
D-Day and the Airborne Bridgehead

The sector of the Normandy coast code-named “Juno” gradually came into view – five miles of coastline which at low tide was bounded by wide sandy beaches. The maps, air photos and wave-top pictures had familiarized the officers with the landmarks. There, on the extreme right, were the lighthouses and wireless mast that marked the junction between “Juno” and “Gold,” the area to be attacked by the British 50th Division. In the centre, two and one-half miles along a low shoreline, was the small port of Courseulles-sur-Mer at the mouth of the River Seulles which separated “Mike” and “Nan” beaches. High church steeples identified the two seaside villages, Bernières and St. Aubin. Immediately behind the coastline the countryside

was open, rising very gradually towards Carpiquet, the divisional objective. To the east on the high ground between the rivers Orne and Dives 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion along with other units of 6th British Airborne Division were already hard at work securing the eastern flank of the bridgehead.

It was time to go. The assault of Hitler’s Atlantic Wall was about to begin. The young men of Canada’s 3rd Infantry Division, drawn from all parts of the country, were set to do battle for the liberation of western Europe. Some were to die that day and many more would be wounded. In the weeks and months that followed the casualty lists would grow, men would be killed, maimed and driven beyond the edge of human endurance. Why were they there?

Soldiers from 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade landing at Bernières-sur-Mer on the afternoon of D-Day.
CFJIC ZK 1083-3



The Second World War engulfed the world in violence on an unprecedented scale. There has never been another conflict which has involved so many different parts of the world or brought so much suffering and death. The people who went to war against Hitler's Germany were involved in a crusade to destroy a force of such great evil that there was no solution other than total victory, no other strategy but total war. They went to war with a sense of indignation and resignation, not with any sense of adventure or quest for glory. It was a decision taken reluctantly and with a feeling of horror, but a decision which most people felt necessary. Hitler had left them with no choice.

Canadians shared both the reluctance and the horror, but there was widespread understanding of the evil which Hitler represented and a firm belief that a line must be drawn. Canada would not have gone to war unless Britain went to war, but it was a common set of values, not blind imperial loyalty, that led Canadians to stand at the side of Britain and France. As the war progressed Canada's role became of vital importance. By 1944 almost a million Canadians were part of the Allied forces.

German soldiers scramble for cover as an American P-38 passes over on a reconnaissance mission, 6 May 1944. Detailed information on Normandy beach defences was obtained from "dicing" shots such as this one. Timber ramps with mines or saw-toothed blades to breach the bottoms of landing craft were typical.
US Air Force Photo 57357 AC

As you tour the Canadian battlefields you will obtain some impression of the challenges faced by these volunteer citizen-soldiers who helped to win the Battle of Normandy. As armchair generals you will no doubt have your own views on how the battles should have been planned. Remember that the men who actually fought the battles lacked the 20-20 hindsight which we possess today. No one knew what the outcome of individual battles would be or how long the campaign in Normandy might last. And no one knew exactly what was required of them. Which actions were courageous and which were foolish? Should attacks be pressed when things were going badly or should they be called off? Discipline and courage could keep men going, but at what point did the price become too high? There were no easy answers in 1944 and there are none today. What we do know is that Canadian soldiers, sailors and airmen made a vital contribution to the defeat of Hitler and the liberation of Europe. The victory did not bring an end to war or to human misery, but it did destroy a "monstrous tyranny never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime" and offered





Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth and her daughter, Princess Elizabeth, inspect a member of 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, 6th Airborne Division, in England prior to the invasion.

LAC PA 129047

the world the opportunity to build a new and more rational social order.

The planning for D-Day began in 1943, but the final decisions were not made until Generals Dwight D. Eisenhower and Bernard L. Montgomery were appointed to command the expeditionary force. "Ike" and "Monty" found that two of the essential pre-conditions for an assault on the coast of France, air superiority and naval control of the English Channel, had been achieved. A third criteria, enemy ignorance of the landing site, was verified through "Ultra," the British intelligence source based on decrypted German radio signals. Ultra provided regular reports on the location of German divisions, confirming estimates that the enemy believed that the main landings would be in the Pas de Calais. A fourth objective, the isolation of the battlefield through air power, was less certain, but efforts to delay the arrival of reinforcements by bombing bridges, railway yards and road junctions was planned for the weeks immediately before D-Day.

The attack was to be made on a five-division front with three airborne divisions landing ahead of the main invasion force. The Canadians were assigned to Juno in the centre of Second British Army's sector. The 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, reinforced by the 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade, was to land in brigade groups, each composed of three infantry battalions, an armoured regiment, two artillery field regiments, combat engineer companies and extra units like the specialized armoured vehicles (AVREs) of the 79th Armoured Division. More than 20,000 men, 200 tanks, and hundreds of other vehicles were under command of Major-General R.F.L. Keller.

The Airborne Bridgehead

The decision to create an Allied Airborne Army of five divisions and commit enormous resources to gliders, special equipment and a fleet of transport aircraft was always controversial. Ever since the conquest of Crete in May 1941, when German airborne forces lost 30 percent of their strength, with more killed and wounded



Landing
Zone "N"

Ranville

Orne River

Horsa (Ranville)
Bridge

Pontoon Bridge

Landing Zone "Y"

Landing
Zone "X"

Caen Canal

Pegasus Bridge

Café
Gondrée

Bénouville

than in the entire Balkan campaign, the role of lightly armed airborne units had been in question. Allied experience in the Mediterranean did little to silence the critics. In Operation "Husky," the Sicilian invasion, 1st British Airborne Division had suffered heavy losses and both parachute and glider troops had been too widely scattered to be effective. A week before D-Day Air Chief Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, the air commander, seriously argued that the entire airborne operation should be cancelled as the projected losses in men and aircraft were too great. The drop zone for 82nd US Airborne Division was moved 12 miles to avert a disaster on the right flank, but 6th British Airborne Division's drop zones and landing zones for gliders could not be changed even though Ultra reported the transfer of 21st Panzer Division to the Caen sector.

The reality was that studies of the feasibility of landing on the coast of Normandy suggested that the left flank of the beachhead was the most vulnerable point in the whole operation. A counterattack there might roll up the entire invasion force. To meet this threat the planners

suggested deploying 6th British Airborne to seize the bridges over the Orne and hold the high ground east of the river. Many of the other original elements of the "Overlord" plan were changed in the months that followed, but no one could come up with a better solution for securing the left flank.

