

D-DAY: The Story of the Canadian Assault Troops

**Produced by:
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**For:
The War Amps of Canada**

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Introduction

H.C. Chadderton:

In early 1940, the enlistment of the troops who would eventually invade Europe at places such as Courseulles started. They came from the small towns, the factories, the inner cities.

They were the true citizen soldiers of World War II. Some enlisted for patriotism, some for adventure, but the majority, because it just seemed to be the right thing to do!

Little did they know then that they would end up four years later as the spearhead of the Allied invasion of Europe, either as part of the 3rd Canadian Division, or in the tank battalions, which would support the Normandy landing, designated as the 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade.

This is their remarkable story. How they formed the assault wave that smashed through the German defences, held off the counter-attacks of the crack SS Panzer units, and how in the end, they took in a magnificent battle, the pivotal city of Caen. It took a month.

The Canadian invasion forces had spent years in Britain training for the task. They had tried very hard not to think of what lay ahead.

It was difficult to realize the enormity of what we would be attempting. I was part of that force. However, when we started our assault training in the south of England and in Scotland, we began to realize what loomed before us. Untried troops would dare to set foot in Hitler's Europe.

Everyday while in Britain, we heard stories of the heavily fortified French coast which the Germans, in four years with slave labour, had turned into a continuous system of guns, pillboxes, mines, barbed wire and on the beaches, underwater pilings, some loaded with explosives waiting to blow up the assault crafts. It was a terrifying picture.

The men of the infantry and tank regiments chosen for the invasion simply had to disregard what lay ahead for them across the channel. We just dug in, trained harder, determined to do what some were saying would be impossible. Then it came, June the 6th, 1944, D-Day.

The most recent book on the D-Day Invasion – at least on this side of the Atlantic – seems to be: *D-Day June 6th, 1944, The Climactic Battle of World War Two*. It was written and published in 1994. The author is Stephen Ambrose, Director of The American National D-Day Museum, located in New Orleans, Louisiana.

In the book, he extols the virtues of the American soldier, zeal, dare-devil attitude, bright, healthy, well-educated. He follows up with a disparaging comparison of the other Allies.

Incidentally, when he talks of the British Army, he lumps in the Canadians, without identification.

The following quotes are of interest.

"...Although Britain had been at war with Germany for four years, only a small number of their divisions had been in combat, and none of those designated for the assault had more than a handful of veterans.

The ordinary Infantry Divisions of the British Army had been in barracks since the British Expeditionary Force retreated from the Continent in June, 1940. The ordinary soldier was not as well educated or as physically fit as his American counterpart.

The Germans who fought against the British often expressed their surprise at the way in which British troops would do only what was expected of them, no more..."

Unbelievably, Ambrose devotes almost all of his book to the Americans at D-Day. Only some 98 pages are devoted to other troops, and only 18 pages to what the Canadians did at Juno Beach.

The final insult: He devotes a scant eight pages to the landing of the British Airborne Division, and get this, his only mention of the Canadians, without designating the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion by name, is inexcusable. His quote reads:

"...By 1900 the Canadians had taken ... (Varaville). They thought that with the job accomplished, they would be evacuated to England.

'Give'em Hell, boys,' the Canadians called to the Commandos who were taking over..."

World War One Canadian veterans could get properly riled up over the frequent references in the United States to the effect that the American Expeditionary Force, which came in three years after the start, won the 1914-1918 war.

Ambrose, in his book, suggests that the Yanks in 1917 stated that their initials, A.E.F., stood for "After England Failed." This American boast gained a lot of notoriety. Canadian World War I veterans were still showing annoyance at the comment years afterwards.

It's 54 years after D-Day, Hollywood again turns the spotlight on Normandy commencing with Steven Spielberg's epic *Saving Private Ryan*. It is factual, an accurate, gut wrenching portrayal of the infantryman at war. Unfortunately, it is light on Canadian content. D-Day will always be a big story, but what the 3rd Canadian Division did, backed up by our 2nd Armoured Brigade should also be part of the legends of D-Day.

1st Canadian Parachute Battalion

H.C. Chadderton: The landings of the assault troops would have been impossible, had it not been for the preliminary tasks assigned to the paratroopers, seven or eight hours ahead of time.

The objective of the Canadians is set out in the book *Airborne* by Brian Nolan, published in 1994:

"...The division was to be dropped east of the Orne River and the Caen Canal that parallels it. This was the left flank of the main British assault force. It was a vital piece of landscape, especially the crossroads known as 'Le Mesnil.' The 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion was picked to defend and hold this key objective after its initial objectives were achieved.

