

RECOLLECTIONS OF D-DAY

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SOME BACKGROUND ON THE ROLE OF A COMBAT INTELLIGENCE MAN:

In the early Spring of 1944, a new position was added to the complement of each battle Company in the Third Canadian Division (Assault): an Intelligence Man. The idea was General Montgomery's, as an effort to improve the communication of tactical intelligence in the heat of battle. In the Queen's Own Rifles, one Rifleman was chosen from each of the four Companies, by each Company C.O., and temporarily attached to Intelligence Section, Battalion HQ, for intensive training in enemy unit and weapons identification, map reading and recording, and physical fitness. We returned to the battle Company about the time the Regiment was "sealed in" before D-Day.

The normal role of an Intelligence Man was to carry and update the tactical maps in battle. His place in battle order was with Company HQ, moving forward with the C.O. and the Radio Man. After a Company objective (or at least a secure perimeter) had been achieved, his job was to map the positions held by each Section and Platoon of the Company, try to locate and map the positions, numbers, and weapons of the enemy positions facing them, report to his Company Commander, then get the information back (firsthand and on foot) to Battalion HQ as fast as possible, and return to his Company with an updated map of Battalion, Brigade, Division, and Army dispositions, along with any new information about the enemy. From time to time, the job became more complicated. During the first month of the Normandy Beachhead, for instance, Company Intelligence Men also served as Company Runners, since these were left behind in England for lack of space in the landing craft.

SOME BACKGROUND ON ASSAULT FORCES:

A British or Canadian Assault Division for the Normandy invasion was an augmented Division of over 20,000 troops, especially equipped to overcome fortified beaches, move inland quickly, repel expected armoured counterattacks, and hold a perimeter while major forces built up behind them. An Assault Company had a complement of about 90 men, rather than the usual 110, in order to fit into 3 assault landing craft. Troops not essential to the assault itself would catch up to their units when the beachhead was secure, and transport from England could be arranged. In the case of my Company, the remainder began to appear just before Caen was taken.

I remember getting our first hot meal, for instance, lounging by a bunker at the edge of Carpiquet airport, 26 days after we landed (or was it 26 June?). What I most remember was the taste of bread and butter instead of hardtack.

A great variety of Landing Craft were used. I recall these:

LCA. Landing Craft, Assault. An open, armoured, flat-bottomed craft designed to deposit 30 assault troops on (or within wading distance of) an invasion beach. Its front is a hinged ramp held up by chains until the Navy pilot lets it down at his closest approach.

LCI. Landing Craft, Infantry. A large follow-up landing craft, covered, manned by 5 or 6 naval personnel commanded by an officer, equipped to billet and carry a reserve assault Company to within wading distance of a beach.

LCT. Landing Craft, Tank. A large, open, armoured, flat-bottomed craft, a giant version of an LCA, designed to deposit combat-ready (and shooting) tanks on a beach.

LSI. Landing Ship, Infantry. A "mother" ship, for carrying the assault and immediate support troops of a landing force, plus their landing craft, into range of a beach in relative comfort.

JUNE 6, BEFORE DAWN

The Channel was black and drizzly, rolling in the back swells of yesterday's storm--but this was truly a luxury trip. The last time our Company had been on the Channel was on a "Scheme," crammed into an LCI where nearly everyone was sick, including the Navy. I remembered how it felt being held by the ankles as I wretched in agony upside, the lining of my stomach beginning to bleed. With a high surf running on the landing beaches, the first troops landed so disastrously that the reserves were ordered to turn back before landing, so had to suffer the roller-coaster ride going out and coming back.

But this was no flat-bottomed LCI--this was a real ship, an LSI, equipped to feed, billet, and transport an entire beach assault group, ringed with climbing nets and LCAs slung from the davits. We'd been aboard her since the 4th, waiting. She would carry us comfortably across the Channel, and drop the first of us into our LCAs under cover of darkness, about 2 (?) miles off the coast.

Reveille was early. It was still night. The LSI was still ploughing ahead into the darkness. I don't remember eating; the Navy may have ladled out some porridge and coffee. All we had was our Compo Rations, anyway, but that was for later. I remember lining up for rum ration, but only because somebody talked me into

it: since I was so queezy in the stomach, at least I could be a good pal, and get an extra shot for a drinkin' man. The drinkin' man was smarter than I was. He poured both mine and his into his canteen, which was already half full--a little something he was saving up for a party when the time was right.

