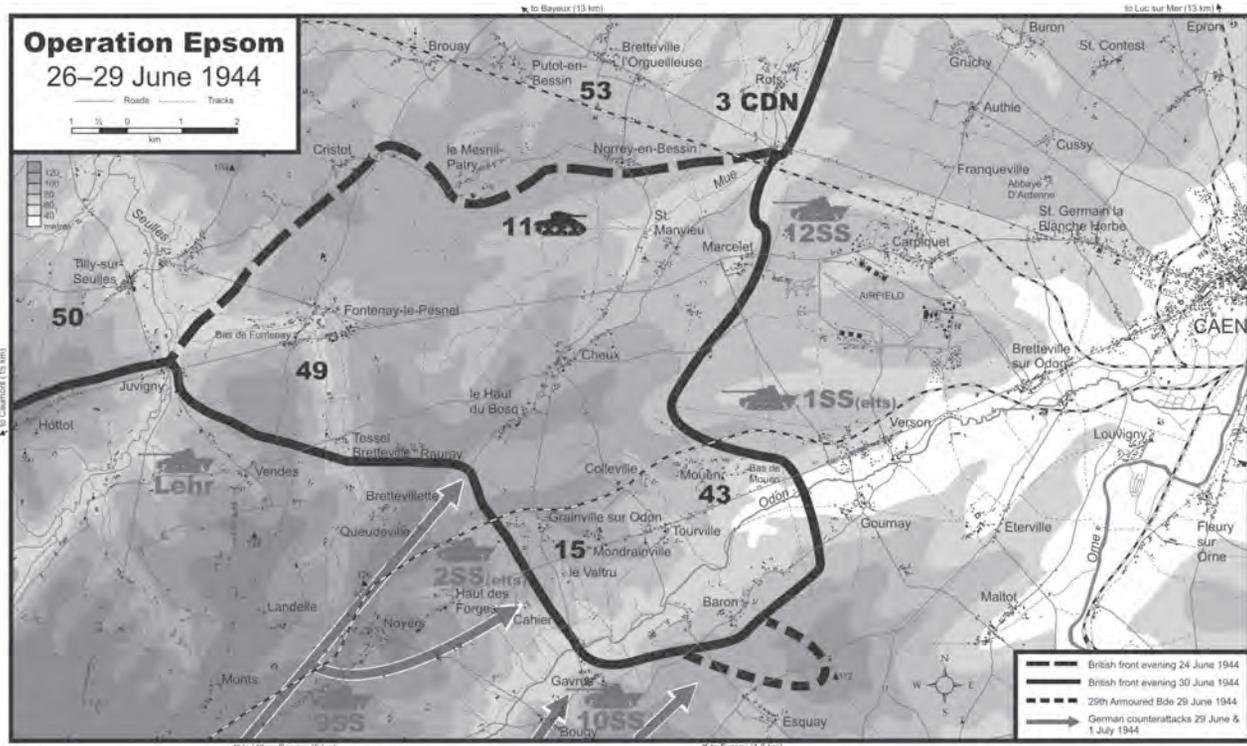
Above left: Two Churchill tanks from the British 31st Tank Brigade advance south of Norrey-en-Bessin on 27 June 1944 during Operation Epsom. **Above right:** Troops from the British 49th West Riding Division move through Fontenay-le-Pesnel on 25 June 1944 during Operation Martlett, a small attack designed to clear the startline for Epsom.

Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment by Marc Milner is the first to explicitly make the link between the southern hangers and escarpment with the British operations that were conducted to the south.⁸

The battle for Carpiquet was a major event for the 3rd Canadian Division and the first brigade-sized engagement since le Mesnil-Patry almost a month previous. The division, in constant action since D-Day, had held the line between the northern suburbs of Caen and the corps boundary near Putot-en-Bessin. The storms of 18 June that wrecked the Mulberry harbours⁹ and slowed Allied operations also delayed the start of Operation Epsom, the British drive over the Odon River. The initial assault across the Odon was intended to seize Hill 112 and then drive southwest to cross the Orne River valley. The attack, launched on 25 June, saw the summit of Hill 112 change hands several times as elements of the 15th Scottish Infantry and the 11th British

Armoured Divisions battled the II SS Panzer Corps. This formation of two divisions, direct from the Eastern Front, was drawn into the battle to seal off the British penetration.

