

2. ACCOUNT OF THE ATTACK BY CALG HIGHRS ON MAY-SUR-ORNE,
25 JUL 44, AS GIVEN BY LT.-COL. D.G. MACLAUGHLAN, O.C.,
TO HIST OFFR 2 CDN INF DIV, 28 JUL 44.

The situation on 24 Jul for 2 Cdn Div was as follows: The Camerons of Canada held, precariously, the NW portions of ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE, and the Fus MR held the ground just NORTH of BEAUVOIR FARM. The intention of 2 Cdn Div was to capture MAY-SUR-ORNE and FONTENAY-LE-MARMION on the right and VERRIERES and ROCQUANCOURT on the left in order to make a break in the German line through which the armour could exploit SOUTH. On the right flank the Camerons of Canada were to secure the rd ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE--BEAUVOIR FARM by 242359 hrs. At 250330 hrs the Calg Highrs using this rd as a SL were to capture and hold MAY-SUR-ORNE, and the RHC using as SL the rd running NE from rd junc 02345915, were to move SE and capture FONTENAY-LE-MARMION.

The enemy was preparing vital defences further SOUTH and these outer posns he would retain as long as possible while completing the main stronghold. To the WEST of the RIVER ORNE, he held high ground from which observed fire could be brought to bear on the whole scene of the action. MAY-SUR-ORNE itself and the ridge running NE towards TROTEVAL FARM also gave him commanding posns. It was believed that in MAY-SUR-ORNE his strength would not exceed what one bn could deal with.

The picture of the whole bn during the engagement is still not clear and times and places are still confused.

The Camerons, who were to secure the SL by midnight had a difficult job. They held the NW sector of ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE, but to secure the SL they had to clear areas SE. At 250200 the posn concerning the SL was not clear and no accurate infm concerning it was to be had. Their job was not only to clear up ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE, in which there were many MG posns in the SE area, but also to clear up known enemy posns in the small woods 020601. At about 0200 hrs news came that this clearing was not yet completed, but was so advanced in ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE itself that the SL would be secure and clear by H hour which was 0330 hrs. It was obvious then, that if the clearing had taken so much time in ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE itself, the clearing of the woods and areas SOUTH of ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE along the MAY-SUR-ORNE rd would not be accomplished before H hour. Thus the right flank, which had caused some concern already, would have to be looked after by the Calgarys themselves. Because of this situation the bn plan was altered. "C" Coy was formed up in the area directly NORTH of the main X rds in ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE and given the job of moving SOUTH, using the main rd as axis, towards MAY-SUR-ORNE and of preventing enemy interference from the right flank, which might threaten the main effort. The main effort coys were formed up along the rd EAST of ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE with "B" Coy on the right, "A" on the left, and "D" Coy, in res in the centre, following "B" Coy. Thus formed up they were to sweep around EAST of ST MARTIN-DE-FONTENAY as wide as possible and make for their various objectives. These objectives were right fwd the area about the church in MAY-SUR-ORNE, centre coy the rd junc and northern water reservoir (024591), left fwd coy X rds 027593. "C" Coy was to take up posn to protect the right flank around area 021597. This would secure MAY-SUR-ORNE and the SL for the RHC.

The actions of the left fwd coy are still not clear, but they evidently swept well to the left and got through relatively easily without meeting many MGs. They appear to have reached their objective and held it for a time and then for some reason withdrew somewhat to the NORTH. What might be called the centre coy, "B" Coy, encountered MG opposition at once, as did "D" Coy moving in res behind them. After confused fighting, which began close to the SL even before they had cleared the village, they started out again and shortly afterwards ran into a mine field with anti personnel and A tk mines also close to the SL. "C" Coy, right flank protection, also had trouble about 300 yds from the SL from MGs. Comms were generally bad and spasmodic, but they were best with "C" Coy throughout the action. Timings were very confused. The first message came from "B" Coy. The Coy comd was killed and there were hy cas and an NCO was in charge. News came from "C" Coy that they were making progress but were fighting hard all the way.