At first light, the Merville Battery was silenced, and the terrible threat the guns posed to the landing craft that came ashore was now gone. The charge was expensive. Seventy Canadians were killed or wounded..."

Certainly one of the best known officers in the Canadian Army was Jeff Nicklin. He was Second in Command of the Canadian Paratroop Battalion, on the drop on D-Day.

Jeff, who had originally served in my own battalion, The Royal Winnipeg Rifles, is a member of the Canadian Football Hall of Fame, having played brilliantly in the Grey Cup Game in 1935, when the Winnipeg Blue Bombers became the first Western team to win the National Championship, defeating Hamilton.

On his drop, Nicklin was severely wounded by fire from a German machine gun nest.

The first action of the Canadian paratroops in France was carried out under the direction of Major Murray MacLeod who was killed in the encounter. Their objective was to engage a German defensive position in a château. The official history of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, *Out of the Clouds*, describes this action:

"...MacLeod and his men made their way through the village without detection to the gate house of the Château. The gate house was an impressive yellow brick building some distance from the Château, and overlooked the German defensive position, which consisted of a long trench protected by earth and concrete; with machine gun bays at fixed intervals... a short distance behind the trench was a German gun..."

It was decided to attack the gun with a PIAT. The regimental history states:

“...Cpl. W.E. Oikle took careful aim and fired. He re-loaded for a second shot, but before he could fire, the heavy gun answered. The high explosive shell tore through the wall of the building killing Oikle, Lt. H.M. Walker and Major Murray MacLeod...”

The main job of these tough, hard as nails, Canadian paratroopers was to capture this gigantic coastal battery at Merville.

The Canadians were also tasked to hold and destroy a number of bridges which would prevent a German counter-attack from reaching the invasion forces. The objectives were all taken.

Naturally, in a documentary like this, we can attempt to tell the story in only one or two exploits.

Brian Nolan, in his book *Airborne*, describes one such action:

“...Norm Toseland, who was to lead a party farther east, found he had only a handful of men to blow the bridge below the tiny hamlet of Robehomme, perhaps a dozen at most...”

And Nolan explains:

“...Leaving a small patrol to watch the bridge, Lieutenant Toseland took the rest of the men to the hamlet of Robehomme where they dug in...Of all the positions, these Canadians had gone the furthest into enemy territory, dangerously exposed to counter-attack...”

As night fell on June 7th, the strength of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, that had left England only hours before, numbered 1,200. It was now down to 300 soldiers “fit to fight.” These men had to withstand a bitter 10 days during which they held off determined German counter-attacks, a job they did very, very well.

On June 17th, the 3rd Brigade was relieved and, with the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, it was moved back to the banks of the Orne River.

The Attackers – The Defenders

H.C. Chadderton: The so called “BIG PICTURE” of the invasion brings to the mind’s eye a sky full of air craft, thousands of ships of all descriptions, many carrying the guys who would do the fighting on land, the combat engineers, the tank men and their armoured vehicles, the gunners, the signallers. Some 30,000 Canadian troops on that morning of June 6th were heading for a 10 mile stretch of beach in Normandy, code name JUNO.

It is always surprising however, to learn that the initial touchdown was the responsibility of just **four** regiments of Canadian infantry with an additional company from another regiment. The North Shore Regiment of New Brunswick on the left at St. Aubin; The Queen’s Own Rifles of Toronto in the centre at Bernières; The Regina Rifles and the Royal Winnipeg Rifles at Courseulles on the right.

Securing the right flank was a company of the Canadian Scottish of Victoria, on the left flank, a company of the Royal Marine Commandos.

Two tank regiments, the Fort Garry Horse of Winnipeg on the left and the 1st Hussars of London on the right, supported the landing.

You want numbers. Not more than 3,000 young Canadians in the first wave, all ranks.

What kind of troops would the Canadians be facing? We turn to Stephen Ambrose in his epic, but controversial to Canadians, *D-Day June 6th 1944*, where he states:

“...Hitler had characterized the Wehrmacht as ‘an army such as the world has never seen.’

The German high command had been particularly successful in placing the various types of men where they best fit, and in selecting those to serve as cannon fodder, who are told to hold out to the last man.

In accordance with Hitler’s Directive Number 40, the Atlantic coast defences should be so organized and troops so deployed that any invasion attempts be smashed before the landing or immediately thereafter...”

Ordinary German troops would man the concrete fortifications along the coastline, supported by heavy machine gun nests and well-placed

artillery. This first line of defence would be backed up by elite formations of crack mobile troops, standing just inland from the Atlantic wall.

The strategy was, if the Atlantic wall were breached, these highly mobile Panzer Regiments would throw the Canadians back into the sea.

This rare German footage gives some idea of the tremendous communication system which was state-of-the-art.