The men of 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion knew nothing of these debates when they arrived in Britain in August 1943. Recruited from volunteers under 32 years of age, "with a history of participation in rugged sports or in a civilian occupation or hobby demanding sustained exertion," the battalion had learned to jump out of airplanes at Fort Benning, Georgia and Camp Shilo, Manitoba. At their new home at Bulford, on the Salisbury Plain, they measured themselves against the men of their new sister regiments, 8th and 9th Parachute Battalions, of 3rd Parachute Brigade. They also met the man who would forge them into combat soldiers and lead them in battle, Brigadier James Hill, DSO.

Hill had acquired legendary status in the memories of Canadian and British veterans of the

Below: Modern aerial view of Pegasus Bridge

Opposite: Aerial reconnaissance photo of Pegasus Bridge taken on 5 July 1944.

LCMSDS Air Photo Collection
309/3163



Below: Bust of Major John Howard, commander of the unit that captured Pegasus Bridge on the night of 5/6 June 1944

airborne division. In 1943 he was 32 years old, a tall rugged-looking professional soldier who had fought in the Battle of France and caught the last destroyer out of Dunkirk. Hill volunteered to join the original paratroop force and by early 1942 commanded 1st Paratroop Battalion in its first action in North Africa. Wounded while capturing three enemy tanks, he recovered in England and was posted to command the only mixed British and Canadian brigade formed during the war.

Hill could do anything he asked his men to do and still retain the focus to function as a commander conducting a wide-ranging battle. He needed these skills and all the power of his personality to succeed in Normandy.

According to Hill,

Each battalion had a personality of its own.... The 8th were rugged, relentless in achieving an objective, very tough, and not too fussy about detail. This was the opposite of 9th who were masters of detail, tackling an assignment only after intensive preparation and approaching all problems with precision and professionalism. The Canadian battalion displayed all the characteristics of a troop of cavalry...

The Canadians were, however, neither well disciplined nor adequately trained when they joined the brigade. Hill "kept a tight rein" on his

Canadians for however much he admired their spirit he had no wish to command a battalion of dead heroes.

It is impossible not to be impressed by the intensity of the training of the parachute battalions. Hill insisted on the highest standards of weapons training and physical fitness. Nicknamed "Speedy" because of his own rapid pace he maintained that a paratrooper had to move across country twice as fast as anybody else – ten miles in two hours with a 60-pound pack and personal weapon. The Canadians adapted quickly; some like Major Jeff Nicklin, a football and lacrosse star, and Fraser Eadie, a noted hockey player, ate it up and asked for more but others fell by the wayside. By the time the battalion was briefed for the Normandy invasion the men, whose average age was 22, were ready for anything.

The night of 5-6 June was moonless with patchy cloud and winds gusting up to 20 miles an hour. The odds of placing the paratroop companies in the right place were not great. Major John Howard's coup de main glider assault on Pegasus Bridge was able to land on target but high winds and flak over the coast meant the "sticks" of paratroopers were widely scattered.

Despite the winds, flak and almost total failure of the radar beacons carried by the Pathfinders of 22 Independent Parachute Company, the men of the two parachute brigades were able to capture or secure all of their objectives. For 1st Canadian Battalion this meant that although only a fraction of "C" Company, which was to secure the drop zone (DZ) and eliminate the enemy at Varville, was available, but it all went like clock work. "A" Company was assigned to protect the flank of 9th Battalion as it advanced to capture the Merville Battery whose guns could hamper the landings on "Sword" and "Juno" beaches. "B" Company blew a bridge at Robehomme on the Dives and then joined the rest of the battalion at le Mesnil crossroads where everyone quickly dug-in awaiting the German attempt to regain the high ground and break through to the Orne bridges.

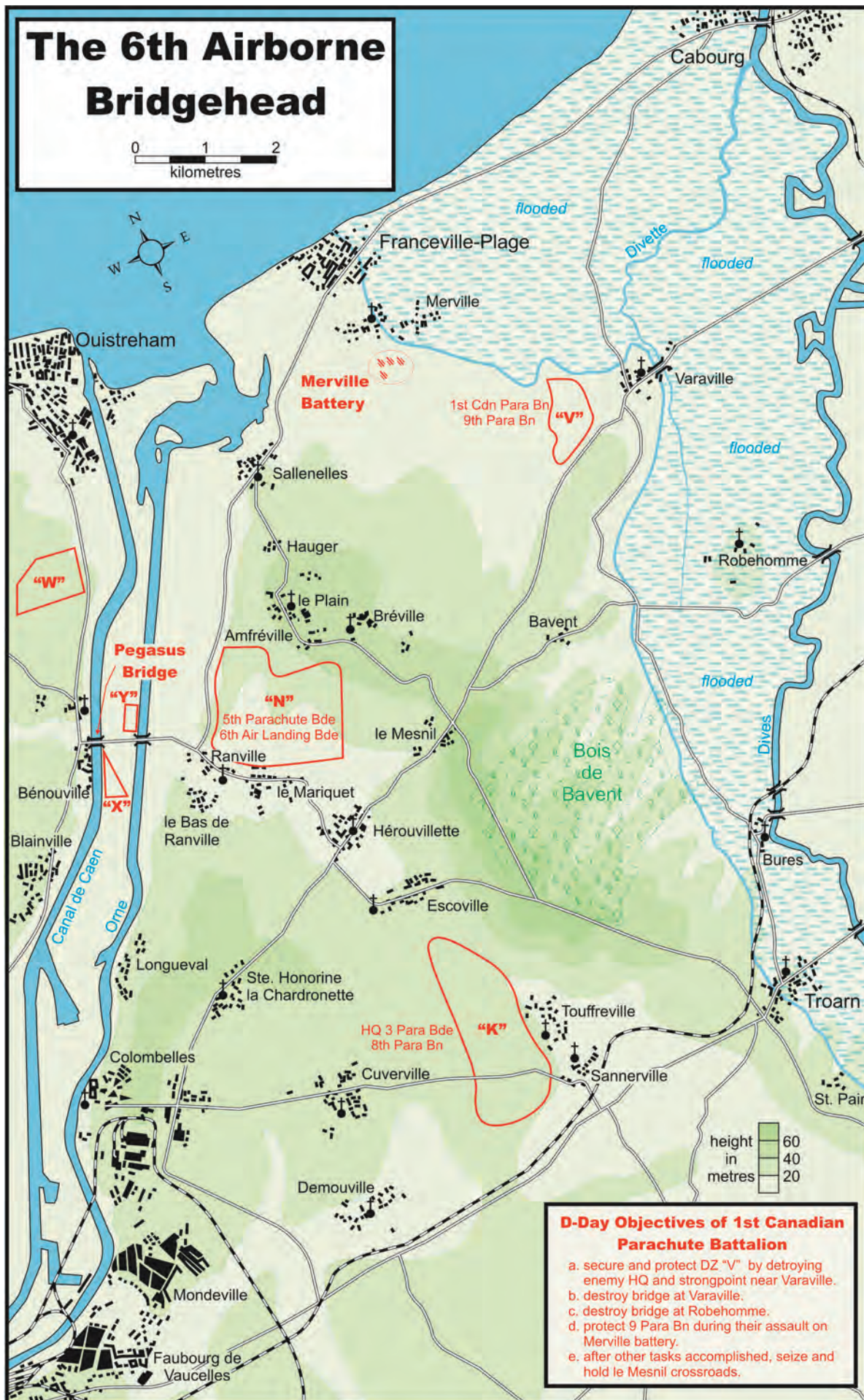


Bottom: Pegasus Bridge as it appears today.