For 3rd Canadian Division Operation Windsor involved the greater part of the combat power available to Major-General Keller at that time. Four of his nine infantry battalions and two of three armoured regiments were committed as well as flail tanks and flamethrowers from 79th Armoured Division. The largest fireplan executed thus far in the Normandy Campaign supported the assault. Fighter-bombers, given an easily discernable target in the airfield and environs, supported the attack along with over 750 guns of the Royal and Royal Canadian Artillery.¹⁰ The monitors HMS *Rodney* and *Roberts* weighed in with their six 16-inch and two 15-inch guns respectively, joined as well by the nine 6-inch guns of the cruiser HMS *Belfast*. Some have criticized Major-General Keller for not being more



Map drawn by Mike Bechtold ©2008



Major-General R.F.L. Keller (left), commander of 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, has been roundly criticized for his conduct during Operation Windsor, starting with comments by his corps commander, Lieutenant-General John Crocker (right).

south and west of Caen amongst which the VIII Corps attack west of Caen, known as Operation Epsom, was critical. Preliminary to that attack were several supporting assaults planned by XXX Corps and I Corps both east and west of Caen. These operations were as follows:

involved in the conduct of this battle. Starting with Lieutenant-General John Crocker, GOC I (British) Corps, critics have attacked Major-General Keller's lack of grip on the battle and his devolution of control of such a large battle to a small brigade staff.¹¹ The detailed conduct of the battle is outside the scope of this article but the result had clear implications for the British to the southwest. The partial success at Carpiquet, the seizure of the village and northern control buildings, but not the southern control buildings along the crest, delayed the start of the 43rd Wessex Division offensive. Brigadier (later Major-General) H. Essame, commander of 214th Brigade of the 43rd Division, and divisional historian, summed up the problem from his perspective:

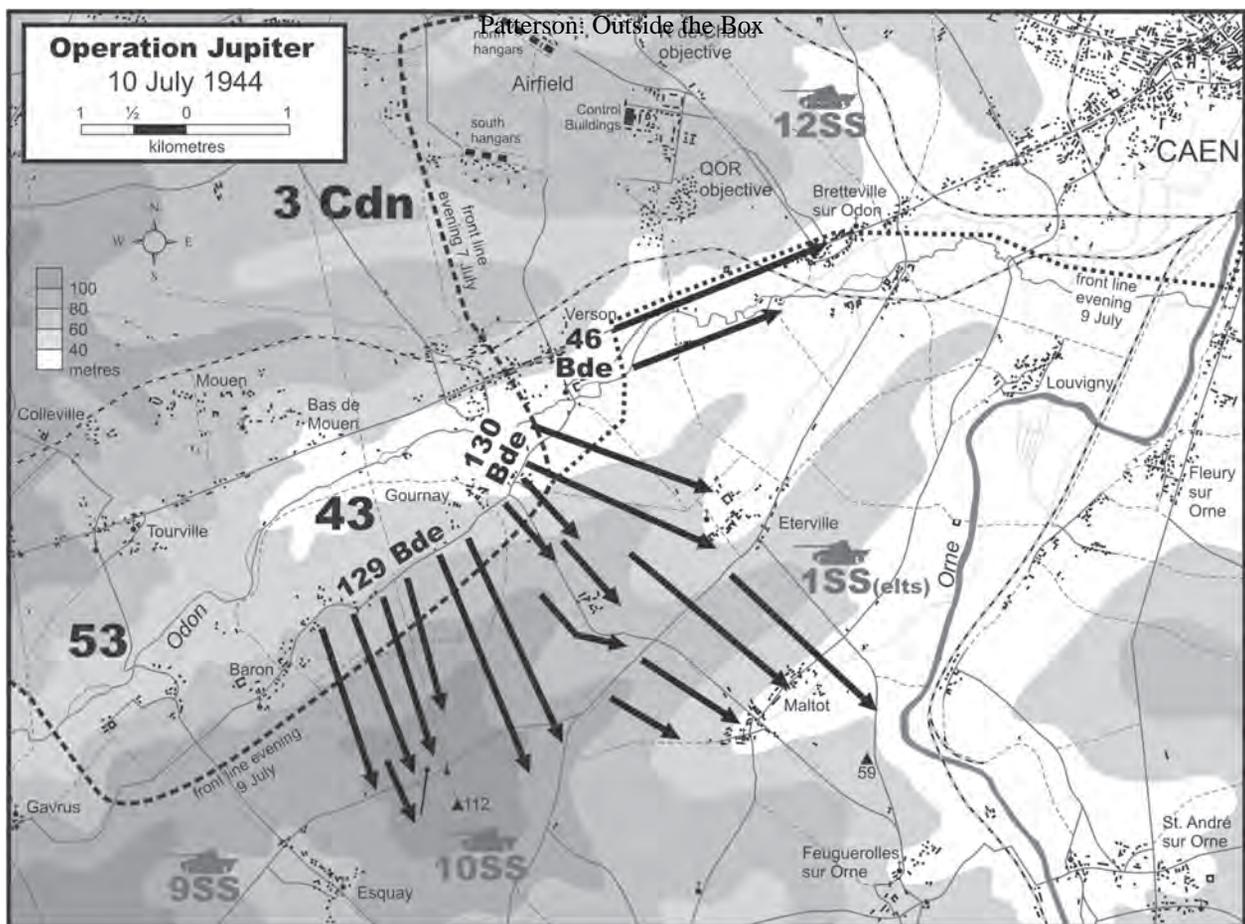
Until the hangers at the south-west corner of the aerodrome at Carpiquet were captured, the whole area lay in full enemy view. The Canadian advance on the 9th put an end to observation from the north.¹²

This view is echoed in a more recent study of the Hill 112 battlefield: "Operation Jupiter was effectively 'on call' as it was predicated on the capture of Carpiquet airfield."¹³ On 10 July, one day after the Canadians had cleared the southern control buildings and escarpment, Operation Jupiter was launched with four brigades assaulting the eastern slopes of Hill 112. The larger battle of Caen that still raged through 9-10 July and the Canadian involvement therein have obscured the link to Jupiter. So from where then did Operation Windsor originate?

Operation Windsor grew out of the series of Second Army plans for expanding the bridgehead

- Operation Perth – a 51st Highland Division operation to expand the bridgehead to the west and attract German attention to that flank;
- Operation Aberlour – a 3rd British Division operation, with 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade under command, to clear the salient north of Caen;
- Operation Ottawa – a 3rd Canadian Division operation to capture Carpiquet village; and
- Operation Martlet – a 49th West Riding Division operation that cleared the start line for 8 Corps west of Caen in the area of Rauray.¹⁴

All these operations were planned in the period 20-26 June and resulted from General Montgomery's desire to avoid a frontal assault on Caen. The lack of potential for expansion to the east and the limited success of Epsom resulted in the final Operation Charnwood plan that saw I Corps launch three divisions directly at Caen on 8 July. Operation Windsor flowed from these earlier operations and was clearly linked more to them than to the ultimate assault on Caen. Windsor, in its earlier incarnations, first appeared in relation to the British offensive on the Odon when Operation Aberlour was proposed as a 3rd British Division operation to clear the right flank of the VIII Corps advance. Operation Aberlour was clearly a supporting attack for Epsom as it was ordered on 26 June, only one day after the start of Epsom¹⁵ and long before Montgomery issued orders for Operation Charnwood. In the original plan Operation Ottawa was also a