Then official noises began coming over the intercoms, people started giving orders, the engines slowed. We got into our gear, and lined up on deck beside our designated LCA. The sky was just beginning to lighten as the LCAs were dropped into the swells, and we climbed down the nets to get on board.

At that point, I don't remember anyone saying anything. Each man's job had been set and memorized days before, and there was really nothing to say. We knew the width of beach we had to cross, the jackmines we had to avoid, the bunkers, the gun positions, the Wall we had to get over or through, the streets and the buildings of the town we had to take, the minefields, the possible enemy strength, the perimeter we had to establish for the next wave to go forward. And I had my own special job after that.

When we were given our assignments at the first briefing session after being sealed in, the Corporal of my former Section in 14 Platoon, not knowing what I had been doing since I left the platoon, had gaped out loud when my job was detailed, and quipped, "What are you buckin' for, Wagar, the Victoria Cross?" And every time we met or passed within earshot of each other in the days before we boarded ship, his nickname for me was "V.C."--like "Hi V.C.! How're things?" or "Why, here's old V.C. Wagar. How are ya, V.C.?" He would say it loudly, for anyone's benefit, with a grin of encouragement, even envy, and I would grin back, feeling heroic. So I was very much inside myself, not really open to making talk. The day was going to be a test of things--a test of me, the test of a Division, the test of an Army, the test of an INVASION OF NAZI EUROPE--and I was silenced by the whole tremendous thing, and scared.

JUNE 6, DAWN

As the sun came up, we were looking at France on a closing horizon that slid up and down, right and left with the motion of our LCA. The "barf bags" were out. One or two had already thrown their bags overboard, and were adding to the bilge. I threw up once, gagged a lot, turned my interest to the show above and around us.

H-Hour at Bernieres was 0730. A and B Companies would land in front of the town. C and D would land minutes later on the right and left edges of the town. Now we began to pick out the features of Bernieres ahead. Support started up. Shells from battleships we couldn't see began hissing high overhead, exploding somewhere inland on targets we couldn't see. A line of four Spitfires swept low

along the line of the coast, blazing away at God knows what. To our left, someone pushed the firing button on a long, converted LCT bristling with bank after bank of heavy mortars. We watched nests of mortar shells lobbing up and over and down, and the town blowing up in slow motion. Someone--it had to be the C.O., Major Nickson--cursed, "Damn! They're supposed to be hitting the beach!" Now the Spitfires were coming back along the coast, higher up, and swinging out over us, heading home. The last one in line was on a collision course with the last nest of mortar shells lobbing up from the LCT. I watched their trajectories closing, and wondered if the guy would know what hit him. The plane exploded, and fell into the water just off shore. The C.O. was up, trying to pick things out with his binoculars--I think it was him--and suddenly blurted, "My God! There's a Frenchman in a boat out there, pulling the pilot out of the water." The unreality of things was creeping in. With our heads down as ordered, tucked safely behind the shelter of steel plates, and all Hell breaking loose around us, here was a mere civilian who didn't know he was in a war--just knew that somebody had to get a man out of the water, and he was elected.

Now we were maybe a quarter-mile off the beach, flanked by our other 2 LCAs, revved up on our final run in, when the orders were changed. Our LCA turned, the C.O. waving the other two after us, and headed back to sea. I don't know where the message came from, or how it got to us, but now we were told that Able and Baker hadn't landed. Our tank support had been slowed down by the heavy seas, and hadn't arrived yet. Able and Baker had been turned around about a half-hour ago. H-Hour was now tentatively one hour later, and someone had forgotten to tell us. Forgot to tell the mortar ships, too, I was thinking. More cursing. About 1000 yards offshore we turned again, and began doing slow circles, waiting. The odd shell began throwing up waterspouts nearby. Any help the earlier support fire had given us was rapidly disappearing.

