

MEMORIES OF A NORMAN SUMMER, 1944

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The Generals can write in terms of battle plans and strategy, but the mental/physical/spiritual holocaust that the common soldier endured is neither military fare nor textbook history. For each man in combat, the war narrowed to a highly personal and private field of vision. For most of us, the memories are silent ghosts that find no lodging in our daily lives. When asked, we sometimes tell a story or two--but few of our acquaintances have rushed to ask. The following pages are abstracted and revised from my correspondence with a graduate student in England whose interest in psychology inspired him to ask.

>> As a Canadian, what made me come to fight what many saw as a European War? The notion of a "European War" is American, not Canadian. We never had a revolution. Our ties with Britain and with Europe were facts of heritage and history that we never dreamed to turn our back on. Hitler was a menace to the world, and our heritage and history were his victims, however far removed our peaceful country lay. Until late in '44, every Cdn soldier you saw overseas was an unscripted volunteer. Whatever his personal rationalization for going to war, that "Canuck" was there because he chose to be there.

>> What effect did Allied propaganda have on me? Obviously a great deal, since the only "propaganda" we heard or recognized was German. We had no cause to disbelieve British or American government pronouncements. We had, however, a firm contempt for our own government, whose weak-kneed conscription policies back home made our continuation as a fighting force almost untenable during the latter stages of the battle in France. I can recall sitting in a slit beyond Caen with a Bn HQ friend, sharing the wish that Gerry had bombers that could reach Ottawa, so our country could have a feel for what was happening over here. (Mackenzie King was booed off the parade ground in Aldershot when he came to visit his Cdn volunteers early in the war.)

>> What did I think of our training? Our training was excellent. Insofar as one can make civilized soldiers out of civilized boys, we were well prepared. Our "schemes" were exact replicas of the Normandy assault we were later to face. We lacked the barbaric training and discipline of some of our enemies, obviously, but we could not have been trained that way. Civilized armies are always ill-prepared for the barbarian at the gates, whether his attack is from without or within--from outside oneself or inside oneself. To be a responsive and responsible social being, in a civilization of such mutual and shared responsibility, means that specific

"training" for the more brutal consequences of a savage war must be largely left to innate and personal capacities for ultimate survival under fire. Democratic states, however well they may prepare, are always less prepared for savagery than maniac dictatorships.

>> In the sealed camps in England, how did I spend the time? Once the camps were sealed, no one came in or out, so entertainments didn't happen. Before the camp was sealed, I seem to recall two shows they took us to. I say "seem to recall" because one I am remembering was a Bob Hope show, and that may be a superimposed memory. One I am sure about was a Cdn Army Show that I remember vividly because a girl from "up the street back home" was in it, and I was surprised. I called out to her as I saw her before the show began, and we went racing to greet each other, and SHOOK HANDS--and the whole gathered battalion groaned. I was surprised because I knew very well she wasn't old enough to be in the Army. When I was 18, I'd been invited to her 15th birthday party--and I was only 20 now. We spent as much time together as we could that evening, and she told me where she would be playing the next night if I could get a "pass." I couldn't have cared less about seeing the Army Show, but I did want to see her. I got my "pass," and hitchhiked my way there and back--can't remember where it was--but when I got back, the camp was sealed. Only the evening's "passes" were getting in. So much for entertainment.

The first thing that happened after being sealed in was full disclosure of the invasion coast, the total assault plan, and then each beach assault was laid out in detail. In the end, each man had his assignments and objectives laid out. It was all done on maps and chalkboards. The practical training had been done long ago.

Being unable to communicate with the "outside" meant nothing to me. It could never have occurred to me that I was being deprived of something. What was going on "inside" was all that mattered, and all that mattered to the whole world.

In the quiet times, I did not mingle, so I cannot tell what others did or thought. I could not join the card games or the crap games or whatever other amusements the men devised for themselves. My thoughts were my own, and had to come to grips with a great uncertainty about my soul's capacity to endure. I knew me, but did not know myself within the crush of battle. It never occurred to me that I might die; it only occurred to me that I might somehow fail my job. In session, talk of casualties meant nothing to me, caused me no fear. The fears I had were more of awe in the face of a stark and dangerous reality I had never experienced before. But most of all, I felt a privilege in being part of it, and that excitement overcame everything. My musing resulted in the writing of a rather long but quite imperfect poem, which somehow gathered me together, and set my tremulous inexperience within the larger context of an emotional/intellectual/spiritual experience that I knew well.

As for the invasion plan itself, and the support behind it, we never doubted for a moment our success. We believed.

>> How did I come to terms with the death and injury of friends and comrades around me? Partly mind-set. I was, and still am, a loner. I shunned the "gang," and developed no psychological need for group support or identification. I have no need to be a member of anything but my family, my heritage, and the human race. I was a poet and philosopher, or at least a student thereof, and found few-to-none with whom I might communicate at that level. It was not without cause that I was moved from a rifle Section to become my Company's Intelligence Man. The death or injury of comrades seldom trespassed this integral insularity.

To this I should add a most personal anecdote. I had a psychiatric cousin who was later Head of Neuropsychiatry at Toronto General Hospital, and went by the nickname "The Brain" around the U of T campus. During the Normandy Invasion, he headed the "shock hospital" that followed the Cdn troops in. He had known me from childhood, of course. During my time in England he visited me a couple of times, just checking up I suppose, and we got together in London on leave once--a cultural exercise, not my usual fare. During the battles for Europe he followed my progress from details gleaned from officers of my battalion whom he met along the way--or perhaps even corresponded with, I don't know--and wrote glowing letters home about my achievements and longevity. Shortly after the war I visited him once in his office, and he began the conversation with something like these words. "You'll never know how proud the family is for what you did during the war! Frankly, I didn't think you'd make it, and I still don't understand how you kept going. I had a bed reserved for you in my shock hospital from D-Day on." I was flattered at the time--but later came to realize the insult, and how little these experts knew about the human condition they professed to know so well. There was no way, even, to tell him how I did it. He wasn't asking me. This turf was his.