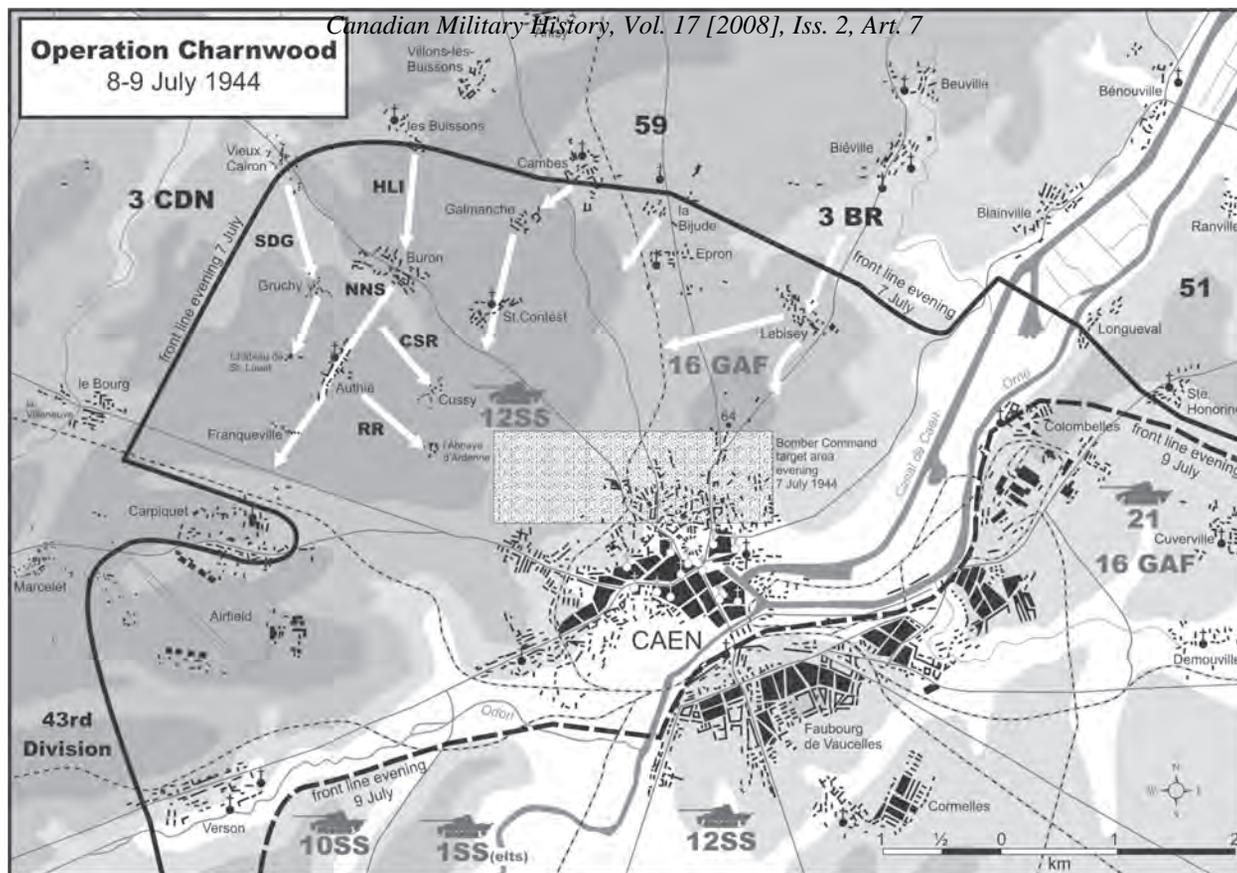


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supporting attack for Operation Epsom, as it would protect the left flank of the British advance by clearing Carpiquet village. At this point the VIII Corps attack to the west of Caen was still the main effort and the Canadian attack on Carpiquet must be seen in this light. Operation Aberlour and the subsequent Operation Ottawa were successively postponed as the prospects for the complete success of Epsom waned. They were both eventually called off completely by 28 June.¹⁶ Operation Windsor, as the renamed Operation Ottawa was called, was revived in a more “virile” form by I (British) Corps on 1 July.¹⁷ This still predated the order for Operation Charnwood received by 3rd Canadian Division on 5 July.¹⁸ To further sever the link between Windsor and Charnwood, an explicit order to 3rd Canadian Division by I (British) Corps admonished Keller not to exploit to the north (towards Caen) if doing so would endanger the objectives of Windsor.¹⁹ The objectives of Operation Windsor, the high ground to the south of the airfield and the airfield and village itself, were more important to I British Corps than any benefit that might be accrued by the capture of Caen. If the capture of Carpiquet was indeed a preliminary to the subsequent seizure of Caen then any exploitation to north would have aided that effort. The remounting of Windsor must also be examined in the context

of the bitter struggle to seize Hill 112. The initial assault by 15th Scottish and 11th Armoured Divisions had been reinforced by the arrival of the 43rd Wessex Division. Their attack was focused more to the eastern end of the hill feature and the heights on the southern edge of the Carpiquet airfield became an even more important vantage point for German observers.

While the study of the documents related to Operation Windsor leads to the conclusions I have drawn, a far simpler, though perhaps more expensive method is available: walk the ground. A visit to the Carpiquet battlefield, still in use as a commercial short-haul airport, and a careful study of the ground should lead the visitor to same conclusions reached by Major-General Essame in 1952. The key to success at Carpiquet was the