The troops could answer to an alert in seconds and were highly trained to get to their defensive posts.

The anti-aircraft defences were formidable and interfered not only with the pre-invasion bombing but with the aircraft carrying the paratroopers, charged with the initial strike inland.

There were some German Motor Torpedo boats which played havoc with the invasion fleet.

As the German newsreel says, the landed troops are immediately engaged with anti-tank guns. The Germans realized, the day had begun.

The Recce Regiment

H.C. Chadderton:

No account of the landings at Juno Beach would be complete without telling of the fabulous work of the reconnaissance troops, carried out by The 7th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment, known as the 17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars, they came from Montréal.

The work of Recce regiments is difficult to describe, because they are everywhere, probing enemy positions, directing traffic and keeping the assault regiments informed. As the historian of the 7th Reconnaissance regiment states:

"...To tell the story of a Reconnaissance regiment in the Second World War is an extremely difficult proposition, for unlike an infantry battalion or an armoured regiment, it operate(s) with few exceptions as independent squadrons..."

Among the first ashore at Touchdown was the BEACH GROUP composed of personnel from this 7th Recce regiment.

Describing the work of the BEACH GROUP, the author, Captain Walter Pavey, states:

"...First, they were to land with the assaulting infantry, locate exits where the divisional battle vehicles could pass through the sea walls, barbed wire, mines, etc. and then be responsible to the 3rd Division that all carriers, guns, tanks, ... got off the beach..."

The Assault Battalions

Queen's Own Rifles

H.C. Chadderton:

This is how the much photographed house at Bernières looks today. It was the objective of the Queen's Own Rifles of Toronto on D-Day.

There are two ways to learn about what this famous Canadian Regiment did.

Let us look first at the account in their regimental history.

The official description is certainly accurate, but hardly gripping:

"...The dull roar of far distant bombing could be heard but all was quiet around the assault craft. Thanks to our Navy and Air Force not once was the immense D-Day flotilla really menaced by enemy ships or aircraft. Steadily the L.C.A. forged ahead. Suddenly, at 0725 hrs, with Bernières-sur-Mer just in sight, the air was filled with screaming shells; later, the rockets joined in; a veritable inferno that numbed the senses and shattered coherent thought. To the men bobbing about on the flimsy craft it was tremendously reassuring that this great weight of metal was all going in the right direction..."

For another retelling which is much easier to understand, let us go to the recently-published book titled *Battle Diary*. It is written by a friend of mine, Charlie Martin. Charlie was a Company Sergeant Major with the Queen's Own. He landed on D-Day and he fought right through until he sustained a wound late in the war when his regiment was in Germany.

Here is how Charlie saw the landing. You will find it somewhat different than that in the official history:

"...As we moved farther from the mother ship and closer to shore, it came as a shock to realize that the assault fleet was disappearing from view. Suddenly there was just us and an awful lot of ocean, or English Channel if you prefer. All that remained within sight was our own fleet of ten assault craft, moving abreast in the early-morning silence in a gradually extending line facing the shore, the "A" Company boats on the right and the "B" Company boats on the left.

None of us really grasped at that point, spread across such a large beach front, just how thin on the ground we were. Each of the 10 boatloads had become an independent fighting unit.

To both sides of us we had minefields. The machine-gun fire and mortars never let up, a barrage of shelling that seemed to come from everywhere. Once over the railway we had ... grass cover, but we ran into heavy barbed wire.

So we moved on. We'd made it, done what we were supposed to do..."

The North Shore Regiment

H.C. Chadderton:

This is how the beaches at St. Aubin look today. This is where the North Shores landed. In his account *Gauntlet to Overlord*, Ross Munro tells of the landing of this New Brunswick regiment:

“...On their left, the assignment of the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment was to storm the beaches near St. Aubin, another resort town. The Fort Garry Horse, an armoured regiment from Winnipeg, was to land with [the] battalion. Assault engineers (were) also... with [the unit]...”

The difficulty facing the North Shores can be readily determined, even today, because the town has restored and maintained the giant pillbox. It is a reminder of those grim days when this seaside resort town contained only a few older people, some French German sympathizers and some very dedicated German troops.

Will Bird, in his regimental history of the North Shores, gives a graphic description:

“...Jerry had a beautiful underground system of communicating with his pillboxes. Things weren't going as planned and unless we captured those heavy guns Jerry was potting landing craft with, things were going to get worse. And worse they got, for there we were with nothing heavier than Brens with which to attack heavily-fortified enemy posts.

Around ten o'clock, some tanks got ashore... none too soon...”

Captain Bill Harvey, Second-in-Command of “D” Company, described the action as the North Shores moved into the village itself.