>> Did I observe any acts of bravery and/or cowardice? Yes, both --and both in myself and others. Enough to know that bravery is as much stubborn stupidity as anything else, and cowardice the shattering realization of such stupidity. The classifications are words for military minds, hardly the stuff of human experience or the psychological moment.

In the early weeks of Normandy we had no Company Runner--no room on the boat--so Company Intelligence Man did the running as well as his own job. When our Runner got to us, we were already inured to the constant barrages, had adjusted step by step, day after day, to their increase in numbers and intensity. Not so the Company Runner. In our slits somewhere along the road to Falaise, a week or so after his rejoining us, I recall the Major asking him to notify the platoon commanders of something--then finally turning to me to do the job. We'd been getting a steady pounding from 88's. The Major told me that Runner (whose name I forget) was talking about his wife and child, and couldn't be persuaded to leave his slit--and then added sorrowfully that Runner didn't have a wife and child. I made the tour. I was used to it by now. Nothing more was ever said about Runner's failure that day, at least in my presence. He learned to get the job done, as far as I recall.

>> Could officers boost morale? Hell, yes! One of our officers was a Jew on the Nazi list, Ben Dunkelman, a formidable-looking man, over 6 feet tall and weighing maybe 250 pounds. He led our Support Company into Normandy, an innovator in the use of heavy mortars, later to command a Tank Brigade in the first battles for Israel. His usual place was at the head of his column, his usual attire a rakish, sloppy uniform with a 6-gun slung below his butt like a cowboy-movie gunslinger. We knew he could never allow himself to be captured. Just to see him walk by was to know the war was as good as won!

>> How was morale maintained in Normandy during the weeks when few advances were made? Didn't have time to think about it. We were being blasted out of our skulls daily. The problem was survival, not morale. A tank man waiting somewhere in the rear might have had such problems.

>> Did Officers' behaviour affect the troops? Of course. I saw my Major go strange once, and refuse an order, inventing all sorts of loss and hazard that didn't add up. I knew as well as the Colonel what was going on in the Major's head. But this was in the Hochwald Woods, long after Normandy, and my Major had been wounded at Boulogne, and was not long back. The anti-personnel mines we faced were real enough; our casualties were real enough; but my Major's exaggeration was unreal. I didn't want to go up that gully either. I would have, if he had said we go; but I was happier not to go, and respected my Major as much for his fear as for his courage. But in that moment one whole Company had lost its nerve. Dog Company had to make the move up that gully, finally, now commanded by Ben Dunkelman. They avoided the mines by jumping from tree root to tree root--a simple tactic that had escaped our battered brains.

The first quality that makes a leader is the willingness to accept and exercise the responsibility. The capacity to do so is only secondary, and may be learned. My Major was an officer I could respect because he had accepted that responsibility, and exercised it, and even in his weakness maintained it. I was not an officer for good reason: I early rejected an invitation to Officer Training because I considered myself too immature to exercise responsibility for men I considered superior to me in every practical way.

>> Entertainment? When we finally took Caen, having been in action for some 40 odd days with no respite, Third Cdn Div was pulled back to a rest area, and I do recall one journey back toward the beaches to see an Army Show featuring Wayne & Shuster. It was good to see some Cdn girls again, I suppose, but that this sort of thing helped "boost morale" seems to me to repeat a cynical fallacy perpetrated by unbloodied do-gooders in the social sciences. Entertainments had nothing to do with our morale! Our morale was an anger that never decreased, whether we were angry with the Gerry, or Patton, or Montgomery, or Ottawa, or the readiness of replacement troops they were sending us, we needed no trivia to buck us up. "Up" was where we were. We were here to fight, to survive, and to win--nothing else could touch us. The rest is orchestrated crap.

>> Training on the beachhead? I can't tell you what the orders were, but training had to go on for replacements all the time. I suspect it was mostly on a man-to-man basis in the safety of a slit, pairing a vet with a replacement. We were on the leading edge of that beachhead for 30 days, no time for sessions or maneuvers. For example, on D+5 Dog Company got wiped out to 19 men in an attack that ran smack-dab into the gathering-area of a major counterattack being set up by the 12th SS Panzer Division (Hitler Jugend) in Le Mesnil Patry. The Gerry was never able to launch his blow--which could have been a major disaster for the British/Canadian beachhead--but we had to be pulled "back" to the tertiary position on the Brigade front to recoup. This time our so-called replacements had to be put through their T.O.E.T's (Tests on Elementary Training). We had already used up our "front-line reserves." Even now they were pulling anyone from cook to plumber out of England to maintain our numbers. These trained as they survived, within the framework of an unremitting enemy observation and pressure from the nearby hedgerow, farm buildings, orchard, or village across the next wheatfield.

The ordinary German soldier--who might well not be German--often fought only as long as he had an Officer or Non-Com to answer to. We held no animus for these. They were the same as us, caught in the awful inevitability of a war neither of us wanted or made.

>> What were my opinions of the U.S. Army, in battle and in general? Envy, for one: I hated American soldiers for having so much more money to spend "on leave" than we did; I wished that we could be on American rations instead of British; I wished we had bazookas instead of PIATS; I wished we had semi-automatics instead of Lee Enfields; I wished we had their PR and their resources, but mostly their PR. I never saw them in battle--except in movies--so I have little to contribute on that score. I have to admit to feeling they were our inferiors as soldiers--not gutsy volunteers like us. I carry an apocryphal story in my head, which came up somewhere in the early days of Normandy. A captured German mortar officer declared that he could tell whether the attacking infantry was British, Canadian, or American by what they did when his mortars caught them. If they ran back the way they came, they were Americans; he didn't need to use more ammunition. If they hit the ground, and stuck, they were British; he could be fairly sure that continued firing was not going to be wasted. If they speeded up their advance, they were Canadians; he couldn't keep his mortars targeted.