The first bright spot was the report from "A" Coy that they were on their objective. One cannot be sure whether they actually were on their objective or whether they were mistaken in the dark and were not on it but very close to it. There they were engaged by the enemy and under our own arty fire. No comn with "B" Coy was possible at that time and "D" Coy in res were also out of touch. As soon as "A" Coy said they were in posn and "C" Coy were reported making progress preparations for consolidation were necessary. The sigs sgt went with line fwd to "A" Coy. He went up the rd actually as far as MAY-SUR-ORNE. He did not locate "A" Coy and ran out of cable. He returned for more cable and reported a mine fd he had discovered and said that some opposition en route could be cleared with a few men. With a sec of carriers he went fwd again. Some of the mines were on the surface waiting to be dug in and others were actually in the ground. One carrier ran into these mines so they came back. Then the A tk offr went with the sigs sgt to recce a route through the mine fd so that he might bring his guns fwd. He went up through the village into MAY-SUR-ORNE. He saw very few people in or around MAY-SUR-ORNE, although he went as far as the church and out SE to the reservoir area, and still could not find "A" Coy. Soon after "A" Coy reported three dug in tks directly in front of them. When asked for a location, they gave me a map ref just slightly SOUTH of ST MARTIN-DE-FONTENAY. This was a distinct shock, as it was the first intimation that they had moved off the objective or had not reached it.

All this time "C" Coy was making slow but steady progress. Then the A tk offr returned, said it was not possible for the guns to go through the mines as far as "A" Coy. They were then ordered to get at least two guns fwd to "C" Coy. The A tk offr then started fwd with his two guns. He was engaged by an 88mm and swung back. About that time word came from "D" Coy that they were in the area of the church in ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE and that the Black Watch were there also. The Black Watch had lost their CO and 2IC and Maj Griffin was in charge. It was also stated that "D" Coy would co-operate with the Black Watch in their attack. Just how they would do this was not given, but probably they intended to assist clearing the route fwd with the Black Watch and then go on to their own objective. The Black Watch were to go through at 0930 hrs, a change from a

much earlier H hour about 0630 hrs. The situation was very confused and comms were a nightmare. Runners came from the remnants of "B" Coy and reported the presence of five hulks of tks with MGs and two tks on the high ground EAST of ST MARTIN-DE-FONTENAY, about 034605. These pinned down the coy whenever any attempt was made to move. Between 0930 hrs and 1130 hrs frantic efforts were made to find out clearly where "D" Coy was and where the RHC were. This is still in doubt. Finally "D" Coy posn was made clear. They were now not in the area of the church in ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE, but were across the intersection in the SE corner of the NW orchards about 020610. There they were pinned by MGs and mortars on the right flank. The situation, then, was that "B" Coy was pinned down, "A" Coy was unable to move because of mortars and MG fire, "D" Coy was not making progress because of mortars and MGs while "C" Coy was still advancing slowly down the road taking Jerry out little by little.

"C" Coy finally got just into the NW edge of MAY-SUR-ORNE. One troop of tks, really sent in sp of the RHC and intended to op fwd from MAY-SUR-ORNE, were in the area and co-operated to their utmost with "C" Coy. They went fwd into the village where the troop leader was knocked out. The other two tks pulled back behind "C" Coy. "C" Coy were at this time under our own arty fire and that of the enemy, which drove them out just clear of the outskirts of the village. There they were pinned for a considerable time. Just how long the coys remained under this enemy fire it is difficult to judge.

About 1400 hrs the bde comd ordered that "C" Coy be reinforced with "D" Coy and with "A" Coy. By this time it was apparent that the remnants of "B" Coy were with "A" Coy. "B" Coy was in fact an unknown quantity after the first hour. At this time "A" Coy was unable to move in the face of constant machine-gunning, mortaring, and arty fire. "D" Coy did pull in from the right part of the village and set out to reinforce "C" Coy. Again the story repeated itself for "D" Coy was very shortly pinned down by enemy fire.