The 6th Airborne Bridgehead

0 1 2
kilometres



D-Day Objectives of 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion

- secure and protect DZ "V" by destroying enemy HQ and strongpoint near Varville.
- destroy bridge at Varville.
- destroy bridge at Robehomme.
- protect 9 Para Bn during their assault on Merville battery.
- after other tasks accomplished, seize and hold le Mesnil crossroads.

Soldiers from the 9th "Highland" Brigade, likely the North Nova Scotia Highlanders, landing at Bernières-sur-Mer on D-Day. The 9th was the reserve brigade assigned to advance through the beachhead to the divisional objective, Carpiquet. The folding bikes were to speed this movement. Note the ramp in the middle of the photo built by the engineers.
LAC PA 122765

In their last briefing Brigadier Hill had warned the men that "in spite of your excellent training and orders do not be daunted if chaos reigns. It undoubtedly will." Hill was right. Chaos was everywhere, but small groups of well-trained men went about their tasks knowing their comrades depended on them.

The bridgehead established by 6th British Airborne Division is not to be missed. The Pegasus Bridge Museum at Bénouville contains an outstanding display of artifacts and a well-researched account of the operations carried out by all elements of the division including the Canadians. The museum grounds showcase the original wartime Pegasus Bridge which was replaced by a modern structure of a similar design. Also on display are a full scale reproduction of a Horsa glider and the tattered remains of an original glider. The café by the canal, the first building in France to be liberated, is still in business and the markers for the gliders that landed here offer dramatic proof of just how successful this part of the operation was. The memorial to Major John Howard is especially striking.

To fully understand the airborne operation you should approach the battlefield from the Caen Ring Road N413 exiting at Mondeville and turning north to Colombelles on the D513. When you reach Ste. Honorine la Chardonette,

captured by 51st Highland Division, you are entering the bridgehead across the Orne which was vital to the defence of the main beaches and to future prospects of offensive action south of Caen. Operation Goodwood, 19 July, was launched from this area. As you continue north to le Mesnil Crossroads, Place James Hill and the memorial to the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, you will reach the high ground which 6th British Airborne had to defend against repeated attacks. The small park with the Canadian memorial is at the crossroads of the D513 and D37B.

Take the D513 back to le Mesnil and take the D224 to Ranville. There is a British Military Cemetery at Ranville. Continue west on the D37 and cross the Orne River and canal on Pegasus Bridge to visit the museum and other sites. The nearby Merville Battery Museum offers a chance to see one of the major German coastal defence installations captured on June 6.

Juno

The Juno area was defended by elements of the 716th Infantry Division and several mobile units from 21st Panzer Division. The German commanders hoped that in the event of an attack, the 716th would be able to use its artillery, mortars, mines and anti-tank guns to delay an Allied advance until reinforcements could arrive.



Operation Overlord



CFJIC ZK 1081-4

Above: The Dido-class cruiser HMS *Diadem* was one of many Royal Navy and Royal Canadian Navy ships supporting the invasion. Here, *Diadem* is photographed off Juno Beach on 6 June 1944. Below: A munitions ship offloads its deadly cargo into waiting DUKWs for the short trip to Juno Beach.



CFJIC ZK 1084-8



CFJIC ZK 543

Major-General R.F.L. Keller, the commanding officer of 3rd Canadian Infantry Division.

These three photographs depict aspects of the naval landing on Juno Beach on 6 June 1944.



Centre: A Landing Craft Infantry (Large) (LCI(L)) leaves the beach at Bernières-sur-Mer while a Landing Craft Assault (LCA) filled with Canadian infantrymen makes its way to the shore.