The Germans had a general contempt for the American soldier, and I guess we picked it up. In one of our first encounters with the 12th SS (Hitler Jugend), we were mistaken for Americans--which gave us a deadly opportunity we might not otherwise have had. A platoon of the Regina Rifles was manning forward defensive positions at the edge of an orchard on the west side of the village of Norrey en Bessin. This sunny afternoon, a most remarkable event occurred. Out of the next village to the west, Le Mesnil Patry, came a troop of Germans marching toward them across the field of wheat. They came in full battle gear, marching 2-deep and line abreast, with a Corporal at one end of the line directing them, as if on a parade ground. The Platoon Sergeant told his men to pick their

targets, but hold their fire until he gave the order. About 25-30 yards from the edge of the orchard, the German Corporal brought his parade to a halt, and called out in typical Germanic English, "Americans! We are 12th SS Hitler Jugend. You are to surrender to us." The Sergeant was properly incensed. He shouted back, "Fuck you! We're not Americans! We're Canadians! Fire!" Needless to say, not many Hitler Jugend got back across that field.

Some sunny days after this event, we (C Coy of the Queen's Own) relieved the Reginas' Coy in Norrey--sneaking in at night with SS on three sides of us--and lived in the gathering stench till June 26 before the Brits came through us (trying for a right hook around Caen via Villers Bocage, as I recall). Their Start Line was our village. With the front pushing forward, we could finally get out to inspect and bury the bodies. I removed some stinking dogtags and service books from bloated and corrupting corpses--but couldn't stomach collecting them all--and delivered them back to my buddies in Bn Intelligence Section, who did not thank me. I recall bulldozers digging out a long pit in the field to the north of the village as we moved back that afternoon. We had learned our first big lesson about the nature of Hitler's private automatons. Their savage discipline would neither be matched nor shaken. But we had learned, also, that they held the American soldier in contempt--and their impression undoubtedly rubbed off on us.

CROSSING THE ORNE OUT OF CAEN.

Monty's "big breakout" across the Orne was called "Operation Goodwood." The Canadian part of it was called "Atlantic." Start date was July 18. Across the Orne, the southern suburb of Caen, Vaucelles, was still in German hands. Its assault was the task of 2nd Cdn Corps: Third Div to take Vaucelles; Second Div, in their first battle, to pass through to take Cormelles. The Corps assault was on a narrow front with the river on our right and the village of Giberville on the left--no more than a mile wide at the most, which left little room to maneuver for two divisions of infantry and two brigades of tanks. British 1st and 8th Corps were attacking to our left in more open terrain, their objective the Bourgebus Ridge beyond Cormelles.

As noted earlier, 8th Brigade with supporting armour had crossed the Orne downstream during the night, as did elements of three armoured divisions of British 8th Corps (including 7th Armoured, the "Desert Rats," more than a little tired of it all). For all our attempted stealth, the Germans were well aware of our movements. Everywhere in front of us, they commanded the high ground.

Our Brigade's task was to follow the bombers in: Regiment de la Chaudieres and the North Shore Regiment on the right, close to the river, aimed directly at the Colombelles' steelworks and the built-up approaches to Vaucelles; the Queen's Own (my Bn) on the left, our object to secure the high ground east of Colombelles, and the village of Giberville, closing up with the British. Ninth Brigade would follow through with the main assault on Vaucelles itself. As it turned out, 7th Brigade would

have to be called in as well, making a flanking attack, a night crossing of the river from their holding positions in Caen after 9th Brigade had been stopped by an impenetrable defense.

Now to the personal recollections. The Queen's Own's first objective was a collection of houses and a crossroads to the east of Colombelles, Able and Baker Companies leading. The dust had not settled from the bombing as the attack began. Charlie (my Coy) and Dog had to wait while Baker Company mounted an armour-supported attack on Germans hitting our right flank from the steelworks and a race track in Colombelles. We started to move up to the crossroads about 10:00, preparing for our shift left to strike across the fields and up the road to Giberville. I wandered along in my usual private world, just taking it in; my job would come later. I remember the bomb craters. I recall the walking wounded straggling back, some faces I knew, the First Aid Men busy. I recall stopping by one bomb crater where a man with a foot wound was complaining. My impression of the man was that he had shot his own foot--a desperate way of getting out of it. Gerries in the bomb-drop zones were either non-existent or surrendered very easily. Those out of the bombing zones made life miserable for us.

With a troop of tanks, we made our left turn toward Giberville, and our attack began. In the fields our tanks were engaging fire with MGs and 75 mm guns to the south and east. One by one the tanks were stopped by mines, and became sitting ducks for the one remaining 75. But by this time our lead elements were in the outskirts of the village. With things quietening, Coy HQ moved forward, following the shattered road. One of the effects of heavy bombing was to make roads immediately impassible for vehicles, I observed. I remember seeing a face on the road--nothing more than that, just the flattened flesh of a face. Up on the bank I saw a leg--nothing more than that, just a reclining leg. I could not tell whether this was an effect of the bombing on some German, or an effect of the 75s on some Canadian. I remember climbing the low bank into the field to the right of the road where numerous Gerry slit trenches had been. I poked into those that were still intact. In one I found a dead German--but just to make sure, I shot him through the head for good measure. I tried to get his Service Book, but couldn't reach it without pulling the body out of the slit, which I really didn't have stomach for.

It was now about noon. Giberville was full of Germans, most of them ready to fight. There were nests of them in reinforced and sandbagged stone houses all over the place. We set up Coy HQ near the road on the west edge of town while Section- and Platoon-size battles went on throughout the village. Very soon our troops were running out of ammunition, and using German weapons. Our Sergeant-Major with the ammunition carrier was about due. I was to go back to the crossroads to meet him, and show him the way up.