"D" Coy in moving fwd got only to the factory area. This area had been cleared out already two or three times and each time quite a lot of PW had been captured. In fact on each occasion the take of Jerries was equal. "D" Coy tried to get past and fwd, but the bde comd soon ordered the withdrawal of the coys. He wished to put them together to form a firm base on the southern edge of the village of ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE.

Withdrawal itself was a problem because movement of any kind brought down enemy fire, and means of getting orders fwd to the coys for a withdrawal were almost non-existent. Furthermore the RHC had to be warned and their whereabouts was unknown. The plan adopted was to use the arty to lay down smoke - 8 rounds per gun - and with this to smoke the flanks, while our own and the RHC mortars smoked the front from about 028597 NORTH and EAST. The message went out about 1445 hrs, and was effective by 1625 hrs. Under it the coys proceeded to withdraw. Still no news came concerning the RHC. The withdrawal was carried out with MGs covering us as far fwd as possible and A tk weapons remaining very alert on the flanks.

The object now was to form a shield across the SOUTH bdy of ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE--ST MARTIN-DE-FONTENAY. By 1700

hrs the major portions of the coys of the Calg Highrs had closed in on this area. The RHC now had a nucleus of about 40 men on the EAST edge of ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE and the Camerons held the NORTH and western sectors firmly. The Calgarys, therefore, occupied the central portion of ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE including the salient running SOUTH along the rd to 021605. The first enemy reaction was, apparently, that he expected an attack and terrific arty fire was brought down on MAY-SUR-ORNE and the fwd areas. Once our smoke cleared he appreciated our action correctly and brought down a tremendous weight of fire on ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE and the area around. This was about 1730 hrs. Once the withdrawal was complete Col MacLaughlan was relieved by his 2IC at about 1830 hrs.

After 1900 hrs, if possible, the intensity of the enemy fire increased. One coy comd was hit around the thigh, saw his coy safely back and then dragged himself through the fds back to the RAP. The Calgarys nevertheless held their firm base in ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE until their posns were taken over by another bn.

The relative losses to our side and to the enemy are difficult to assess. Our losses were about 193 all ranks. This was very expensive but judging by the PW captured and assuming that as many were killed as were captured, we must have hit him one hell of a wallop. We now know that the strength of the enemy in the area we attacked to have been at least triple what was anticipated. It seems likely that we tackled at least one bn or lesser forces which had to be reinforced from a bn or even regt. The op, furthermore, despite the difficulties attendant upon it, such as the fight in securing the SL and the enemy control of the high ground to the SOUTH, EAST, and WEST, was nevertheless, a near thing. Success was very nearly achieved.

This may be judged from the fact that three coys reached their objectives or very close to them. Their movements were roughly as follows:

"A" Coy comd was killed late in the evening. Apparently he brought his coy close to its objective or possibly on it. After holding this fwd posn for a time he pulled back and consolidated in the rear, that is, NORTH of the last check line, the rd running WEST from 02745953.

"B" Coy got up part way. The coy comd was killed very early in the attack and finally his coy was commanded by a pl offr. It could not get fwd because of tks and MGs and finally got in touch with "A" Coy and its remnants joined up with "A" Coy.

"D" Coy pushed its way fwd suffering considerable losses and was finally at about 025595 under the comd of a pl offr. In the darkness and confusion of battle this offr believed he was considerably SOUTH, about 027591. His objective was the church area in MAY-SUR-ORNE. From the posn where he thought himself to be, he considered that the best plan was a wide sweep SW around the water reservoir and then an adv NORTH up the main highway, past some factory buildings, to the church in MAY-SUR-ORNE. He had no compass to check his route but he executed a wide swing and then advanced NORTH up the rd. This brought him through the factory area, where again he had some fighting, and then finally to the church in ST MARTIN-DE-FONTENAY. This church he mistook for his objective, not noticing in the confusion of battle that it was a somewhat different location relative to the rds nearby.