Now the order came to go; all the tanks hadn't arrived, but we were going to have to go with what we had. The tide was coming in, and keeping clear of the jackmines was going to become a bigger problem for the assault craft the higher the tide moved up the beach. This time, over to the left, there were craft going in ahead of us. Our LCA revved up, and we started in again.

Some of the jackmines were already in 3 or 4 feet of water. The pilot was fighting surf to keep clear of them, trying to run a path that he'd be able to back out of, too. The ramp dropped, and we poured off in single file into waves up to our waists, running. Idiot orders were being shouted: "Off the beach! Off the beach! Get to the wall!" Relieved somebody's tension, I suppose, but I don't know anybody who had to be told what to do on that beach. As I hit the sand I was thinking, "Thank God for solid ground!" The world wasn't going up, down, and sideways anymore. In fact, that's all I was thinking. For the first minutes nothing else registered but relief.

Company HQ set up beside the wall, near a jagged split where one man at a time could climb up to the waterfront road. Most of the Company were already in the town when some sniper filtered back into the near houses, and lined up on the road. A little panic in the rear until the sniper was taken out. Wounded were coming back with stories of snipers holding things up in town. I was thinking I didn't know most of these guys. I'd been in training away from the Company for 4 months. For that matter, I'd never worked in Company HQ, so I hardly knew Major Nickson either--and he'd only known me as an out-of-place kid in a rifle platoon. Word passed down that A and B Companies had a lot of casualties. B Company had landed in front of the main bunker. Compared to that, our beach was a cinch.

Now a "flail tank" clanked ashore, rotary chains flailing the sand in front of it to explode the mines, clearing a path up the beach for another vehicle exit into town. A "step mine" blew its left track off, and the crew baled out, minus the driver. Some engineers turned up from somewhere, with their mine detectors, and started clearing a path the hard way.

We got the message that the centre of town had been cleared, and resistance seemed to have disappeared. It was time to move forward. A few stunned civilians were peering out of doorways as we moved into the cobbled streets. Now the Platoon Commanders were reporting that they were digging in on their objectives on the perimeter of town. The C.O. began looking for a place to set up Coy HQ. I asked his permission to start out for Courseulles. I got a preoccupied "Yes." I hadn't thought about it, but our delayed landing had knocked an hour off my schedule. We hadn't made it up.

THE ROAD TO COURSEULLES

THE PROBLEM. Third Canadian Division was landing on a two Brigade Front, 8th Brigade on the left, 7th Brigade on the right, 9th Brigade in reserve. Division HQ was still in England. On our right and left were Gold and Sword Beaches, being assaulted by two British Divisions whose HQs were also still in England. Farther to the right were Omaha and Utah Beaches, being assaulted by three American Divisions whose HQs were likewise still in England (or somewhere in the Channel). But communication between Brigades was only possible through Division. So on D-Day the strategic radio traffic back and forth from England or the Channel to multiple mobile forces in or on the way to Normandy made cross-unit radio contact impossible. If 8th Brigade was going to know where 7th Brigade was, or vice versa, in the first hours of D-Day, that information would have to be run across. On the morning of D-Day, between the right flank of 8th Brigade at Bernieres and the left flank of 7th Brigade at Courseulles, there was a gap of one mile, linked by a coast road no one had secured. Someone would have to run it.

THE PROBLEM ASSIGNED. Somewhere the decision was made that the Intelligence Man of the rightmost Company of 8th Brigade would run the gap, and trade information with the Intelligence Officer of the leftmost Battalion of 7th Brigade. Why it wasn't the other way around was good planning, I hope. The enemy positions overlooking the road could be countered better from Bernieres than Courseulles. Anyway, I was the Intelligence Man of my Brigade's rightmost Company, so I would do the running; and some Lieutenant in the Regina Rifles was the Intelligence Officer of his Brigade's leftmost Battalion, so he would do the meeting.

THE PROBLEM DEFINED. Aerial photography had given us most of our information about the gap between the towns. About a quarter-mile out of Bernieres, there was a gun position 5 yards off the road, between the road and the beach. In the fields on the inland slope, about 100 yards off the road on a low ridge, there was another gun position, a ring of trenches, and what looked like mortar positions. The inland fields were mined. The beach was mined. It was suspected that the road could be mined, and that the ditches on either side of it could be mined. I was told I could take two men from 15 Platoon with me, since that Platoon was holding the right perimeter of Bernieres. The Regina Rifles Intelligence Officer would meet me on the road where it entered Courseulles. When we got back to Bernieres, we were to "catch a tank" up the Caen road and find the Regiment somewhere beyond Beny or Basly. The Brigadier should be somewhere close by, if not with Bn or C Coy HQ, expecting my information.