“...I moved up towards the road parallel with the beach and saw puffs of smoke coming from a pillbox. I got Sergeant Joe Bertin to fire two hits on the pillbox. I moved along the street and found everything at a standstill since a German 75mm gun controlled the area. A dozen high explosive mortar bombs did the trick and we cleared the gun position. But we were held up by snipers. Then our guns got into fire position and disposed of the sniper controlled from the tower...”

Lieutenant-Colonel Don Buell was a soldier's soldier. He commanded the North Shores. He sums up the success:

“...Word came by my signaller that “A” Company had taken its objectives but in ... doing had suffered 25 casualties. “B” Company reported they required much more time to complete their task and

subdue the strong-point. However, they had completed clearing their portion of the village. "D" Company reported (that) they had cleared the remainder of St. Aubin but had some difficulty at isolated spots..."

Understated to be sure, but a clear cut description of a hard morning's fighting.

The North Shores were on the extreme left of the Canadians but landing with them, along here, was a battalion of the British Royal Marine Commandos.

Donny Buell tells us what happened.

"...I spoke to the CO of the marines and asked him how he had got along. He looked very downcast and said he had lost about 50 per cent of his strength on landing. I was able to report to him that St. Aubin had been cleared and that his start line in the east end of the village was securely in our hands. He thanked me and went on with his job..."

The Chaudières

H.C. Chadderton: This is the famous monument at Basly associated generally with Le Regiment de la Chaudières better known as the Chauds.

The task of the Chauds on D-Day was to pass through the Queen's Own and head south until they ran into the Germans.

The Chauds regimental history tells us:

"...“A” Company, commanded by Major Hugues Lapointe, was the first to attack. Despite the mined terrain our troops, supported by a squadron from the Fort Garry Horse and a machine gun platoon of the Cameron Highlanders, overcame the German position..."

Then this history gives us an exciting account:

"...A bit further, hidden in a hole, an 88 cannon was still firing on the village exit. Lieutenant W. Moisan attacked on his own initiative. As he advanced in front of his men, a bullet hit a smoke grenade he was carrying. The grenade's phosphorous caught fire. His battle dress started burning but Lieutenant Moisan continued the attack. The enemy was annihilated. Unfortunately, the phosphorous had burnt Lieutenant Moisan and he had to be evacuated. This act of heroism earned him the military cross..."

The history continues the account of the Chauds on D-Day:

"...“D” Company, led by Major G.O. Taschereau, was the first to reach Basly, after the platoon of Lieutenant J.R. Grégoire had taken fourteen prisoners. On the right, “B” Company led by Major J.F. L'Espérance, attacked six 105mm cannons and took 54 prisoners.

The Bren carriers, led by Captain Michel Gauvin, reinforced by a platoon from Company “C”, swiftly reached La Mare. The carriers captured four vehicles and 20 prisoners, some of them German youth 14 and 15-years-old who were manning the coastal and anti-aircraft guns.

By 1600 hours all the companies had reached the objective and were consolidating. The regiment had completed the first phase of the mission for which it had trained so long. This first victory was the reward for days, nights, weeks and months of effort, courage and sacrifice..."

On D+1, the Chauds were given an important objective. Their regimental history tells us about it:

“...A pocket of resistance held the Château de Colomby-sur-Thaon. The enemy had converted it into a small fortress surrounded by a system of trenches, and controlled (the) Thaon Road. The Chauds attacked the fortress to allow the Bren carrier platoon to reach the bridge at Thaon. Thirty Germans were taken prisoners, among them a Colonel...”

This was the climax of the Chauds' action, having passed through the Queen's Own Rifles, to secure their D-Day objectives. The history then tells of the plans to recapture Fontaine-Henri when it was realized that there may still be some wounded Chaudière in the area. The history says:

“...Captain Gauvin, Lieutenant A. Miller and a few volunteers from the carrier platoon moved together with their hands up toward the position while shouting: 'We are coming to remove our wounded.' A German soldier advanced. He asked that an officer accompany him to a cave. Captain Gauvin followed him. Inside the cave there was some 50 wounded Germans and Allies. After a few minutes of negotiations, the Germans surrendered...”

Bridge – Transition

H.C. Chadderton:

Now, we've talked thus far about the left half of the assault – the eastern flank. The idea, however, was a two pronged affair to be carried out by the 3rd Div and the 2nd Armoured Brigade. We had to capture the pivotal city of Caen.

The attack on the right of JUNO beach, that is, the western salient, was spearheaded by The Regina Rifles and The Royal Winnipeg Rifles. The Regina's objective, the town of Courseulles, is shown here.