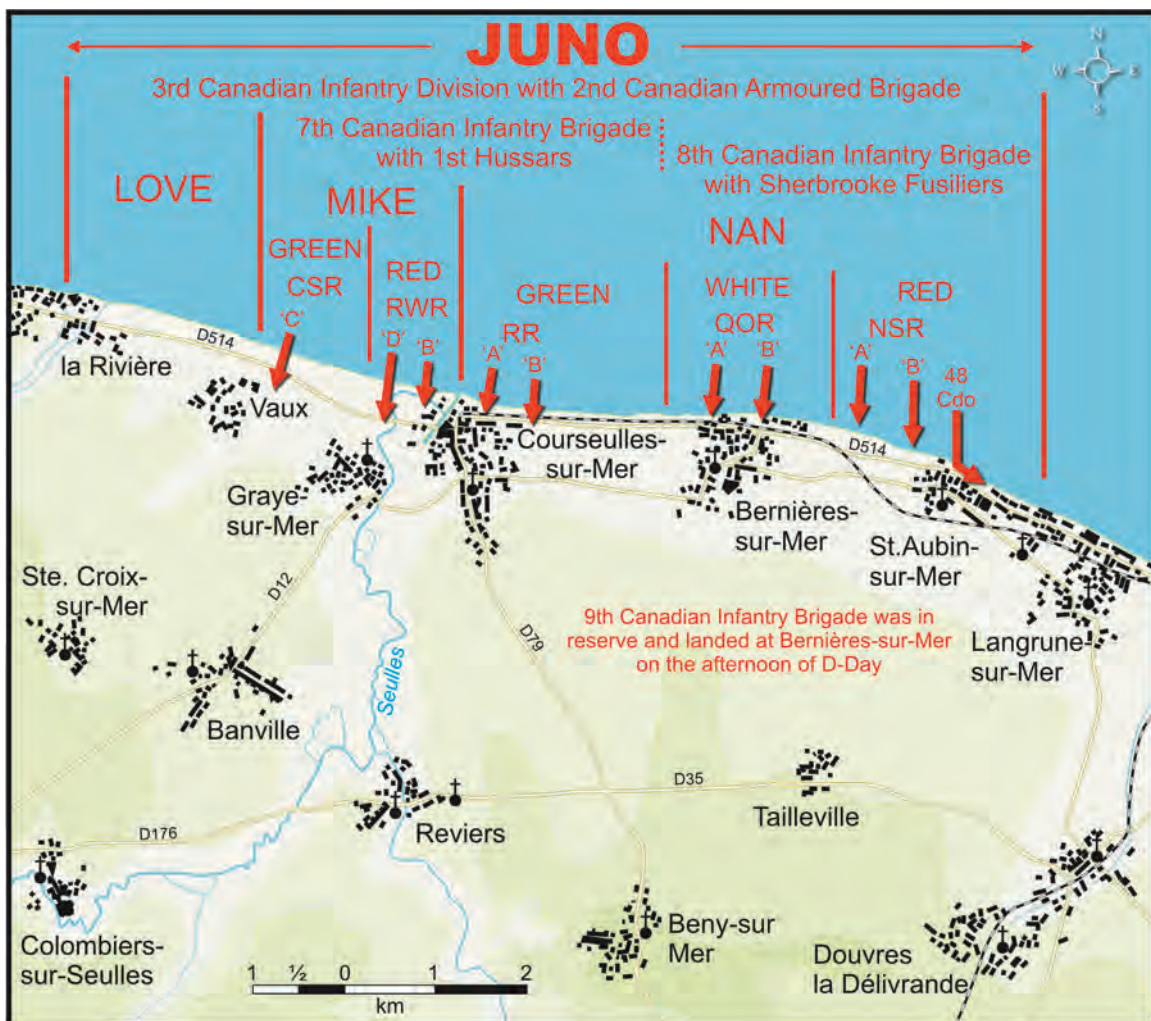
CFJIC CT 309

Bottom: Two LCTs approach the Normandy coast on the afternoon of D-Day. Smoke from fires started during the morning assault still burn in Bernières-sur-Mer.

CFJIC CT 300

Juno Beach The D-Day Assault

Key to map
CSR - Canadian Scottish Regiment
RWR - Royal Winnipeg Rifles
RR - Regina Rifles
QOR - Queen's Own Rifles
NSR - North Shore Regiment





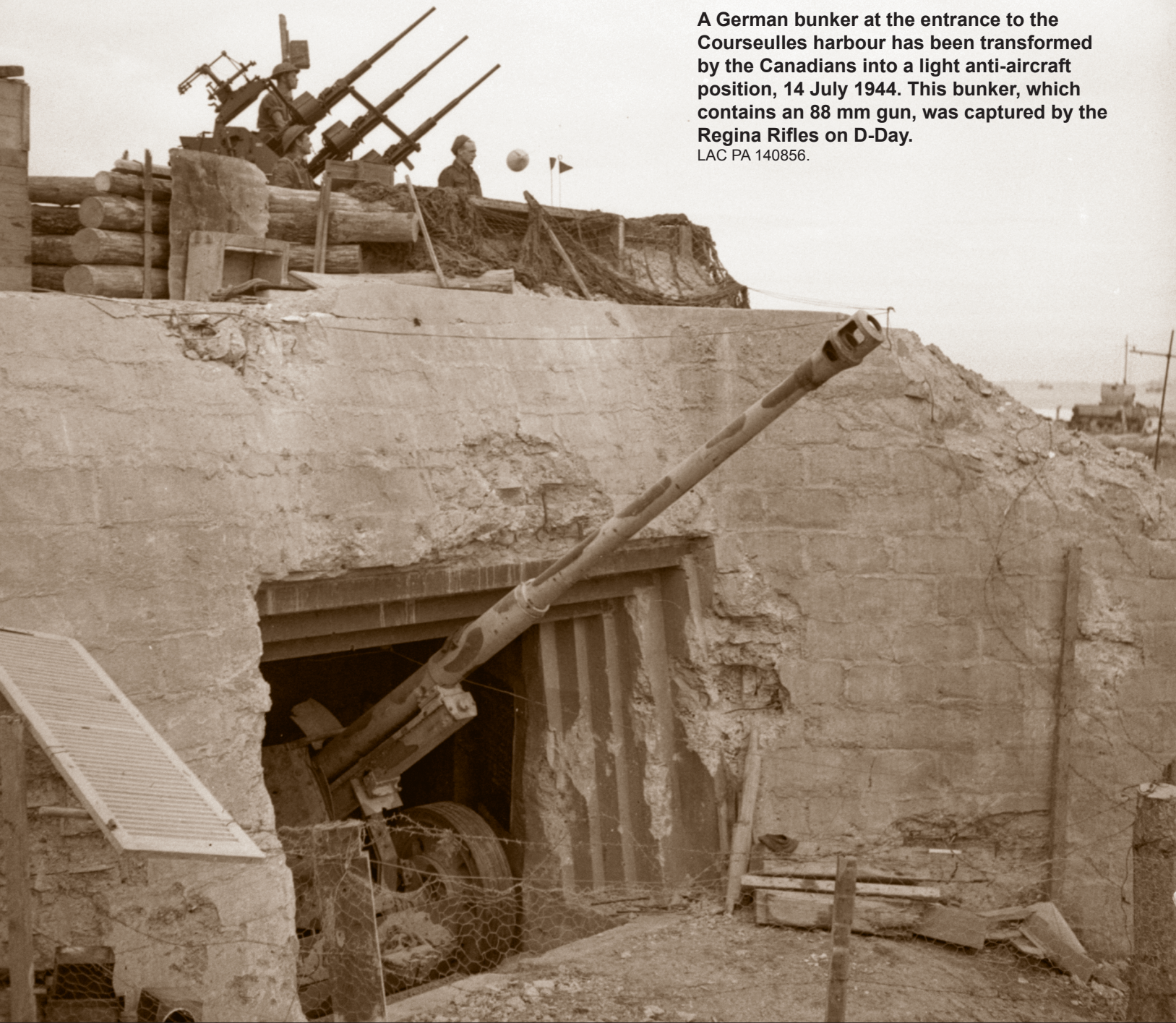
This air photograph of Courseulles-sur-Mer on the afternoon of 6 June provides a unique view of 7th Brigade's battlefield. The flooding of the River Seulle is particularly striking as is the openness of the beach attacked by the Royal Winnipeg Rifles. US Air Force Photo 52168 AC



Courseulles today.

The mouth of the River Seulle at Courseulles-sur-Mer photographed in 1946. The large enemy bunker on the east (left) side of the river is no longer evident, but the tilted bunker to the right may be viewed today. CFJIC PMR 82-068





A German bunker at the entrance to the Courseulles harbour has been transformed by the Canadians into a light anti-aircraft position, 14 July 1944. This bunker, which contains an 88 mm gun, was captured by the Regina Rifles on D-Day.
LAC PA 140856.