I found 15 Platoon where they were supposed to be. Platoon HQ was in an orchard at the edge of town, alongside the road. I reported to the Lieutenant, and he asked his Sergeant to give me two men. He said I just missed some excitement. He pointed up the slope beyond the orchard, "There's a mortar or two up there somewhere. They were hitting us a while ago, but they've switched to the south end of town now."

I took my two companions over to the road, and explained what I had to do. I told them it looked like the only way across was down the slope-side ditch, one at a time, "leapfrogging." I didn't tell them the ditch might be mined--weren't likely to be anti-personnel mines, anyway. I didn't talk about the gun position beside the road a quarter-mile out--just hoped it wasn't occupied.

We took off down the ditch. The first man ran his yards and dropped. The second ran past him 10 yards and dropped. I ran the yards to the tail man, and dropped. "Go!" I said. He ran past the lead and dropped. The tail man looked back at me, and I signalled him to go. He did his leapfrog and dropped. The two ahead leapfrogged each other; I leapfrogged myself. Run, drop, crawl, run, drop, crawl--a mile of it.

Someone up the slope had noticed. I could hear invisible bees

swish by as I ran. Run, drop, crawl. Don't get up in the same place you went down. We passed the ack-ack gun position at the side of the road--empty, as I'd hoped. Run, drop, crawl. I had a clear view over the Channel. The mists had cleared, the sun was bright, the sky was a great patch of blue ringed with clouds, and the Channel was full of ships. From one end of the horizon to the other, for as far out as I could see, ships of all shapes and sizes, an armada of ships. The drama was getting to me again. Run, drop, crawl. France, I was thinking, today I'm in France! French road, French grass, French ditch. Behind that hill a whole continent of guns and armies gearing up to push us off this little strip of coast that isn't ours. Run, drop, crawl. A wire fence flanked the ditch. A small metal sign on it caught my attention. "Achtung! Minen!" it said, on a skull and crossbones background. How civilized and normal, I thought, and wasn't being sarcastic. Run, drop, crawl. Where the ridge fell off to level fields there was a 2-storey farmhouse sitting off the road 100 yards. Didn't see anybody. Wasn't hearing the bees anymore. Run, drop, crawl. Could see people moving back and forth down the road in Courseulles. Got up to run, moved out on the road, and stayed up. At the edge of Courseulles a dead German was lying on a patch of grass under the trees by a backyard shed, looking out of place. We started walking.

I didn't see my Regina Rifle Lieutenant. As we walked on between solid rows of houses, the local residents were moving about with a general air of excitement. There were no soldiers in sight. I wondered where the war was. Someone offered us a drink of something, pouring it into a glass. Turned out to be some sort of lemonade, as far as I remember. The unreality was creeping back. Looking down toward the centre of town, the only military thing I could see was a tank sitting dead in the road. As we approached it, the commander became visible, slumped on his elbows in the turret, headphones over his ears, looking annoyed. I motioned I wanted to talk to him, and he slipped his headphones down around his neck.

"Have you seen the Regina Rifles? I was supposed to meet their Intelligence Officer along here somewhere."

"Regina Rifles? Haven't seen any around here for hours. Hell, they're a couple of towns up by now. Where're you from?"

"Queen's Own. Eighth Brigade. Came over from Bernieres," I said, pointing back the way we came. "Supposed to find out how Seventh Brigade is doing."

"A couple o' towns inland is the best I can say. Regina Rifles moved out of here maybe two hours ago."

"Damn," I said, waved a half salute, and turned back in the direction of Bernieres.

This record of my conversation with the tank commander has to

be fiction, of course, but the way it went, and the information I got, was exactly that.