The Regina Johns

H.C. Chadderton:

We now proceed to tell the story of the attack in the western sector. But first, allow me to go back a few weeks. The Royal Winnipeg Rifles were in the embarkation area in England.

Brigadier Harry Foster had just completed his briefing. At last we had the final details about the D-Day landing.

Lieutenant Bill Grayson of the Regina Rifles, known as the Regina Johns, was in a friendly argument with Bill Aitken of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles. Aitken thought his pillbox was bigger. The ruins are shown here.

This is Bill Grayson's.

Bill Grayson got to do personal battle with the defenders in his pillbox. No better description of what took place could be found, than in the recently published history of the Reginas titled *Up the Johns*, by Stewart Mein.

"...The men of "A" Company lay huddled on the beach, exposed to the withering fire directed at them. They could go no farther.

However, Lieutenant Bill Grayson made a mad dash for the emplacement. The rear man, on seeing Grayson, threw a "potato masher" grenade at him, which landed between his legs. Coolly, Grayson reached down... and threw the grenade back at the German... Grayson then followed the Germans into a trench which zigzagged to... an underground area. Out came 35 men whom he promptly took prisoner... With the 88mm gun out of action, "A" Company was able to push on into the town... For his daring action; Grayson was later awarded the Military Cross..."

This is the Regina's monument in Courseulles in France. This western Canadian battalion went on to secure this objective on D-Day in hard, hard bitter fighting.

A mere ten hours after the regiment first set foot on the beaches, the Regina's controlled all of this important Normandy town, and its small but significant port at the mouth of the Seulles River.

An earlier history, written right after the war and titled *The Regina Rifle Regiment 1939-1946*, gives a graphic description about the landing written by Major Gordon Baird of this famous western Canadian unit.

"...So far, not a shot has been fired from the defenders on the beach.

Will it be a push-over? We soon have the answer in the form of machine-gun fire and shells from pillboxes which are apparently still open for business despite the terrific pounding they have taken. The LCAs of the leading companies and the tanks of the 1st Hussars are working into the beaches now. H-hour has arrived.

Supporting arms had done a wonderful job. Baker squadron, 6th Canadian Armoured Regiment (1st Hussars), had given invaluable aid. Guns of the 13th Field Regiment had proved excellent support in the initial phases of the landing.

With us too were elements of the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa (the support battalion), reconnaissance groups from the 17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars, and 3rd Anti-tank Regiment...

Major Baird's description carries on, talking about the advance inland to Reviere:

"... It was night: the John's were digging in the fields of Normandy – on D-Day and in enemy-held territory. We were on our own now. But the plan of the High Command had been carried out – to assault and break through, exploiting rapidly inland. This meant taking (the) chance(s) of ... being cut off. And we were on our intermediate objective as ordered..."

The Winnipeg

H.C. Chadderton:

Bill Aitken's pillbox, seen here on the west side of the Seulles River, proved equally as difficult. It contained a 75 mm field piece and a very large anti-tank gun.

The Winnipeg Rifle's history titled *The Little Black Devils*, a name by which the regiment has been known since the Riel Rebellion, gives a chilling description of the objective. This film is from a German newsreel:

"...In the dunes were coastal fortifications, lines of concrete and steel pillboxes, big-gun emplacements, elaborate trench systems, underground chambers, hidden machine gun posts and gun batteries in the earth. Houses near the beach were fortified; guns on slopes beyond the beaches were sighted in on every approach to the beach and dunes, and stretching inland were numerous other positions and defence lines, hinged on fortified towns, villages and cities. Elaborate minefields had been laid and exits from the beaches covered by artillery, mortar and machine-gun fire..."

For a brief, initial description of the Winnipeg's landing, we go to the book, *The Meeting of Generals*, written by Tony Foster, and published in 1986.

Incidentally, like most of those who fought with the 7th Brigade, we were not exactly overwhelmed by Tony Foster's book about his father, Brigadier (later General) Harry Foster.

Tony attempts, in his book, to draw an unfavourable comparison between his own father Harry, arguably one of the best Generals the Canadian army ever produced, and the arrogant, contemptuous German General, Kurt Meyer. Meyer's Hitler Jugend troops faced the 7th Brigade in Normandy. This Meyer, an ardent Nazi, was the one who was found guilty of war crimes for the murder of Canadian prisoners.

Tony Foster, despite his shortcomings, did manage to give an inspired description of what the Little Black Devils did at Courseulles on June 6th.