"C" Coy encountered MG posts just SOUTH of the SL on either side of the rd and cleared them out with some hy fight-

ing. At the factory area "C" Coy cleared the western half, the other part presumably to be done by the Camerons. Near MAY-SUR-ORNE it was joined by the 17-pdr which shot out OPs in the area and took the tower off the church in MAY-SUR-ORNE.

The enemy used his weapons cunningly. 88mms had the rds taped, dropped concs on orchards and fds and then at intervals searched all areas systematically. His fire was so carefully planned that every posn we were likely to move to, or to wait in had fire raining down on it. Systematically such areas were engaged whether or not he could see them. He also adopted the technique of having his machine gunners sight on a target and then duck down, firing their guns without observing their targets. This meant that we were engaged by weapons which were extremely difficult to locate. The psychological value of this type of fire he seemed carefully to have considered, the whole effect of this careful siting of weapons was to make one feel under the most skilled and complete observation at all times. Along with the unobserved fire on likely spots, went observed fire on other areas whenever we showed ourselves or moved. The net result was that all the fire seemed observed fire coming from extremely well hidden posns. Hence movement of any sort was discouraged. When he was unable to engage us for effect, he opened up on the abandoned hulk of a tk on the high ground on our left and fired round after round into it making tremendous noise to continue his war of nerves so that it was never-ending.

"F" Ech of both the RHC and the Calgarys was back of the orchard in the area 020618. Tactical HQ for bn and bde were NORTH of the orchard nearby and under continual mortar fire. This fire was spasmodic but virtually continuous. When the mortars were not firing as a bty, they were firing searchingly over the orchards and nearby area. The mortars would search the whole areas very systematically, varying distance and direction, so that the whole area was thoroughly covered.

If a man's pack showed for an instant above the grain in the wheat fds, he was at once under MG and mortar fire. The 88mms were used even for sniping at individual men. Three posns seemed particularly troublesome because of enemy 88mm. One was across the RIVER ORNE, another in the area MAY-SUR-ORNE, and a third on the left flank. Everywhere mortar and MGs seemed to be firing and tks and MGs were dug in on his right flank on the high ground. All movements by our tps were subject to his sniping--DRs, jeeps, movement in HQ and ech areas, and any movement along the rd to FLEURY-SUR ORNE. In addition to these weapons rifles and rifle-grenades were used.

Because of the extreme difficulty in getting locations, both from our coys and from the Black Watch, it was very difficult to use arty fire to wipe out MG or mortar posns fwd or on the left flank. Arty was, however, of very great value on the right flank along the woods by the RIVER ORNE and in the long quarry feature.

In an effort to engage the enemy with counter MG fire our MGs in sp were moved to the flanks, but this did not help materially as the MGs themselves were heavily mortared and were in any case unable to locate enemy MG posts.

One problem was continually present - that of the enemy re-appearing in areas which had been cleared. This was equally true of the factory area 022003. There, many prisoners had been seized and the area apparently cleared out two or three times, but Jerry would return in apparently equal numbers once we had gone by. This may have been due to incomplete clearing or to re-infiltration. On one occasion

our tks surrounded and riddled the factory area, but when they withdrew more enemy returned. Also late in the day a Coy comd in ST ANDRE-SUR-ORNE found in a building one SS offr with some men. Afterwards it turned out that this area was connected by old mine shafts to MAY-SUR-ORNE, FONTENAY-LE-MARMION, and ROCQUANCOURT.

There is no doubt whatever that he fires his MG unobserved. He sights his target first, then gets cover and pulls the trigger. One example was a carrier which was riddled with MG fire about the level of the tracks. An offr was standing in the carrier at the time, and lifting the fire a couple of feet would have killed him, but no lift was made. MGs he put in both live and dead tks and in areas where no tks were. He fought at close range often waiting until we advanced to 40 or 50 yds before opening fire. Behind MGs he fought very well, but when our men came within 20 or 30 yds, he pulled out or surrendered. Two or three times people would come to a place and say, "Is this 'A' Coy?", to be greeted with "Ya ya, kamerad." Some prisoners were terrified. In one case a Calgarian was attempting to sort PW. He told them to line up against a wall. At once two or three were down on their knees praying expecting that that would be the last wall they would stand against.