seizure of the southern control buildings, and more importantly the clearing of the crest that dominates the ground to the south. A walk along that crest in 1998 with Terry Copp and the Canadian Battlefields Foundation student study tour brought this home in the way no text or map could. The southern crest dominates the ground to its south, across the Odon valley to crest of Hill 112. It was along this valley that the 5th Battalion, Duke of Cornwall’s Light Infantry advanced with the intent of seizing Verson in concert with the 4



July attack. That attack, timed to take advantage of Operation Windsor, must not obscure the link with the advance planned, in a completely different direction, for Operation Jupiter. Further to the south of Verson the start line and path of advance of the 10 July Operation Jupiter attack can be seen clearly. Marc Milner always told the students of the tours he led to Normandy to consider the ground a primary source when studying military history. Nowhere is this more clear than at Carpiquet where the contours on the map and distance from the southern crest to Hill 112 can be deceiving. A powerful set of binoculars and a good map were all that any German artillery observer would have needed to wreck havoc with any British attempt to drive up the northern slope of Hill 112.

The operations of the 3rd Canadian Division have been examined and re-examined almost since they occurred. Some say that it has been studied to death and that Stacey wrote the definitive account, so why continue to rake the coals of Normandy? The answer lies in the evolution of thought about this relatively minor battle in the grand campaign. Carpiquet teaches us to look beyond the bounds of national historiography and examine the context of Canadian action within the Allied coalition. A

simple chronological analysis of events is not enough – if Windsor preceded Charnwood then Windsor must be a lead in to Charnwood. Rather we should expand the “black box” and look at the impact of Canadian operations on the activities of other formations. Literally getting another point of view, by walking the southern crest of Carpiquet airfield in this example, helps put the decisions and actions of Canadian commanders and soldiers in better perspective.