"...While the Regina Rifles with the tanks of the 1st Hussars were fighting their way into Courseulles to the east of the river dividing the town, the Royal Winnipeg Rifles battled through the beach defences on the west side of the river. The Winnipeg's landing craft arrived well ahead of their Duplex Drive Floating

Tanks and AVREs (Officially Armoured Vehicles, Royal Engineers) and came under heavy fire from one of the strong points even before reaching shore. But there was no hesitation. Holding their weapons aloft, the men waded into the sea, then raced across the sand to engage the mortar and machine-gun emplacements. The Winnipegs' "B" Company, and the Royal Canadian Engineers 6th Field Company assault team working with them, had one of the highest beach casualties of the day. Their courageous company commander, Captain Phil Gower, was left with only 26 men..."

I'd like to tell you one story of unimaginable courage which took place near this pillbox. It concerned Corporal "Bull" Klos. Let us read from the Royal Winnipeg Rifles history:

"...Rushing the enemy, "B" Company encountered heavy enemy fire. Corporal Klos, badly shot in the stomach and legs while leaving the assault boat, made his way forward to an enemy machine-gun nest. He managed to kill two Nazis before he was mortally felled. His hands still gripped about the throat of his victim produced a chilling sight! ..."

The other lead company of the Winnipegs landed about 400 yards to the right of the mouth of the Seullles River. They had no tank support; nevertheless, they battled their way over the beach defences and ended up capturing many Jerries in the process. The regimental history describes what happened next.

"...Major Lockie Fulton's company had quickly poured through the minefield at La Vallette and headed straight for Graye-sur-Mer. It made good progress and some sections even approached Banville. While "D" Company was making this sprint, "A" and "C" Companies had landed, along with half of the Battalion Headquarters. The beaches were still under fire when they landed. For nearly two hours the Battalion Headquarters No. 22 wireless set was the target of much of this fire. It was a rough welcome for Headquarters..."

With Courseulles and the surrounding territory captured, the Winnipegs and the Reginas moved inland. The Winnipeg's objective was here at Banville.

The move of the Winnipegs, as described in the *Little Black Devils* official history, gives this account of the action:

"... "A" Company (Major Fred Hodge) moved inland towards Croix-sur-Mer when it came under fire by a battery of eight machine guns. "C" Company (Major Jimmy Jones) made its way towards Banville. Hard fighting developed but "C" and "D"

Companies managed to take the village of Banville. The first phase of the operation had been completed...

Many of the Winnipegs were what we called “originals” who had joined the battalion back in 1940. They had been highly trained in the use of rifles and automatic weapons, but also they were experts with mortars, anti-tank guns, and even in directing artillery fire from the rear. Still, this was their first battle experience. They saw friends with whom they had lived in the barracks for years cut to pieces by vicious enemy gun fire. Still they found the strength to carry on and, most of all, there was the thought in the back of their minds that battle-hardened Germans could counter-attack at any time.

By six o'clock on the evening of D-Day, the Winnipegs had gone further inland than most of the planners thought possible. This description from the *Little Black Devils* history:

“...1800, Creully. The Battalion reached Creully about this time. Snipers and small groups had maintained the sole resistance during the advance on the village. Lieutenant Jack Mitchell of “D” Company with a section of rifleman silenced an enemy machine-gun nest along the bridge near Creully...”

With evening fast approaching, the weary battalion set about digging in just south of Creully. Fortunately, five officers and 78 other ranks arrived from the reinforcement unit that very evening.

The Canadian Scottish Regiment

H.C. Chadderton: I am standing in front of the Chateau de Vaux, the objective of the Canadian Scottish Regiment on D-Day. This gives me an opportunity to talk about a long time friend, Roger Schjelderup, a Lieutenant who would fit just about anyone's description of the ideal soldier.

Roger had the good fortune to serve under one of the very best infantry company commanders, there were probably 50 of these (mostly majors), who had the awesome responsibility to lead the infantry companies in this crucial bridgehead battle. Roger's company commander was Des Crofton. Their's was a somewhat unusual task.

The Reginas and the Winnipegs had to take Courseulles, but at the extreme right flank of Juno Beach the Germans had constructed a stronghold, centred around the Château Vaux.

Thus it was that the Brigade Commander, Harry Foster, decided to attach one company of the Canadian Scottish to the Royal Winnipeg Rifles. This would provide sufficient strength to take this imposing Château. Hence, the Can Scots, as they were known, were among the very first Canadian troops to set foot in Normandy.

In his excellent regimental history, *Ready for the Fray*, Reginald Roy describes the part played by the Scottish:

"...Meanwhile, Schjelderup's platoon, closely followed by company headquarters, was pressing forward along the centre, up the road to Vaux and then through the tree-filled gully towards the open fields beyond. Then... the platoon attacked three machine gun posts, one after another. It was grim going, but not a man faltered. The platoon...took about 15 prisoners, one of whom led the assault troops through a heavily mined area in the gully. Once through this spot, the platoon started out across the fields in extended formation, moving through the tall grain towards the gap between Ste. Croix-sur-Mer and Banville. By this time, the other platoons were coming in from the flanks, closing up on either side of company headquarters towards the tip of the woods..."