The problem of the proper use of artificial moonlight requires additional consideration. In the initial stages of our adv we advanced SOUTH from high ground down a slope. It is quite possible that during this phase we were silhouetted by the artificial moonlight. If such was the case, the moonlight would be of greater value to the enemy than to ourselves. The weather was clear and there were no clouds during part of the night at least, which limited the effects of the artificial moonlight. There was no answer to the question as to whether or not the artificial moonlight would assist in keeping direction.

Trg in England did not give trg in fighting through wheat fds. Food in Britain was scarce and trampling down grain was not permitted. Problems, such as advancing in single file where the wheat would be trampled down conspicuously, and of moving in line where control is made very difficult, need to be carefully considered. The value of burning the wheat which would rob the defender of some of his concealment, but might hamper the attack as well, must also be studied.

The sheer magnificence of the job done by every offr and man in the bn was quite beyond description, especially SBs and signalmen who did tremendous tasks throughout the day. The contrast between the normal ordinariness of these average Canadians and their magnificent achievements on the battle fd is a matter of astonishment, and of great pride.

3. ACCOUNT BY SGT BENSON, SCOUT PLATOON, R.H.C., OF THE ATTACK ON MAY-SUR-ORNE, 25 JUL 44, AS GIVEN TO HIST OFFR 2 CDN INF DIV, 2 AUG 44.

Before we were sent out, one patrol had been sent fwd to the woods, and another patrol to the church, in MAY-SUR-ORNE. These patrols came back and reported that there were no snipers in the area.

Our attack was keyed up for 0900 hrs. About 0730 hrs Maj Griffin took over. He wanted a confirming recce of MAY-SUR-ORNE and sent Lt Duffield, myself, and one scout. Without using the ditches we moved straight down the rd walking in the centre as far as the church in MAY-SUR-ORNE. Up to that pt we saw no one. Past the church one German was on the rd directly ahead evidently expecting someone. He finally recognized us as enemy and tried to get away in a jeep but we hit the jeep and injured him although he did escape. On the X rd we turned left. We then went to the fork in the rd. When we were within fifty yds an MG 42 opened on us from the corner house. Lt Duffield felt obliged to return at once with this infm so we did not investigate further. Again we walked down the centre of the rd straight back to ST MARTIN-DE-FONTENAY and reported that the MG 42 would be able to fire on the flanks of the bn as it advanced to the EAST on its way to FONTENAY-LE-MARMION. I was then sent with six scouts back to MAY-SUR-ORNE to take out the MG 42, so that it could not fire on the bn as they went across the fds.

This was about 0845 hrs and the bn was forming up on the SL near the iron works. We went down the rd again and reached the outskirts of MAY-SUR-ORNE. By that time the bn attack had begun. We met "C" Coy, Calgarys, on each side of the rd in the ditches and under fire from MGs from the edge of the town, while mortars fired whenever any heads appeared. The Calgarys then began to clear the buildings but Jerry dropped smoke and fired every type of weapon from every direction. I decided to keep out of this scrap and get on with my job before my seven men were wiped out. We tried first to get in farther by the left-hand ditch running around the NORTH outskirts of MAY-SUR-ORNE but this proved impossible as the ditch came under carefully calculated fire. One scout became a cas at this time. In a few mins the moaning minnies opened up as they knew that altogether there were about eighteen of us in the ditch -- engrs, Calgarys, and Black Watch. We had to crawl back almost all the way and reached MAY-SUR-ORNE after two hours. At the factory we met Maj Bennett who asked us to go with his carriers. We started to cross the hill SOUTH of the factory heading EAST but were very shortly halted by intense fire. Soon our cas began to straggle back in ones and twos and Maj Bennett decided to occupy the posn in the courtyard across from the church. I left him there and went to the buildings at the main X rds in ST MARTIN-DE-FONTENAY, where there were some Tor Scots and engrs. We went to the basement where we were cut off all night; whenever any movement took place in the basement Jerry would move in the top floor. We decided, therefore, to stay doggo in case our counter attack came in and took the town again. In the morning I went to F Ech and waited about two hours while the cooks, dvrs, cobblers, and batmen of the Black Watch were mobilized to hold the courtyard in ST MARTIN-DE-FONTENAY. We believed that the centre of the town would be occupied as well but actually there were only friendly tps in the far western area. We took up our defensive posn and got dug in around the building 02556075.