On the way back I passed by a bomb crater with a couple of frightened soldiers in it. "Get down! Get down!," they shouted to me, "There's a sniper over there across the road!" I was a little puzzled. I was walking upright, with no cover at all, and had heard nothing. I figured they were still stuck in the past somewhere, and hadn't been able to

update themselves. I told them what I was doing, and that I had heard or seen nothing of a sniper shooting at me, and went on my upright way. At the crossroads I found no one, and could see no one approaching up the road. On the porch of the farmhouse, I saw a wounded QOR sitting. He had been missed by the First Aid Men earlier, and had crawled here hoping to attract someone's attention. The assault had passed him by, and the main war hadn't caught up to him. He was near dead, as far as I could see, but I could do nothing for him but tell him to hang on. I told him I was expecting support vehicles to be coming up the road any minute now. I asked if he wanted me to stay with him. He asked to be left alone.

I wandered back to the crossroads. I was in the middle of the road when an artillery barrage hit. I couldn't tell whether the guns were theirs or ours, but they were close enough that I had no time to hit the ditch. (Later it dawned on me that these guns were closer than any of ours could be, and that I may have actually been the target. Unseen snipers indeed!) I had to flatten out where I was, on solid pavement in the middle of the road. As the shells exploded around me, I felt a savage smack in my butt. "Hey," I said to myself, "maybe I've got my easy trip out." When the shelling stopped, I felt my butt area before I did anything else. My pants weren't even torn. I'd been hit by a thrown piece of road. I got up and moved to the nearest bomb crater to wait.

Finally the carrier arrived, along with a troop of tanks. I told them they couldn't get up the road; they'd have to cross the field. The lead tank commander looked at the Sherman hulks still smouldering in the field, and promptly declined. I was rather more concerned about getting our ammunition up to Giberville than I was for the safety of the tankmen. The tank radios went to work, and pretty soon we had a bunch of engineers out in the field, clearing a path through the minefield. As this went on, our Battalion Commander arrived, also waiting to cross the field. The wounded man on the farmhouse porch finally got his ride back--alive or dead, I could not tell.

I went back to Giberville to tell my Major what was going on. When the engineers reported they had marked a path into Giberville, a column of waiting vehicles now set out across the field. Vehicle number one was a tank, vehicle number two was the Bn Commander in his Jeep, vehicle number three was our Bren carrier with the ammunition. It turned out that the engineers had missed one mine, a step-mine. It blew up vehicle number three, our ammunition carrier. The mine blast threw our Sgt Major clear, but it trapped the driver in exploding ammunition.

By now it was about 4:00 pm, and we had collected more prisoners than we could possibly handle. (War records put the count at 600.) With a small escort party, the prisoners were now lined up in column-of-threes, and started out of the village toward the rear. As we came out of the village this time, we saw a sight we had not seen before. Off to our north and west, for as far as we could see into the distance down the long slope, a solid line of British tanks had moved into position, waiting for the order to go. The Germans gaped at the sight. All they could say was "Hitler caput! Hitler caput!" But now from across the road to the south an MG42 opened up on us, and everyone flew for cover. We still had the SS

with us--this was their usual response to surrendering Wermacht.

I recall little else of the day. I remember wandering over to the line of British tanks, wondering why they hadn't moved forward. The "Desert Rats" were out of their tanks, brewing tea. They simply hadn't been given the order to go. I privately cussed Monty, as usual. On the following day, Third Div had cleared Vaucelles, Second Div took Cormelles, and the British had taken Bourgebus Ridge. Third Div no longer had a front, squeezed out by the British on the left and Second Div on the right. On the next day, we were pulled back to R&R, at last, having been "in the thick of it" since D-Day, a month and a half before.

BOMBING BLUNDERS

Heavy bombing in close support of ground attack began for us with the final assault on Caen. The bombers made a wasteland of Caen, which made our later transport in force through that city a bottleneck of some concern. Heavy bomber support of our advance across the River Orne to the east of Caen--the assault on Bourgebus Ridge, codenamed "Operation Goodwood"--was much more successful. Again R.A.F. Lancasters led the way. But though we were able to break through the first lines of defenses, the Gerry's fluid defense-in-depth still held. (My memories of this action are still vivid.) After that action, 3rd Cdn Div was finally pulled to the rear for a much-needed rest and refit. Second Cdn Div had taken over the final cleanout of the southern outskirts of Caen, and our 4th Armoured Division and 1st Polish Armoured were now fully in Normandy, as yet unbloodied, but were to lead our next (supposedly decisive) assault down the road to Falaise, Operation "Totalize." We had now officially become First Cdn Army--in Normandy, Second Corps, consisting of 2nd and 3rd Cdn Divisions with 4th Cdn Armoured and 1st Polish Armoured; in Italy, First Corps, consisting of 1st Cdn Division with 5th Cdn Armoured, these to join us later in the liberation of Holland.

Operation "Totalize" was to go in with U.S. heavy bomber support, the first time we had seen American bombers on our front. It was also the last, as it turned out. As the attack began, 3rd Div was on the move forward from our beach holiday to join in the battle as it developed. Getting through Caen was a logistical nightmare. I had gone ahead with Recce to plot our gathering-areas to the south of Caen in preparation for the arrival of the fragments of the Division as they came through the bottleneck. Thus I was on the long slope looking back down at Caen as the American Superforts started coming in from England on their way down the road to Falaise. Fleet after fleet were coming across, to the East of Caen, each a great solid wedge of planes in close order, each wedge having one navigator in its lead plane to direct its coordinates and bomb run. We watched and cheered as they went over. But suddenly one wedge veered off its southward course, and turned westward toward Caen. Consternation rippled along the slopes; I saw the yellow smoke of "friendly" identification flares start up from a half-dozen points along the slope. No effect. The wedge came on. We watched in horror as the whole wedge, as if one plane, released its bombs, and watched them fall like elongated sheets of rain, and watched the centre of Caen boil up in a long, erupting

line of dust, debris, and smoke from their explosions. Then another wedge, seeing the bomb-run of the first, veered back from its course toward Falaise, and made its bombing run from south to north across the city. And then another followed. Three in all, I think. We cursed Americans for their mindless "following the leader," for that was what it appeared to be. We cursed the lack of ground-to-air communications. Most of all we just cursed in impotent frustration.