The remainder of the Can Scots went ashore on D-Day to back up the Royal Winnipeg Rifles and the Regina Rifles. The action of this famous battalion from Victoria, British Columbia is told in *Ready for the Fray*:

“...“B” Company, once off the beach, struck inland along the low ground bordering the River Seulles towards Amblie. All this action – from the time they landed on the beach shortly before nine until setting off for their first objective – took place within half an hour...”

An incident which gives some idea of the fierce fighting is described in *Ready for the Fray*. Lieutenant Bernie Clarke had been ordered to take out a dangerous gun emplacement.

“...Clarke’s classic reply was ‘Who? Me?’ and he immediately set out to clear up the spot... It turned out to be a gun emplacement encased in concrete with hay piled on its roof for camouflage. A door leading into the emplacement was pulled open and someone threw in a grenade. All around them were German soldiers, about 50 of them, rising out of their slit trenches – all surrendering.

It was at this point that the “A” Company’s second in command, Captain William H.V. Matthews (with an Military Cross from the earlier desert fighting) and known as the mad shepherd came running up, asking Clarke, ‘What the hell are you trying to do, win the VC?’...”

The further action of the Can Scots on D-Day is described in *Ready for the Fray*.

“...About 4:30 in the afternoon, after crossing the river Seulles at Colombiers, Lieutenant-Colonel Fred Cabeldu, (the CO), reported to Brigade Headquarters that the battalion had reached ‘Elm,’ the code name for the Creully-Pierrepont road. This was more than four miles directly inland from the beaches, and the Canadian Scottish was now spearheading the brigade attack...”

At the day’s end the Scottish were dug in, ready for an expected counter-attack. The job done by the Can Scots that day is described in the regimental history:

“...It was a remarkable achievement, and said a great deal for the aggressive leadership of the officers as well as the splendid spirit of the men. There were gaps in the ranks, many of them, and no platoon had been hit harder than Lieutenant Schjelderup’s. He had come ashore with 45 men under his command. At the end of the day when he, himself, was ordered back to have his wounds dressed, there were only 19 men left...”

The Armoured Vehicles

H.C. Chadderton:

The assault on Juno Beach was unique in many ways, not the least of which was the use of armoured vehicles. Sir Percy Hobart had devised a number of tracked monsters known as “Funnies.” To many, they were the difference between success and failure.

One was a simple bulldozer. The Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers had welded steel plating to the cabs to protect the drivers. To the defending Germans they must have looked like so many creatures coming out of the sea.

Another invention, which the Germans have actually described as a complete surprise, were the DD or Duplex Drive Floating tanks. They were Shermans with twin propellers and canvas sides which allowed them to land either before, with, or in some instances behind the charging infantry.

Then there were the Flails, tanks with rotating steel chains in front to blow up mines.

From the Canadian perspective, the main tank support came from the Duplex tanks manned on the far left by the Fort Garry Horse supporting the North Shores and on the far right by the 1st Hussars of London, Ontario, supporting the Winnipeggs.

The Garrys

H.C. Chadderton:

A word of explanation: What happened to the famous names of the armoured regiments in World War II? Well, some arm chair General decided to leave the names off and just use numbers. I think it was rather sad.

Accordingly, one of Canada's oldest calvary units, later converted to tanks, called the Fort Garry Horse, became the 10th Armoured Regiment. The Troopers still insisted on being called the Garrys.

The tradition, which goes back to the 19th century, got a real boost in World War One when Marcus Strachan, in the first major tank battle in Amiens, won a Victoria Cross, a fact which was told to all Garrys when they joined the unit.

The regiments which took part in the Normandy landing had all belonged to the militia prior to the war. We will use the Fort Garry Horse as an example to indicate how these regiments converted from peace time to war time status.

Here are pictures of several squadrons of the Garry's shortly after enlistment. They were a mix of militia and raw recruits. Next we see them in England two years later, highly trained and ready for their marching orders.

Before D-Day, some Garry's were involved in the "great deception," designed to mislead the Jerries as to the number of tanks we had. The real D-Day vehicles were the Shermans, remodelled to float, called DD or Duplex Drives.