Going back to Bernieres, we walked, straight down the middle of the road, three abreast. As we left Courseulles, the German soldier was still lying by the shed. As we passed the farmhouse off to the right, we could see the occupants now, sitting out on the front porch taking in the show. They waved to us as we went by, and we waved back. There were no bees in the air. The German troops on the ridge had moved back. When we got to Bernieres, 15 Platoon was still sitting in their holes in the orchard, and my two companions went back to their Section. What the hell, I was saying to myself, I guess I don't get my tank ride.

I moved into the centre of town, and up the main street to the south edge. Troops and congestion all over the place. I remember a tank trying to negotiate a narrow turn in a street, tearing off the corner of a building, not stopping. The owner was trying to find someone to complain to.

In the field to the right of the road where it left the town, a half dozen or so vehicles, mostly Bren Gun Carriers, lay dead and gutted, going nowhere. In the orchard to the left, behind a line of hedge, I recognized some QOR dug in. At the rear edge of the orchard I found my Major, and beside him the Brigadier, looking grim. Some Chaudiere came barging back through the hedge from the field, and hit the dirt. I reported to Major Nickson, and he identified me to the Brigadier.

Our conversation went something like the following. I told him no one had met me in Courseulles, but I'd talked to a tank officer. Regina Rifles were already 2 towns up when I got there. The Brigadier was not pleased. That's the third time the Chaudiere have come back. There's a damn 88 sitting in a hole up there, knocking off anything that sticks its nose out down here. Tanks can't move. I'm trying to get a naval gun on to it.

Major Nickson said, "You'd better dig in. They drop one in on us every once in a while." I unslung my gear by the back hedge, slipped my toy shovel out of the webbing, and started to scratch. Under the few knots of grass, it was almost pure gravel. I didn't go very far. My idiot shovel broke.

Soon a battleship out in the Channel started firing. Couldn't hear the gun, of course, but it had to be 16 inch. Overhead its shell sounded like a low-flying freight train. When the Chaudieres set out again, they found the SP had pulled out. As soon as they were into Beny, the rest of us started to move up the road. After Beny would be Basly, then Anguerny, then Anisy, and two or three towns farther up, the Provincial Capital, Caen.

JUNE 6, AFTERNOON

I know we moved up, but I don't remember moving up. I know that the North Shore Regiment had to follow the Chaudieres, and from Basly take over the lead up the main road past Anguerny. But I don't remember seeing a North Shore.* I know that the Queen's Own had to follow the North Shore, and from Anguerny angle off left to take Anisy. But though I remember the evening in Anisy, I can remember only two incidents of the afternoon on the way. The rest of the move draws a blank. Too much had been happening too fast. Somewhere inside, whatever it is that writes memory was taking a rest. In the days that followed, just to survive, that kind of forgetting became the rule.

* The above memory of what I "knew" is largely imaginary, my flawed attempt to fill in a memory gap. As I learned after recording this, the North Shores were never assigned to follow the Chaudieres; they had their own, and especially difficult, objectives on the left flank of the Divisional bridgehead. Anguerny along with Anisy were the Queen's Own assigned objectives. The "evening in Anisy" that I seem to remember here was really my evening in Anguerny. One tends to fill memory gaps with whatever related possibilities that conveniently come to mind, so that what we sometimes recall as "memory" becomes an unintentional invention.

But the two remembered "incidents" along the way are true enough. I remember them because they each concerned a friend from my former Platoon, and I didn't want to forget them. I've forgotten their names, but I've never forgotten the men.

The first was an East End kid who was out to beat the odds. He was five foot three, and never let you forget an inch of it. I never saw him finish a route march, small pack or large. With the noise he made about it, you could never be sure his agonies were real. I remember one time dragging along under full pack in the last miles of a 30-mile march, seeing the jeep heading out to pick up any casualties, and coming back with the East End kid perched up on the front, all smiles and comments, waving his boots at us as he passed, heading home in a manner more his style.