Notes

1. John A. English, *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign: A Study of Failure in High Command* (New York: Praeger, 1991), p.214.
2. Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy* (London: Pan Books, 1983), pp.305-306.
3. To be fair, Professor Terry Copp, in *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy* (University of Toronto Press, 2003), revised this thesis initially expressed in the mid-1980s in the acclaimed *Maple Leaf Route* books.
4. Terry Copp and Robert Vogel, *Maple Leaf Route: Caen* (Alma: Maple Leaf Route Press, 1983), p.98
5. Michael Reynolds, *Steel Inferno: I SS Panzer Corps in Normandy* (New York: Sarpedon, 1997), p.146.
6. Reginald H. Roy, *1944: The Canadians in Normandy* (Ottawa: Macmillan of Canada, 1984), p.45
7. The cumulative airfield requirement of the air forces up to D plus 25 was as follows:

Day	British Sector	American Sector
D-Day	1 ELS	2 ELS
D+3	1 RRS	
D+4	2 RRS	2 RRS
D+8	5 ALGs including improved RRS	5 ALGs including improved RRS
D+14	10 airfields	8 airfields
D+25	15 airfields	12 airfields

ALG - Advanced Landing Ground; ELS - Emergency Landing Strip
RRS - Refuelling and Rearming Strip

In both the British and American sectors, construction was delayed by the tactical situation. The cumulative comparison between the planned and actual completion is as shown below:

Day	British Sector		American Sector	
	Planned	Completed	Planned	Completed
D-Day	1 ELS (pm)		2 ELS	1 ELS
D+1		1 ELS		
D+2				2 ELS
D+3	1 RRS (untracked)	1 RRS (untracked)	2 RRS (untracked)	
D+4	2 RRS (1 tracked) (1 untracked)	2 RRS (untracked)		2 RRS (untracked)
D+6		2 RRS (1 tracked) (1 untracked)		
D+7		2 ALGs		
D+8	5 ALGs		5 ALGs	
D+9		3 ALGs		
D+10		4 ALGs		
D+11		5 ALGs		
D+12				4 ALGs
D+14	10 airfields		8 airfields	
D+16		6 airfields		
D+17		7 airfields		
D+18		8 airfields		
D+19		9 airfields		
D+21		10 airfields		
D+23				6 airfields
D+24				7 airfields
D+25	15 airfields	10 airfields	12 airfields	8 airfields

Royal Engineers Battlefield Tour: Normandy to the Seine; Chief Engineer of the Army, August 1946; pp.47-48

Comment: By 1 July two-thirds of airfield requirements had been met in both the British and American sectors. The immediate pressure to capture Carpiquet airfield to use it as an airfield was no more.

8. Marc Milner, *D-Day to Carpiquet: The North Shore Regiment and the Liberation of Europe* (Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane Editions & New Brunswick Military History Project, 2007).
9. The harbour at Omaha Beach was destroyed while that at Arromanches severely damaged. As a result supplies and reinforcements were in large measure still having to land over the beach, with all the delays that implied.
10. The guns of one heavy, eight medium, and 12 field regiments supported the attack as well as the naval guns of two cruisers and the monitors HMS *Rodney* and *Roberts*. G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada Volume II* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972), p.285.
11. English, p.217.
12. H. Essame, *The 43rd Wessex Division at War 1944-1945* (London: William Clowes and Sons Limited, 1952), pp.36-37.
13. Tim Saunders, *Hill 112: Battles of the Odon - 1944* (Barnley, Leo Cooper, 2001), p.46.
14. Canadian Military Headquarters Historical Section, Report No. 147, Canadian Participation in the Operations in North-West Europe, 1944 : Part I – Operations in June, 1944, pp.221-222, Directorate of History and Heritage [DHH].
15. C.P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1960), p.150.
16. *Ibid.*, p.150
17. 1 British Corps GS Log and Summary of Events, serial 156, 1 July 1944, The National Archives/Public Record Office [TNA PRO] WO 171/258.
18. Canadian Military Headquarters Historical Section, Report No. 162, Canadian Participation in the Operations in North-West Europe, 1944 : Part II – Operations in July, 1944, p.24, DHH.
19. 1 British Corps GS Log and Summary of Events, serial 319, 2 July 1944, TNA PRO WO 171/258.

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