A view from the low water mark gives an idea of the distance the men of the Regina Rifles had to traverse to get at the enemy. The building on the right, now La Maison de la Mer (beside the entrance to the harbour) was built on the bunker pictured above.



“Mike Red” Beach on 6 June 1944. Landing craft run up on the beach to unload their cargoes of men, vehicles and supplies.

The challenge confronting the Canadians was to overcome the coastal defences and advance inland, staking out ground which would be defended against a major counterattack. As we shall see these tasks were largely accomplished.

Third Division was to land two brigades up with the reserve brigade waiting to pass through to the divisional objective astride the Caen-Bayeux highway. The landings were scheduled for just after low tide so that mined beach obstacles could be avoided. H-Hour was delayed for 30 minutes because of the weather conditions and by the time the reserve companies landed, many of the obstacles were covered and mines caused a large number of casualties.

The assaulting infantry was to be preceded by armour, especially the Duplex Drive (DD) tanks which could “swim” ashore. Again the weather disrupted the schedule and, except for “Nan Red” beach at St. Aubin-sur-Mer, and part of “Nan Green,” the infantry landed ahead of the supporting armour.

Courseulles-sur-Mer

In 1944, Courseulles, a small but useful port, was the most heavily defended area attacked by Anglo-Canadian forces on D-Day. On the east side of the river, “strongpoint Courseulles” included an 88 mm gun, six concrete machine gun posts, a 50 mm anti-tank gun and a 75 mm gun in a separate casement. To the west of the river another 75 mm and two 50 mm guns were covered by six concrete machine gun posts. German mortar teams were dug-in with a carefully registered plot of the beach areas so that fire could be brought down quickly.

The Regina Rifles and “B” Squadron of the First Hussars landed on “Nan Green” beach east of the river. The 13th Field Regiment’s self-propelled guns as well as the navy’s gun and rocket fire were 100 to 200 yards “plus” of the target and little damage was inflicted on the German defensive crust. “A” Company of the Reginas drew the hardest task landing close to the river in front of the strongpoint. They were immediately pinned down

by heavy fire. “B” Company landed to the east of the strongpoint and with immediate support from the tanks and AVREs got off the beach and began to clear Courseulles from the flank. “C” Company came ashore and moved inland to begin the next stage but “D” Company suffered heavy casualties from mined beach obstacles covered by the tide.



Top: The Juno Beach Centre

Bottom: In 1970 a Duplex Drive Sherman tank of the First Hussars which sank on D-Day was recovered from the bottom of the English Channel. “Bold” was subsequently restored and is now on display in Courseulles.

To the west of the river, “B” Company of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles landed in front of the other section of the strongpoint. Naval guns and the work of 12th Field Regiment provided temporary suppression of enemy fire but no damage and few casualties were inflicted. “B” Company had to begin the attack unaided as the tanks were delayed. The War Diarist of the Winnipegs exaggerated only slightly when he wrote “The bombardment having failed to kill a single German or silence one weapon these companies had to storm their

position “cold” and did so without hesitation.” With the help of armour the Winnipegs and 6th Field Company Royal Canadian Engineers captured the strongpoint and crossed the river clearing the west side of the town.

“D” Company, Royal Winnipeg Rifles landed to the west and moved quickly to open a path through the minefield at la Valette. Graye-sur-Mer was captured shortly afterwards. Still further to the west “C” Company of the Canadian Scottish Regiment met only slight opposition and found its primary objective, a 75 mm gun at Vaux, had been hit by naval gun fire and was abandoned. The nearby chateau was taken after several hand grenades produced the surrender of a small group of dispirited enemy. The rest of the Canadian Scottish landed safely and moved inland ready to spearhead the advance to the Brigade objective.

Courseulles-sur-Mer is now a popular beach resort with good hotels, restaurants, and a permanent population of 3,000. You will want to photograph “Bold,” a DD tank of the First Hussars recovered from the sea in 1970. It is displayed along with a memorial marker describing the DD tank. A number of Canadian regiments have added bronze plaques to the sides of “Bold.” Close by are memorials commemorating the Regina Rifles and Canadian Scottish Regiment, while 100 yards to the east a monument to the Royal Winnipeg Rifles takes the form of a giant crusader’s sword. A German 50 mm gun, its shield holed by armour-piercing shells, is still in position at the edge of the harbour. There is also a memorial commemorating the arrival of General Charles de Gaulle on June 14th, 1944.

The best view of “Nan Green” beach is from the edge of the water at low tide where something of the perspective of the troops who landed at D-Day may be recaptured.

Cross the lift bridge to the west bank of the river on the D514 and turn right at the first traffic light. Park in front of the British AVRE, a Churchill “Petard” with 79th Armoured Division markings.

The large memorial erected by the *Comite du Debarquement* marks the western boundary of "Mike Red" Beach. There are a number of block houses still in place and it is worth spending some time exploring the battlefield where the "Little Black Devils," the Royal Winnipeg Rifles, landed. The Canadian Scottish came ashore on "Mike Green" close to the commercial camping site named after the regiment. The next road to the beach at Vaux ends at the site of the gun battery the Canscots were to attack. The Chateau Vaux, which is private, may be approached by circling south through the village of Vaux.

The Juno Beach Centre is located where "B" Company of the Royal Winnipeg

Rifles landed. The Centre owes its existence to the devotion and persistence of Garth Webb who was with 14th Field Regiment Royal Canadian Artillery on D-Day. Webb and his partner Lise

Cooper worked tirelessly to develop the project finally winning the support of private donors and governments.

The Juno Centre presents the story of Canada and its participation in the war and post-war world to both adults and school children. Consult the Juno Centre website for further information about opening times and special exhibits: <www.junobeach.org>.

This air photo of Courseulles-sur-Mer was taken 48 hours before D-Day.



Plaques at Courseulles-sur-Mer honouring the units of 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade: Canadian Scottish Regiment (far left), Regina Rifle Regiment (left) and the Royal Winnipeg Rifles (right).





Above: A group of German prisoners await their transfer to England by the seawall in Bernières. Note the height of the seawall as well as the tangle of barbed wire at the top. LAC PA 115535



Inset: A close up view of the machine gun-armed Tobruk where soldiers of Le Régiment de la Chaudières gather after the position was knocked out on D-Day. LAC PA 116532



An M-10 Tank Destroyer drives through a Norman town on D-Day.



Canadian military vehicles congregate in a village square on 6 June 1944.

Two views of “Maison Queen’s Own Rifles,” the famous house in Bernières-sur-Mer. Above, pictured in 1944 and below, pictured in 2003.