Since the main body of our Division was "running the bottleneck" at the time, we had some casualties, of course--mainly in Divisional Headquarters and one Company of Seventh Brigade. We lost our General, for one. My regiment had only one minor casualty as far as I know, having moments before passed through an area where bombs were about to fall. As you might expect, the USAF culprits were "up on the carpet" as soon as they got back to England.

Thinking about what had happened, we came to the conclusion that this could never have happened with the RAF. Each British bomber had its own navigator--massed errors on the American scale could not occur. But our partisan illusion of superiority was about to be demolished.

Having failed to get to Falaise with "Totalize," 2nd Cdn Corps re-organized to try again. Tanks and motorized infantry would sweep around to the left of the Quesnay Woods--our nemesis in "Totalize"--while the Woods themselves would be flattened by Lancasters of the RAF. As it turned out, they flattened much more than the Woods. They also took on our own Artillery Units and B Echelons. Since I was already some 5 miles into German territory at the time--a story I will get to later--I neither saw nor heard the bombing. It was on the way back that I learned about it, and saw for myself some of the devastation.

Why it happened has never been adequately explained. The bombers saw concentrations of vehicles and guns, and took them to be German. If we could lose our bearings on the ground, I guess that pilots and navigators could do the same above the ground. Mistaking the yellow smoke of our identification flares for markers dropped by Pathfinders, they simply went about their business, playing an RAF version of "follow the leader," one by one dumping their bombloads on friendly troops--who had no choice but to shoot back once the fracas started. One thing is certain. Even in the face of disasters like this, "Bomber" Harris refused to countenance the thought of ground-to-air communication between his lofty Air Force and the lowly ground troops he was supposedly supporting. In the long tradition of British aristocracy, "territorial" imperatives were more important to him than the common good. Churchill should have sacked him for that elitist denial of simple military commonsense. The Americans were much quicker at making such accommodations.

>> How did I cope with the stress? I came prepared. I wrote a poem before D-Day in which I pre-lived the experience. And during the experience I merged with my mother Earth in her travail, and did not merge with my comrades in theirs. (I couldn't explain it then, and can't now. But that's what I did.) I became a fragment of a greater motion in which

I could feel a trigger being squeezed before the shot was fired, and made my countermove before its trace arrived. In my head I never fought a battle, only the war. I did not get lost in the chaos. I remembered who I was, and where I was, and what was at stake--and never let the intrusions in. By the time we got to the Rhine, Bn HQ were calling me "old indestructible"--but it had never really occurred to me that I was anything else.

A little logic played a part. This was a trick I learned on the early beachhead perimeter as the Gerry brought more guns to bear, and the barrages began to increase in number and intensity. We spent as little time as possible out of our slits, and always knew where the nearest slit was if we were caught out. When a barrage started, from the bottom of my slit I calculated the number of guns firing. Then I calculated the number of those shells that might actually hit the orchard I was in, and the number of these that might be duds. Then I calculated the number of square yards in the orchard; and finally, figuring that the danger area of a shell against a man in a slit trench was about 8 square yards, I calculated the odds of one of those orchard-bound shells falling into the 8 square yards of my danger zone. My permutations and combinations were never very accurate, of course, but I could plainly see that the odds of a shell dropping in on me were so enormous that the Gerries could blast away all day or night without hitting me. At first I went to sleep doing this sort of thing. After a while I didn't need to do it anymore. When a barrage started, my first inclination was to go to sleep. If sleep was out of context, the soporific chemistry simply relaxed me.

I don't know anyone else who did it this way. As far as I could see in my slit-travels, the usual antidotes were saying prayers, or telling beads, or swapping stories with the slit-buddy. (Two-man slits were more usual than one-man, though less logical in defensive spacing.) My method worked for me--and worked because it transferred so easily to autonomic biological coping mechanisms. In that sense I became the coping strategies I rationalized. I did not go into Normandy with it. It came with the experience of being targeted by increasing numbers of guns as we consolidated after D-Day. I cannot recall how it developed. Since the strategy is all I remember, it must have been my first response to concentrated artillery fire on our positions. One dealt with it because one had to deal with it--not to deal with it was to go mad (flunk out, quit, fail, however one might manufacture it).

BUT THEN CAME THE QUESNAY WOODS

The one time when I almost succumbed is a long story. We were attacking a woods straddling the road to Falaise, the Quesnay Woods. We had told Monty that there were tanks in there, but he had to do it his way--a Brigade attack, Queen's Own on the left of the road, North Shore Regiment on its right, a frontal assault, with 6 tanks off to the left somewhere protecting an exposed flank, the attack to take place in the evening, night-fighting through the woods to the river, so his main armour could cross the river the next morning (promises, promises!). What we found was one of those little Battle Groups of crack troops set up to hold

the Gap. But I will condense this story almost to the point of misinformation.

Able and Baker Companies had gone first, taking off at 1900 hrs. Charlie and Dog were to follow, Charlie at 1920 hrs heading across the wheatfield, Dog a little later, coming up the road. Waiting at our start line as Able and Baker disappeared from view, we heard not a sound from the direction of the woods--which from these positions was masked by the high ground of the wheatfield. At 1920 hrs we set out, in familiar battle order, not knowing what to expect. About a hundred yards into the wheatfield we found ourselves in stubble--and a beautifully-prepared killing ground, I was thinking. Why hadn't they used it? I wondered. Moments later the stubble was being raked by machine gun fire from God knows how many guns--and I had my answer. They were waiting for the second wave they knew would be coming. This little killing ground had been made just for us.