Jerry then began to play tricks. Just behind a ridge to the SOUTH and somewhat to the EAST of the church he ran a single tk up and down all night trying to make us think that Pz Div was moving in and his men kept shouting as if to imitate a whole bn. For a time we were worried but by the morning we found that we were faced by only two tks and two pls of inf. These came into the church courtyard between 0730 and 0800 hrs. As usual they came in noisily, shouting, hollering, and calling. One pl went to the church yard, the other came around our left dropping off two or three men along the way as if to surround us. Few cas were caused by this - we lost only two men. Maj Bennett then asked me to get in touch with the Calgarys or Camerons to see if they had been attacked. I crawled out to find myself surrounded. Two Jerries passed by me noisily and I stayed down by the side of the rd until they passed. Then I crawled fwd more cautiously, and found no one, except in the far edge of the town, where I found the Camerons. They had no men to spare to help us, but told us that our best bet was to get to Cameron HQ up the orchard rd. On returning to the building I found that Jerry had posted snipers on all the high buildings around us and was harassing us with this fire....

The Jerries I saw either had colossal nerve or they were unaware that tps were in ST MARTIN-DE-FONTENAY when they moved in or they acted very carelessly. To me their snipers seemed to be Poles or Russians who were forced to fight and fired only because they were ordered to without ever hitting anyone. Their cam was excellent and they would never fire if more than one man was in the area. Whenever we swept a fd in extended line not a shot would be fired and our job would apparently be done, but within half an hour they would be back sniping away from their former posns. They tend to site the MG 43 in corners where hedge-rows meet a track or wall. There is almost certain to be an additional MG further down a flank to cover the main one. Their weapons are extraordinarily well sited for cross-fire and one of the weapons which are sited for cross-fire effect is almost certain to be maintained absolutely silent until we put in a serious attempt to take out the MG which is firing. Then we are caught unexpectedly in our flanks.

Always if our MMGs are discovered by them they will bring up an MG 42 as close as possible and this will direct tracer fire at our MGs in order to bring down mortar fire on our Vickers.

Almost every Nazi soldier carries some form of automatic pistol in addition to his rifle. They do not observe where they fire and when they pull out of a posn they tend to leave behind them by weapons and amm.

Snipers are normally dressed in cam suits. Wheat fds are excellent for them as they cannot be cleared out properly. Snipers usually come fwd under a barrage of moaning minnies. They give away their posn by using tracer to a considerable degree. They hear the earth being thrown while we dig and fire tracer at us. Our inevitable reaction is to jump into the slit trenches we have begun to prepare and snipe back at them. Thus at little cost they have found out where our permanent slit trenches are and can fire at these posns at anytime.

His fire control, even with foreign born tps, must be extraordinarily good. He permitted us to walk all the way through MAY-SUR-ORNE where he must have had at least two coys hidden, and held the fire of all these men while we marched through, seeing only one Jerry and one MG 42. It is evident that he was most anxious that we see this small display of strength and that we return and report it to our own tps. Although he did not fire we afterwards found that MAY-SUR-ORNE was completely prepared. The buildings were all carefully sealed up so that the doors could not be opened and every window and doorway along the rd was covered by fire.