Bernières-sur-Mer

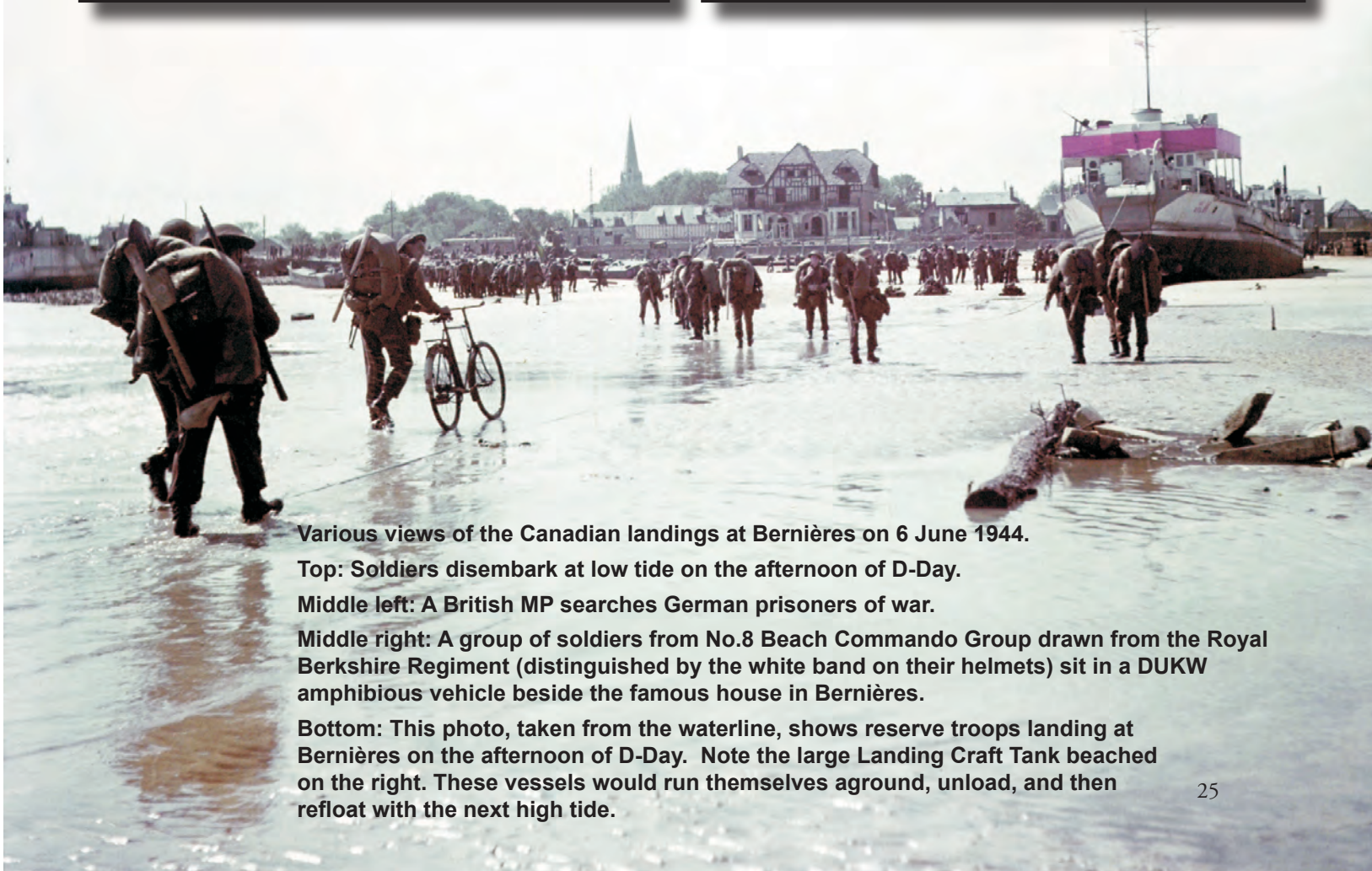
This seaside village is distinguished by its church with a 13th century bell tower and 220-foot spire. In 1944 Bernières was defended by a company of the German army’s 716th Division occupying defences along the sea-wall.

Operational research teams later identified nine concrete encased positions containing two 50 mm guns and seven machine guns. Most of the casualties were inflicted by two 81 mm mortar positions sited 150 yards behind the beach. Neither the air nor naval bombardment did more than keep heads down and the self-propelled artillery (14th Field Regiment) firing from landing craft (LCTs) put the weight of their fire to the left of the fortified area attacked by the Queen’s Own Rifles. Rocket projectiles were on target and helped to destroy some of the mines which covered approaches to the resistance nests.

What all this means is that if you stand out at the water’s edge when the tide is half-way out and look to the beach wall you can, with a little imagination, understand what the infantry faced that morning. The DD Tanks of the Fort Garry Horse were behind the assault companies, as were

the AVREs. “B” Company, which landed 250 yards east of its objective and thus directly in front of the main “resistance nest,” lost 65 men before breaking through the beach defences. Everything depended on the willingness of the survivors to race across the sand using grenades and sten guns to take out the machine gun posts. The lead company of No.8 Beach Commando Group, drawn from the Royal Berkshire Regiment, joined in the attack capturing one of the machine gun positions set in the elaborate network of underground defences.

“A” Company, which landed to the west of Bernières, got off the beach quickly and despite casualties from mortar fire was successful in joining the tanks and “B” Company in clearing the town. It seems likely that if the rough sea had not forced



Various views of the Canadian landings at Bernières on 6 June 1944.

Top: Soldiers disembark at low tide on the afternoon of D-Day.

Middle left: A British MP searches German prisoners of war.

Middle right: A group of soldiers from No.8 Beach Commando Group drawn from the Royal Berkshire Regiment (distinguished by the white band on their helmets) sit in a DUKW amphibious vehicle beside the famous house in Bernières.

Bottom: This photo, taken from the waterline, shows reserve troops landing at Bernières on the afternoon of D-Day. Note the large Landing Craft Tank beached on the right. These vessels would run themselves aground, unload, and then refloat with the next high tide.



French civilians were amazed to hear “British Tommies” speaking French, especially with the old Norman accent. In front of the Bernières train station, a soldier from Le Régiment de la Chaudière jokes with a young French boy while three old women watch.

CFJIC ZK 1080-8A

“B” Company’s landing craft off course, Bernières would have been taken from the flank with many fewer casualties.

Le Régiment de la Chaudière began to land at 0830 hours, but German anti-tank guns, beach congestion, and traffic jams in the narrow streets forced the battalion to wait in its assembly area until late in the morning.