I had never heard so many machine guns coming at me all at once. They were even using tracer, and you could see these smoking through the stubble. As in slow motion I watched one tracer pass between my legs, and another inches to the right of my right ankle. I was thinking that if I hadn't been in one of my zigzags, one of those would have got me. We had a new Company Commander, a Captain in his first action with us, which didn't help. (It was also his last, it turned out.) He'd taken off his pips because of sniper threat in the woods--his rationale--and carried a rifle instead of a Sten or sidearm. The only one in Coy HQ who might look like a Commander was me, moving in my usual place, 5 yards on the other side of the Radio Man, carrying my rifle and the MAP SATCHEL(!). When the shooting started, the Captain still wasn't acting like a Coy Cmdr, but since things were rapidly falling apart under the weight of machine-gun fire, I started waving my arms and shouting orders to try to get things organized--so guess who the Gerry thought was Coy Cmdr! When we topped the rise and saw the downslope ahead, we came in sight of 3 Tigers at the edge of the woods. They'd been busy creaming 14 Platoon to our left, but now they saw the Radio Man with his aerial waving in the breeze, and this jackass of a hero waving his troops on. They dropped a set of three in a neat triangle right on top of us. I was surrounded by dust and smoke, and for a moment I stopped, thinking now they can't see me, and the next moment telling myself how stupid that idea was since those machine-guns were simply raking the field. I moved forward out of the smoke, running. Half a man from 15 Platoon was staring up at me from the stubble--we'd come to the Regiment at the same time in early '43. Ahead of me, 14 and 15 Platoons had disappeared. To my right, Coy HQ had disappeared. I didn't have time to look behind. I was thinking "God, where is everybody? Maybe they've got across the stubble, and are hiding in the wheat." I was running in combat zigzag, trying to get to the wheat. But my inner clock told me I didn't have time to go that far. I had to find cover right now. I saw a mortar crater, and dropped into it. I still had to find out where people were, so up came my head, looking. The Gerry tanks didn't waste shells on me; one was going to be enough now. It hit about 3 feet to the left of me, raising me into the air, and dropping me like a sack back in my hole. I knew they knew I had to be dead, so this time I didn't raise my head. (The forward velocity of an 88 shell at 300 yards exceeds the

velocity of its explosive force; the shrapnel made a V-shape gouge in the earth that missed me entirely; only the blast had stunned me.)

But "playing dead" is an act one cannot quite excuse of oneself. In my mind I had gone coward, and all I knew was fear. I had lost my way, and willynilly slipped into the clutches of chaos. I got out of there in about 2 hours as it grew dark, and found my way back to Bn Hq, and tried to tell the story. It still hadn't made sense to me, and I rambled a lot. When we had collected those who dribbled back as the night progressed, we headed back to the rear to get replacements, and regroup. On the way back I had to march at the rear of a section because I kept falling, tripping up anyone behind me. Our way took us through our gun areas. Every time a gun went off, I fell. If it was some distance away, I stumbled to my knees; if it was close, I fell flat on my face. I had no control over the reaction. Over the next week, I continued to do my job, but continued to fall all over myself when the guns went off. No one thought I should be pulled out of action, fortunately, though I was obviously suffering some sort of "shell shock." I say "fortunately" because I am convinced that I would have been rendered useless to myself if they had sent me off to hospital. I may have never recovered. We'd already seen some fine examples of that, returning ruined men to us who could no longer last a day of it. As it was, when the next action came along, I started winning again, and being stupidly heroic, and got myself missing-in-action for a day, and came out of it completely cured. The dumb infantry were not so dumb, after all.

And I survived. The stress caught up to me after the war, when my adrenals were still functioning as if the war had never ended, and I was in subconscious fight or flight when neither were called for in reality. The pancreas turned out sugar to counteract the adrenin overload until it could produce no more, so that I would go into a temporary shock reaction due to loss of blood sugar. It took me several years to get my endocrines working normally after I came back from the war.

Let me add a little more to round out the description of our battle for the Quesnay Woods. The German designation for their defensive unit, we later learned, was Battle Group Krause, and was one of 3 Battle Groups that Kurt Meyer had set up from the remnants of his 12th SS Panzer Division and the 89th Infantry Division, plus elements of the 85th Infantry that were just beginning to arrive in the area. In all likelihood, Kurt Meyer himself was in that woods.

Our assault was on August 10, I believe, and was really the last gasp of 1st Cdn Army in operation "Totalize." We had simply run out of steam, troops, and tanks, but our Senior Officers were hoping that the Gerry was more weary and used-up than we were, and took a last gamble.

I suspect the Americans could never imagine the tier-upon-tier of defensive lines we had to penetrate in order to force the Caen-Falaise road, against many of the elite of the German forces--and Patton's idiot remark from the other side of the "Gap" in Argentan (about continuing on and driving us into the sea) gave us the same gut feeling as the 12th SS we had to deal with on this side.

>> Do I think that my experiences in Normandy and elsewhere changed me permanently in any way? Yes, definably. But it's a long story, and moves on several levels of perception, some of which are far removed from "common sense."

I have already noted the alteration of adrenal function that plagued me after my return to Canada. That experience in itself is not the stuff of common sense. No doctor was able to diagnose the cause of my sporadic nocturnal bouts of malaria-like agony and delirium, and no doctor could invent a cure. Left to my own devices, finally, I took a "road less used" to challenge it myself--and in so doing, permanently turned a corner of perception and belonging that I would likely not have come to otherwise. Since the condition was a direct result of my adaptation to the war, my success in altering it had to be equally as direct a result.

For a less recondite indication of my sense of change I might suggest the following. Shortly after my return in 1945, I quickly rewrote my pre-Normandy poem--which I mentioned to you earlier--including it within the larger framework of a war now ended. It won a poetry contest at the U of T, a brief moment in the sun, but was still much less than I was trying to accomplish. In 1960, in sudden inspiration, I turned to it again. Its matured development fell into place without effort, and the final lines--which had formerly only frustrated me--now came rushing to the page. Their realized harmonic was so natural that I was amazed to think I had not found that voice before. My feeling was of a great burden removed; I had composed the war behind me at last. Ahead, a new world was dawning on my resolution of the old.