But that was in England, and this was France. Early in the afternoon, as we followed up the road from Bernieres well back of the leading troops, our lead Platoons began getting sniped at from houses on the left. The snipers turned out to be tall, blonde Frenchmen in German uniforms--but not all that willing to die for their Masters when it came down to it. As Coy HQ started moving forward again, down the road came six of them, running with their hands over their heads, scared silly. Behind them came the East End kid, looking half their size, running in full pack with fixed bayonet, mess tins clanking up and down on his hips, herding them back to the nearest POW cage. He was cussing them all, jabbing the point of his bayonet into the rear of any he caught up to, and

waving to the cheers and applause of the troops as he went by, happy as a pig in the proverbial. For a moment the war was forgotten in laughter. I couldn't remember ever seeing him run before.

The second man was also from Cabbagetown, but quite a different type, a big, jovial guy with a talent for being helpful. If I had to give him a name, I'd call him Happy; I can't remember him being anything else. He was the one who held my ankles as I retched overboard on the LCI, and as far as I know, the only one on that ship who didn't get sick. He mothered the sickest of us, with a natural compassion for pain.

Somewhere on the road, an SP opened up on us from our flank--we thought likely the same one that the Navy had flushed out of Beny for us earlier. It left some more casualties before it moved on again, one of them my compassionate friend. As we moved up, I saw him sitting in the lee of a hedge at the side of the road, his jacket draped loosely over his shoulders, the bandaged remainder of a shattered arm wrapped to his chest. He'd been looked after, just waiting for the jeep to come back up for him.

I don't know what you say to a friend with a wound like that--but I said something, and my pain was showing. He said, "Hey, don't be sorry for me. I'm the lucky one. I've got my boatride home. I'm sorry for you guys. You're the ones who hafta stay here."

I said, "Lucky it's your left arm, anyway."

He laughed, "Yeah. There's lots o' things a guy can do with one hand. And no worries anymore. They'll be lookin' after guys like me back there."

I had to go. "Good luck, anyway. Maybe see you again, sometime, back in Toronto."

"Good luck to you guys. I'll be thinkin' of you over here."

I went on up the road. When I got home a year later, I dropped into Christie Street Hospital, half thinking I might find him there. I'd forgotten his name already. But none of the Queen's Own I could find had familiar faces, and none of them knew my friend from my description, and none of them knew me. France, Belgium, Holland, the journey of a year: it was as if I had never been there. What I remembered had already become my private folklore of a war. Somewhere inside, a curtain went down.

JUNE 6, EVENING

The Queen's Own final D-Day objective, Anisy, was as far as the Queen's Own got on D-Day, but to our right and ahead, Villon was the nearest approach to Caen that Ninth Brigade was able to hold that

day. Attempts to go farther had to pull back. Originally, the Divisional plan was to be in the airport at Carpiquet, on the heights overlooking Caen from the west, on the first day. But everything the Germans were moving up came to Caen first. For reserves rushing south from Calais or west from Paris, the city of Caen was the first major transport and communication centre nearest the Allied Beachhead.

By early evening, the Queen's Own had secured its perimeters, C Company in Anguerny, D Company in Anisy. After digging a slit for myself, I moved out to do my job. I found Fifteen Platoon first (or was it Thirteen?) settled in along the edge of an orchard, looking up a wheatfield. Out in the field, about 5 yards in front of where the Sergeant was still digging in, a German soldier was staggering back and forth, 10 yards one way, 10 yards back, eyes wild, breathing hard, tripping on his turns. The Sergeant's Sten Gun was lying at the edge of his trench. If the German slowed to a walk, the Sergeant aimed a burst in the ground near his feet, and went back to digging.

In response to my question, his anger was like rock. "This bastard came in with his hands up," he said, "then threw a grenade that killed one of my kids! The son of a bitch was a dead man the minute he did it, but this platoon isn't going to make it that easy!" In response to my next question, he told me the Platoon Commander was looking after a burial detail, and had left the German to him.

I went on my way, doing my job. On my way back to Coy HQ, I stopped for a moment to see what was happening. The German was still on his feet. His path back and forth was worn bare. His pants and his boots were off, his jacket open. He was flailing with every step, his long underwear stained brown to his ankles with the diarrhea of dying. He slobbered, grey as death, no longer a man.

I went on my way, and finished my job. I was told later that he had been shot where he fell, finally, one limb at a time.

In Anguerny I had seen the face of anger on my first day of war. But the shock that ended the days of my youth, and the days of my innocence forever, was seeing how easily the civilized pretense of humanity slips off.

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