A plaque depicting operations at Juno as well as memorials to the Queen’s Own Rifles and Le Régiment de la Chaudière are located near a

German bunker at Place du Canada. Photos taken of Bernières in 1944 depict a scattering of houses and the railway station which survives as the local tourist bureau. The “house on the beach” is now *Maison Queen’s Own Rifles* and there is a plaque that describes the events of the day. Again the best view of the battlefield is from water’s edge. If you walk or drive into the village as far as the Church, you will appreciate why Bernières itself was an obstacle to movement inland on D-Day.

6-7 June 1944





The beach at St. Aubin-sur-Mer. The inset was taken on 22 June 1944, while the top photo was taken 59 years later. The two photos were taken from just below the gun position looking east. In the centre of the 1944 photo is a US Army Air Force P-47 Thunderbolt which made an emergency landing on the beach. Note the Duplex Drive tank of the Fort Garry Horse which was put out of action on D-Day, and the beached landing craft in the background.
inset: USAF Photo 72625 AC

St. Aubin-sur-Mer

The situation at “Nan Red” Beach was similar in intensity though different in detail. In 1944 there was only a scattering of houses on the beach at Bernières but at St. Aubin, seaside villas stretched along the sea wall. Two and three storey houses, many of which survive to the present, provided direct observation of the beach. The planners assumed that these houses would be ideal defensive positions and proposed to avoid the area. Air photographs had also revealed the existence of a resistance nest and this became a primary target for both air and naval bombardment.

The North Shores landed two companies up with Baker Company assigned to secure the resistance nest by advancing south to the main road and then attacking from the rear. Intelligence reports suggested that the position was manned by “a garrison of 40 all ranks” classified as “poor troops.” Able Company, landing to the west, was to clear the beach, capture a gap designated as a main vehicle exit and then link up with the Queen’s Own Rifles. The two reserve companies, avoiding the battle for the coastal defences, were to clear the western half of the village and advance to Tailleville where a second resistance nest was reported. If all went well the battalion would

then assault the heavily fortified radar station at Douvres-la-Délivrande.

Scheduled to land 45 minutes behind the North Shores was 48 Royal Marine Commando. The Commandoes were to cross the channel in Landing Craft Infantry (small) whose wooden construction and sharply-pitched bow ramps made them death-traps in an opposed landing so the planners must have assumed that the battle for St. Aubin would be over in less than 45 minutes. Perhaps it would have been if any of the elaborate methods of air or seaborne bombardment had worked but it was quickly evident that the fortified area had not been touched by bombs or shells.

The North Shores were able to land both assault companies with far fewer casualties than the QORs but the resistance nest, with its 50 mm anti-tank gun, mortars and machine guns, was still completely intact and able to deliver continuous and accurate fire. The company assigned to clear the position found that all approaches were covered by machine guns and snipers who could move underground as well as from house to house. Without armour this was a tough proposition but a battalion 6-pounder anti-tank gun was brought forward and one pill box was put out of action by two direct hits. The 2-inch mortars were also used effectively before the first armour, an AVRE mounting a Petard and the Fort Garry tanks, arrived to complete the work.

The Fort Garry DD squadron was not launched at sea because "the waves were smashing above the doors of the LCT." The naval commander brought his LCTs close to shore. The DDs moved ashore in what the Garries called a "wet wade." The 50 mm anti-tank gun in the strongpoint, which according to operational researchers used more than 70 rounds on D-Day, had a clear field of fire sinking one LCT and damaging another. The landing was chaotic but everyone knew what they were supposed to do, including Sgt. J. Martin and his crew who, when their tank was hit, backed it into deep water to put out the fire then used their main gun and machine gun to engage the enemy until the rising tide forced them to wade ashore.

The struggle to subdue the resistance nest had barely started when 48 Royal Marine Commando began its run-in. Lieut-Colonel J.R. Moulton, the commanding officer, recalled trying to obtain information from the Beach Control vessel but none was forthcoming and the order to increase speed and advance line-abreast was given. The rising tide, which had caused the North Shore reserve companies trouble, now covered many of the beach obstacles and two of the five craft were hung up well out from shore. Moulton's own vessel was fouled but was carried forward by the waves. Mortar and machine gun fire cut through the plywood inflicting heavy casualties. Many of those who tried to swim ashore drowned, caught by the undertow. Less than half the original strength of the 500 man Commando landed and made contact with the North Shores and continued clearing the village. Their advance eastward did not begin until the next morning.

On every anniversary of D-Day the people of the towns and villages along the Normandy coast gather to pay tribute to their liberators. At five year intervals larger crowds and delegations of veterans and politicians arrive to observe or participate in the ceremonies. But each year veterans of 48 Royal Marine Commando journey to St. Aubin to lay wreaths in memory of their comrades.

The 50 mm gun casement in Place du Canada has been repaired, but it is of the same thickness as the original indicating why it was invincible to head-on fire from the sea. In 1944 the entire parking area was part of the resistance nest and there must still be tunnels below the pavement. The plaques to the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment and the Fort Garry Horse are accurate but the wording on the blue marker column erected for the 50th anniversary is partial and misleading. If you are in Normandy on 6 June try and make it to the morning ceremony here. It beats all the official ones with their verbose politicians.

As you approach the village of Tailleville you will see a walled farm on the right. "C" Company of the North Shores had moved quickly along the D219 D-Day morning meeting no resistance

Right: The beach at St. Aubin-sur-Mer looking west as it appeared in 1946. The gun position (shown in detail below) at the top centre of the photo has been preserved, but the rest of what was an elaborate defensive position is no longer visible.

CFJIC PMR 82-072 (left) USAF 72641 AC (below)

Bottom: The plaza in St. Aubin today.



until they reached this point. Tailleville was the headquarters of the 2nd Battalion, 736th Regiment and was defended by its reserve company. The battle here lasted until early evening and required tired men to co-ordinate an infantry-tank attack which finally overcame resistance and yielded 60 prisoners. In the centre of the village at the crossroads of the D219 and D35 you will find a number of street names and plaques recalling the events of D-Day. B4, the airfield used by the 126th Fighter Wing RCAF was just west of Tailleville south of the D35.

Look north towards Bernières and St. Aubin and you will see much the same view that the soldiers manning German anti-tank and field guns had on D-Day when the QORs and Chaudières began to move south from Bernières. This may help you to appreciate why 8th Brigade was “slow” in moving to Beny-sur-Mer that morning

and why the decision to land the reserve brigade at Bernières meant that the existing traffic jam became a monumental pile-up.