LOST BEYOND THE LAISON RIVER

Operation "Tractable" started on August 14. Since "Totalize" had bogged down at the Quesnay Woods, "Tractable" was to bypass the Woods, cross the Laison, capture Falaise, and push on to close the "Gap." This is to record the unforgettable experience that I had during the first day of this operation, an experience that I have come to call, with pardonable romantic flourish, "Lost Beyond the Laison."

A word about the vehicles the infantry used to go in with the tanks. Part of 3rd Div's added artillery support starting with D-Day was provided by "Priests" on loan from the American Army. A "Priest" was a self-propelled gun, a 105mm howitzer mounted in a Sherman shell. By July these had been phased of action, but were still attached. General Simonds (Cmdr, Cdn 2nd Corps) got permission from the Americans to convert them into armoured personnel carriers. Working around the clock, 76 of them had been converted for use in operation "Totalize." For "Tractable" we had a few more. Officially they were now called "Kangaroos," but we still called them "Priests." We also had the White Scout Car, the half-track vehicle used by the motorized regiment in the 4th Cdn Armoured Division.

Third Div was the assault infantry, 7th and 8th Brigades fully mounted in half-tracks and "Priests," with three great wedges of tanks in front of us. We started out from about 2 miles behind our lines, heading

cross-country. The dust and thunder of our coming must have been a fearful sight to behold. C Coy HQ was in a half-track, accompanied by one section of 15 Platoon led by a Sgt. Our Coy Cmdr was new to us, replacing the Captain we had lost days before at the Quesnay Woods. By the time we were in "German territory" we were already lost in the noise, the covering smoke, and the duststorms raised by our tanks. Hitting one ditch too hard, our half-track lost part of its steering. It could turn left, but not right. After a time we came out of the dust and smoke, and found ourselves on a winding country road in quiet woods descending into a green and pleasant valley. At one curve a German 105 stared down the road at us, but it had either been hit by something, and wasn't manned, or was saving itself for the tanks that were sure to follow. We came out on the valley road, turned left, crossed a picture-postcard culvert spanning a creek, and stopped at the edge of a silent and deserted town, whose main street we could look down as far as the hill on the other side. It was time to get our bearings.

Behind us, on the other side of the bridge, 3 Bren Gun Carriers hauling anti-tank guns bounced to a stop. In the orchard to our left, white flags began to appear, tied to gun barrels waving from unseen slits. We had got ahead of our tanks, and unwittingly become a random commando force. We had, in fact, crossed the Laison River on one of its few remaining bridges, far to the left and upstream of our objective. I was quickly able to point this out to our Company Commander--who wouldn't believe it! Our new Captain couldn't read a map, apparently, and couldn't accept the possibility that I could. I told him the creek we had just crossed was the Laison River, and the town we were looking at was not Maizieres, where we were supposed to be, but Ernes, 2 miles farther to the East. I pointed out the church on the hill at the other end of town, and showed him the layout on the contour map. He wasn't convinced. He decided the half-track had to reconnoitre ahead, while the support carriers remained at the bridge. I can't remember him telling us why.

Off we rattled down the main street of the town, moving fast. Away ahead of us, in the centre of town, a dark-uniformed figure scuttled across the road from one building to another. As we approached the church on the hill, I recall opening fire at the belfry, knowing church steeples to be typical observation posts. At the end of the village, the road curved left, and climbed up to the high ground following the eastern edge of the valley. Now we were moving north in open country again. I pointed out the curve and the contours to the Captain, but on we went. Now to the west, on the other side of the valley, we saw tanks appearing out of the wheatfields, starting to nose down toward the river. At the same time, out of the valley on this side, numbers of Germans began to appear, in full pack and armed, running to escape the tanks. A shell from one the tanks dropped to the west of the road, about 50 yards away. Where a short hedge of trees masked the road, the Captain ordered the driver to stop, only half-hidden by the screen of trees. "Hit the ditch!" was all he could say. We did. From the south edge of the hedge of trees, I watched more Germans climbing out of the valley, more tanks coming into sight on the opposite slope. At the other edge of the hedge, the Captain was consulting with the Sergeant, both of them completely lost. The men held fast in the ditch, waiting for someone to tell them what was going on.

By this time I figured I knew exactly what was going on. We were now maybe 5 miles out of place. As far as the tanks knew, though still out of range, we were a German command half-track pulling back from Ernes with a Battalion of Wermacht. As far as the Germans knew, we were either one of theirs, or part of a crack enemy assault force that had them surrounded. I took a Bren Gunner's weapon from him--I had been a Bren instructor before I went overseas--set it up at the edge of the hedge, and told the gunner to cover me. I walked out into the field about 3 yards, and started waving the Germans in. Seeing me, a number of them started in our direction. As the nearest one got to about 10 yards away, he suddenly realized we weren't German after all. I watched the man go instantly mad in front of me. He stopped in abject terror, his eyes glazed, his face white, all reason gone. Dropping his rifle, he turned back toward his comrades, waving both arms, screaming in whatever voice he had left, flailing away from us like a man possessed. We couldn't have that, of course. I raised my rifle, aimed above his head, and fired. I could not shoot him in the back. But other rifles had been brought to bear by now, and the stricken went down like a limp rag. Now about a hundred yards back down the way we had come, a group of 3 Germans started across the road, trying to escape around us. One had a radio on his back--an HQ of some sort, obviously. We couldn't have that. I moved to the middle of the road, and put one bullet through the radio into the man's back. The man toppled into the ditch. Other rifles had joined in. Who is to say whose bullet did what? None of the 3 got across the road. We began taking in a few of the Germans in front of us willing to surrender.

What was happening at the other edge of the hedge, I do not know. This edge was where I was; I had no eyes or thought or concern for anything else--the total tunnel concentration of the warrior in battle. The autonomic shock-reaction that had laid hold of my reflexes since the Quesnay Woods' debacle had disappeared. I was whole again, on top of all I perceived, and winning.