Here we see the Garry's heading for the embarkation areas. Landing Craft in Plymouth Harbour, some carrying the Garry's. Landing Craft heading out of Plymouth. The Sherman DD tank afloat. The Shermans, with their skirts down, go ashore in close support of the infantry. A wrecked Sherman on the beach, note the partially lowered skirt. General Montgomery awards the Military Cross to Alec Christian for his gallantry on D-Day. A Sherman from the Garry's goes flat out for Beny-sur-Mer. Some Garry troopers inspect a Panther tank knocked out by "A" Squadron.

The Shermans were outgunned by the Germans, but very fast. Discarded tracks and sand bags give extra frontal protection. A German Tiger tank knocked out by the Garry's. Sherman with infantry. Logs were used for extra protection. Close combat in Normandy. This is the tank "Adanac," the only survivor out of more than 50 tanks with which the Garry's landed on D-Day. A testimony to

the brutal fighting in Normandy. More about the Garry's later.

The First Hussars of London

H.C. Chadderton: This is a monument to the other famous armoured regiment which landed on D-Day, the 1st Hussars of London, Ontario.

Their regimental history gives the following description:

"...D-Day Operation Overlord. At 0730 hours 6th June, 1944, the 6th Canadian Armoured Regiment (1st Hussars) in support of the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade of the 3^d Canadian Division assaulted and overpowered the Hun's beach defences between Courseulles-sur-Mer and Bernières-sur-Mer and after wiping out enemy resistance moved inland. One troop of "C" Squadron managed to reach the Caen-Bayeux Railway line, thus becoming the only unit of the Allied invasion forces known to reach its final objective on D-Day..."

Within half an hour of the initial touchdown tanks of the 1st Hussars really went to work.

"...As soon as the anti-tank guns on the beach had been liquidated, the seven DD tanks began to cruise up and down the beach engaging the machine gun nests... permitting the infantry to sweep ... over the dunes to begin their push inland..."

The support to the Winnipeg Rifles during their landing on the west side of the Seulles River is described in the regimental history of the Hussars:

"...During the rest of day the Shermans scurried here and there as the Winnipeg Rifles pressed inland and gave fire support to neutralize enemy positions whenever the 'Pegs' were pinned down... the tanks played a role in helping the infantry to clear each successive town as the advance moved on..."

The tankers of the Hussars, supported the Canadian Scottish on the right, the Winnipeg at Graye-sur-Mer and the Reginas at Courseulles; then they moved on to Pierrepont and Amblie.

As this map from the Hussars' history shows, the six 1st Hussar tanks were destroyed in the action between Reviers and Fontaine-Henri. The Hussars' history gives a clear description of the situation at the end of D-Day:

“...In view of the losses in DD tanks due to the unsuitable weather, the 1st Hussars ended D-Day with a considerably smaller number of tanks than was desirable for their first night in Europe.

In addition, the infantry continually had to anticipate Jerry counter-attacking heavily with armour in an attempt to kick them back on the beaches. However, the eventual appearance of the tanks with their capability of needling out the MG posts raised the morale of the infantry, so that by nightfall Harry Foster’s 7th Brigade was firmly astride the line running through Fontaine-Henri, Pierrepont and St. Gabriel...”

Conclusion

H.C. Chadderton:

So, we have been talking about the initial battle of Normandy, we call it touchdown. It has taken us from a stretch of coastline of some 10 miles to a penetration inland of five or six miles.

The 8th Brigade was on the left, that is, the Queen's Own, the North Shores and the Chaudières. The 7th Brigade consisting of the Reginas, the Winnipegs and the Canadian Scottish was on the right; the Fort Garry Horse of Winnipeg supported the left front, the 1st Hussars of London, the right. The 9th Brigade made its landing by 10 or 11 in the morning. The infantry battalions were the Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders of Cornwall, the Highland Light Infantry of Galt, Ontario and the North Nova Scotia Highlanders. Their tank support was the famous Sherbrooke Fusiliers.

The young men had done what many had thought was impossible. Hitler had used four years of occupation and millions of slave labourers to build the Atlantic Wall. The untried troops of the 3rd Div and the 2nd Armoured Brigade had broken through it.

Now they waited for the counter-attack. They had been warned that Hitler would bring up his mobile forces. Many thought the best in the world to throw them back into the sea.

John Keegan, eminent British historian who wrote *Six Armies in Normandy*, stated concerning the Canadian 3rd Division:

"...At the end of the day, its forward elements stood deeper into France than those of any other division. The opposition the Canadians faced was stronger than that of any other beach save Omaha. That was an accomplishment in which the whole nation could take considerable pride..."

Ross Munro, arguably Canada's premier war correspondent, stated in his epic *Gauntlet to Overlord*:

"...The splendid, shining heroism of the Canadian assault troops themselves was the immediate reason for the success of the coastal attack at Courseulles, Bernières, and St. Aubin..."