The Chaudières captured Beny and a battery of field guns during the afternoon of D-Day and moved on to Basly and Colomby-sur-Thaon. There is a memorial to Le Régiment de la Chaudière in Beny and a large marble maple leaf to “The Canadian Liberators” in Basly. Ninth Brigade, which had been equipped with bicycles to pass through to “Oak,” the divisional objective along the railway line, got started in time but the counterattack on Sword beach by 21st Panzer Division led the Corps Commander, Lieutenant-General John Crocker, to order both 3rd British and 3rd Canadian divisions to dig-in and re-organize for a renewed advance the next morning.



Soldiers from the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division prepare to fire their mortar, Normandy, June 1944.

CFJIC ZK 882-1

The Beny-sur-Mer Canadian War Cemetery, for those who lost their lives in the first stage of the Normandy campaign, is on the road between Beny and Revers. The cemetery is beautifully kept and there is a registration book which allows you to locate individual gravesites. It is a place of pilgrimage for all Canadians. You may wish to search the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website before visiting these cemeteries <www.cwgc.org>. There is a user-friendly search engine for individual gravesites.

Below & Below left: Beny-sur-Mer Canadian War Cemetery.



Below: Memorial to Le Régiment de la Chaudière in the village of Beny-sur-Mer.



We begin at the German military cemetery at la Cambe. The contrast between the serenity and attention to individuals so evident at Commonwealth cemeteries and the dark, brooding imagery of the German cemeteries is striking. La Cambe also has an information centre on the German war graves program and a display which documents the horror of war for individual soldiers and their families. There is no indication that Hitler's Germany started the war and waged it here on French soil. The la Cambe cemetery is beside the N13 20 km west of Bayeux. The exit is well marked.

From la Cambe follow the D113 north to a junction signed Cricqueville-en-Bessin and Pointe du Hoc. If in doubt stay on the D113 to Grandcamp-Maisy, where there is a US Army Ranger museum, then drive east on the D514 to Pointe du Hoc. Allied intelligence had identified the gun battery here as a serious threat to both Utah and Omaha beaches and the battery was bombed repeatedly before D-Day. The Germans reacted to this by moving the guns inland where they were in temporary storage in early June!

The Rangers were to assault the position from the sea climbing the 30 metre cliffs with the aid of London Fire Department ladders and rifle-propelled grappling hooks. Landing craft reached the coast at the wrong place and the attack was delayed. The Rangers heroic assault and subsequent defence of the area is outlined on plaques at this well-preserved site.

Continue east on the coastal road to Vierville-sur-Mer. The small private museum here offers a clear and compelling account of the struggle for Omaha Beach. The beach side road allows you to drive along the foot of the cliffs returning to the D514 at St. Laurent-sur-Mer. We usually invite our tour group to walk from the St. Laurent road to the Colleville draw on the eastern side of Omaha. This part of the beach can be accessed from the D514 at Colleville. The American cemetery can be reached by walking directly from the beach or by car on a well-marked one-way route. A new



visitor centre at the American cemetery, opened in 2007. It offers a poignant look at the American experience in Normandy. It is not a "must see" stop, but the free centre is worth a look if you have the time.

The events of D-Day at Omaha are too complex for easy summary. The first 20 minutes of *Saving Private Ryan* do not exaggerate what happened here and if you have been to Dieppe before visiting Omaha you are bound to wonder why this area was attacked on D-Day. The partial answer is that there is no other beach between Utah and Gold and the planners were reluctant to allow the landings to take place on widely separated

The US Military Cemetery at Omaha Beach.



A plaque to the 31st Canadian Minesweeping Flotilla, which helped to clear the way for the Americans on D-Day, has been placed on the side of a German bunker on Omaha Beach.

Photo by Matt Symes

This aerial view shows the remains of the Mulberry Harbour at Arromanches-les-Bains that are still visible after six decades.

beachheads. The troops landing at Omaha were to provide the link up between Utah and the Anglo-Canadian landing areas. Allied intelligence missed the arrival of elements of the 352nd, a full strength German Field Division, in the area but even if the decision-makers had known of this new danger they could scarcely have cancelled the operation.

Given the Allied fear of tipping off the enemy as to the location and timing of the landings there could be no prolonged bombardment of the coastal defences, which were completely intact when the landings began. The harsh reality is that the planners expected the fighting at Omaha to be particularly difficult and that is why the veteran "Big Red One," the 1st US Infantry Division, was

brought from the Mediterranean to carry out the assault.

There is a Canadian connection with Omaha Beach. The Royal Canadian Navy's 31st Minesweeping Flotilla was responsible for clearing the eastern sector of Omaha and four other Bangor-class minesweepers were part of the 14th British Flotilla operating to the west. In 2004 the Canadian Battlefields Foundation, in co-operation with the American Battlefield Monuments Commission, unveiled a plaque on Omaha Beach to commemorate the RCN contribution. The plaque may be found on the side of a German bunker below the American Military Cemetery at St. Laurent-sur-Mer (near the monument to the US 5th Engineer Special brigade).

The American Military Cemetery at St. Laurent-sur-Mer provides another contrasting method of commemorating those who lost their lives in combat. More than 9,000 men are buried at this large impressive site, which conveys a message of national pride as well as sorrow. Continue east along the coast road to Longues-sur-Mer and the gun battery which fought duels with US and British ships on D-Day. The cruiser HMS *Ajax* silenced the battery firing 114 shells from its 6-inch guns. Direct hits destroyed two of the guns,





damaging the others, one of which began firing again until struck by the guns of a French cruiser. British infantry (50th Division) secured the battery the next day. Three of the guns are still in place at the site and the view of the western end of Gold Beach and the Mulberry at Arromanches provides a visual introduction to our next objective.

Arromanches deserves some of your time. The *Musée de Débarquement* contains an excellent collection of artefacts and the model of the Mulberry with the floating roadway is brilliant. At low tide you can explore several caissons used to create the artificial harbour and the arc of the outer Phoenix Wall is visible at all times. Above the town the view of Gold Beach is extraordinary and the 360° Cinema that offers a well-conceived introduction to the landings and the coastal area is highly recommended.

Before you return to touring the Canadian battlefields visit the Musée Mémorial de la Bataille de Normandie (Battle of Normandy Memorial Museum) on the ring road around Bayeux. The museum is located near the large British Military Cemetery and memorial to British and Canadian soldiers of the Normandy campaign who have no known grave. The collection of military vehicles, uniforms, small arms, letters and photos is outstanding and the Canadian role in the Battle of Normandy receives due attention.

Above: The Mulberry Harbour at Arromanches viewed from the eastern headlands.

Below: A remarkably intact German gun battery remains at Longues-sur-Mer including three large bunkers that still contain their original 150 mm guns.



Road Map The Normandy Bridgehead