Now up the road from Ernes came a small German scout car--their version of the Jeep--carrying a driver and one passenger. I stood in the middle of the road, watching them come. They took us to be German, of course. I changed their mind when they got within 20 yards by firing a shot into the "Gerry Can" that sat on the front seat between them. They stopped, climbed out with their hands up, and surrendered. I went to their Jeep, thinking to put it to use. But the key was gone. I asked the driver for the key, but he said he had thrown it into the grass. We searched him, roughly, but found nothing. We might have forced him to find it for us, I suppose, but we really didn't have time or men to spare for tough stuff. Better to stay friendly. Even our prisoners outnumbered us by this time. We left the "Jeep" where it was. None of us were smart enough to think of hotwiring it. It was detestably German, anyway.

But now the far tanks had another vehicle to look at, this one clearly German. A shell dropped in the field about 20 yards away, and the Captain decided it was time to move out. He was beginning to believe his Intelligence Man must be right about where we were, but he wanted to reconnoitre up to the top of the next slope just to make sure. He was not all that "gung ho"--the driver needed to find clear space on the left

where he could make a turnaround. The half-track loaded up. The prisoners were lined up to run alongside it as it went on up the road.

One of the prisoners was an Austrian with a pocket German/English dictionary with whom I had struck up a conversation. I told the Captain to leave the Austrian with me; I was interrogating him. I'd catch them on the way back. So now they moved out. The Austrian and I sat in the grass at the edge of the road, while he explained how Austrians were not Germans, how he was not a volunteer, and how his country was really one of Hitler's first victims. I found him a pleasant, honest young fellow, and had no reason to disbelieve his sincerity. I was well aware of the Anschluss; not all Austrians had welcomed it.

But now the half-track came barreling back down the road. They had left the prisoners sitting at the top of the slope, promising that if they sat quietly there, someone would be along shortly to pick them up. I climbed aboard. Having found a friend, the Austrian didn't want to be left behind. At my suggestion, the Captain let him climb aboard, too. We skirted the abandoned "Jeep," and headed back toward Ernes, rattling through the still vacant town, to cross the bridge and stop alongside the still waiting support carriers.

The Captain explained to them where we were, and asked them to turn their vehicles around, and follow him down the road to Maizieres. While the carriers maneuvered themselves and their anti-tank guns around, the half-track driver tried in vain to restart his motor, which had stalled when we stopped. The carriers were now alongside, revving to go, but the half-track would still not start. The Captain ordered us into the carriers. We piled in and on as best we could, with nothing much to hang on to for those who moved last. As the Captain waved the column forward, the half-track driver finally got his motor going. The Sergeant, myself, and the Austrian dropped off our perilous perches, and climbed back into the half-track. As the last carrier pulled out, the half-track fell in behind. It went about 10 yards, and stopped dead again. The carrier column disappeared around the bend ahead, and we sat while the driver fiddled with his motor. He fiddled and fumed and fiddled a lot, in fact, but he couldn't get it going.

But now from the north, northwest, and northeast, the tank attack on Ernes was beginning. Sitting in a motionless half-track was no place to be. We moved about 30 yards away from it, flattening ourselves in a ditch behind a hedge. The tanks rolled into town, guns blazing. If only they knew, I thought. But they didn't know. This is what they'd broken through the German tank and anti-tank screen to do. Into the town they went, shooting it up, ploughing through buildings instead of going around them. Massed tanks overrunning a town are a fearsome sight to behold. The half-track was raked with machine gun fire from at least one passing tank. Fortunately, none wasted a shell on it. Finally, a tank came to a stop or stalled in the orchard next to our hedge. The hatch opened, and a bandaged head came up. The Sergeant and I decided it was time to surrender. Leaving the Austrian and the driver in the ditch, we approached the tank with our hands up. I don't remember our conversation, but the tank commander was more than a little surprised at finding

was a bit of a laugh. The troops had immediately abandoned their privileged position on the tanks, now forcing the German prisoners up to take their place--all done on the run without stopping the column. But the ack-ack gun couldn't get its sights down to our level, apparently. Its shots never really came close.

Ahead of us now we could make out the line of an orchard at the edge of a village. As we got closer, we could see the colour of friendly uniforms, and field glasses straining to make us out. Closer yet, we could see puzzled heads being scratched. We had come back to British lines holding the left flank of "Tractable"--infantry of the 51st Highland Division holding at La Bu-sur-Rouvres. We pulled into the orchard, came to stop, and started telling our story. By now it was dusk.

With the Sergeant along, I located the nearest and highest ranking officer, identified myself as an Intelligence Man, and pulled out my map to show him where we had been. He said that it's lucky we moved out of there; he was set to attack Ernes at dawn tomorrow. The barrage was due to begin at midnight. He provided his driver and Jeep to take us (the Sergeant and me) back to his Brigade HQ so we could tell our story to the Brigadier. The Brigadier and his Intelligence Officer quizzed us at length over their maps in a cramped operations room, until they were satisfied with our information. The Brigadier got on the blower to cancel the Artillery barrage, and ordered his troops to start moving up immediately, during the night. We were told to get something to eat, and spend the night here. In the morning we could find out where our Bn was, and figure how to rejoin them.

During our journey back on the next day, we saw what the R.A.F. had done to our B Echelons and the Polish Artillery. In the afternoon, when I walked down the road to rejoin my Company, one of my buddies thought he was seeing a ghost. My pack had been stowed on the Company jeep. Carrying wounded in the thick of the action, it had been blown apart by enemy fire. The bloodied contents of my pack, clearly identifying me, were strewn all over the road. Assuming the blood to be mine, no one expected to see me again.

But that's about the way the war went for me. Day after day, week after week, I kept beating the odds or confounding the expectations. The only disaster I suffered was a sprained ankle, twisted while spinning a motorbike in a rest area.

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