

2014

The British Way of War in North West Europe 1944-45: A Study of Two Infantry Divisions

Devine, Louis Paul

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/3014>

<http://dx.doi.org/10.24382/3911>

Plymouth University

All content in PEARL is protected by copyright law. Author manuscripts are made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the details provided on the item record or document. In the absence of an open licence (e.g. Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher or author.

This copy of the thesis has been supplied on condition that anyone who consults it is understood to recognise that its copyright rests with its author and that no quotation from the thesis and no information derived from it may be published without the author's prior consent.

**THE BRITISH WAY OF WAR IN NORTH WEST EUROPE 1944-45: A STUDY OF
TWO INFANTRY DIVISIONS**

By

LOUIS PAUL DEVINE

A thesis Submitted to Plymouth University
in partial fulfilment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Humanities

May 2013

Louis Paul Devine

The British Way of War in North West Europe 1944-45: A Study of two infantry divisions

Abstract

This thesis will examine the British way of war as experienced by two British Infantry Divisions - the 43rd 'Wessex' and 53rd 'Welsh' - during the Overlord campaign in North West Europe in 1944 and 1945. The main locus of research centres on the fighting components of those divisions; the infantry battalions and their supporting regiments. In order to understand the way the British fought this part of the war, the thesis will consider the British Army's history since 1918: its level of expertise at the end of the First World War; the impact of inter-war changes, and the experience of the early part of the Second World War, as these factors were fundamental in shaping how the British Army operated during the period covered in this study. These themes will be considered in the first chapter. The following seven chapters will study each of the two infantry divisions in turn, to maintain a chronological order. This is so that the experiences of each division can be examined in a logical way, from their initial experiences of combat in late June 1944 through to March 1945. Naturally, their major battles will be considered but so will their minor engagements and day-to-day experiences, as this will give a good, detailed, overview of each division's campaign. This layout of chapters is also convenient for allowing comparisons between the two divisions as the campaign progressed.

This thesis contains several strands of enquiry which will consider how Montgomery's prosecution of the war actually translated to the smaller units of the division (the battalions,

companies, platoons and sections). The historiography for this campaign tends to suggest that the British Army fought the war in a cautious way, and that this approach was characterised by the use of overwhelming material superiority and rehearsed set piece attacks; tactics that were designed not only to destroy the enemy, but also to avoid the heavy casualties of the major battles of the First World War; a factor that was perceived to be vital to the maintenance of fragile infantry morale.

Although the basic premise of a 'cautious' British way of war is generally accepted (along with its attendant emphasis on consolidation of objectives rather than exploitation of opportunities, and a reliance on adherence to lengthy orders), this study will conclude that the way the war was fought at sub-divisional levels was frequently at a pace that did not allow for such caution. Instead, it was characterised by command pressure to achieve results quickly, hasty planning and a reliance on massive artillery and mortar contributions to compensate for deficiencies in anti-tank and armoured support. This thesis will further conclude that a conscious policy of casualty conservation appears not to have been a priority at divisional command level, but was instead a consideration for company, platoon and section commanders and the men that they led.

Table of Contents

	Glossary	7
	Foreword	10
	Introduction	13
Chapter 1	1918-1943: From Great War to Second World War	26
Chapter 2	The 43rd Division's First Action	71
Chapter 3	The 43 rd Division Incorporating Lessons Learned	99
Chapter 4	The 53 rd Division's First Action to Falaise	136
Chapter 5	Colossal Cracks I: The 43 rd Division in Operation Market Garden	163
Chapter 6	Colossal Cracks II: The 53 rd Division in Operation Market Garden and the Ardennes	196
Chapter 7	The 43 rd Division Post Market Garden	215
Chapter 8	The 53 rd Division Post Ardennes: Veritable and Beyond	247
	Conclusion	270
Appendix 'A'	Sketch Maps	285
	Bibliography	300

Acknowledgements

I would like to offer sincere thanks to my supervisor, Dr Harry Bennett, my Director of Studies, who has supported me unstintingly throughout the research and preparation of this thesis with his knowledge, patience and understanding, while at the same time allowing me the latitude to approach this project in my own way. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Kevin Jefferys, my second supervisor, for his unwavering wise counsel and encouragement. I would also like to extend thanks to all the other members of the School of Humanities who have provided encouragement and advice.

During the research and compilation of this thesis I have been expertly assisted by the staff of The National Archives at Kew, for whom no demand seemed unreasonable. I have also been ably assisted and supported by the staff of Plymouth University library, who have provided a level of service which was second to none. I am most grateful for all their efforts.

Author's Declaration

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Graduate Committee.

Word count of main body of thesis: 79,100

Signed:.....

Louis Paul Devine

Date:.....

Glossary

Units - 43rd (Wessex) Infantry Division Battalions

4 th DOR	4 th Battalion, Dorsetshire Regiment
4 th SOMLI	4 th Battalion, Somersetshire Light Infantry
4 th WILTS	4 th Battalion, Wiltshire Regiment
5 th DOR	5 th Battalion, Dorsetshire Regiment
5 th WILTS	5 th Battalion, Wiltshire Regiment
7 th HAMPS	7 th Battalion, Hampshire Regiment
7 th SOMLI	7 th Battalion, Somersetshire Light Infantry
1 st WORC	1 st Battalion, Worcestershire Regiment
8 th MIDDX	1 st Battalion, Middlesex Regiment
5 th DCLI	5 th Battalion, Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry

Units - 53rd (Welsh) Infantry Division Battalions

1 st E.Lancs	1 st Battalion, East Lancashire Regiment
1 st HLI	1 st Battalion, Highland Light Infantry
1 st Ox & Bucks	1 st Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry
1/5 th WEL	1 st Battalion, Welch Regiment
2 nd MONS	2 nd Battalion, Monmouthshire Regiment
4 th RWF	4 th Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers
4 th WEL	4 th Battalion, Welch Regiment
6 th RWF	6 th Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers
7 th RWF	7 th Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers
1 st MAN	1 st Battalion, Manchester Regiment

General Glossary

AGRA	Army Group, Royal Artillery
APIS	Army Photographic Intelligence Section
Arty.	Artillery
AVRE	Armoured Vehicle, Royal Engineers
Bn.	Battalion
BREN	British light machine gun (combination of manufacturers' names, BRno/ENfield)
Coy.	Company
CRAB	Sherman tank fitted with minesweeping equipment
CROCODILE	Churchill tank fitted with flamethrowing equipment
Ey.	Enemy
FRRRA	Field Regiment, Royal Artillery
Fus Bn	Fusilier Battalion (German)
GR	Grenadier Regiment (German)
H-hour	The specific time at which an operation is to commence.
KANGAROO	Tank modified by having its turret removed and used as an improvised armoured personnel carrier.
LAA	Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment
LAD	Local Aid Detachment
MG	Machine Gun
MMG	Medium Machine Gun (generally speaking, a Vickers Machine Gun)
MRRA	Medium Regiment Royal Artillery
Offr.	Officer
'O' Group	Orders Group. Meeting for dissemination of orders.
PIAT	Projector Infantry, Anti-Tank
Pl.	Platoon
RAC	Royal Armoured Corps
RE	Royal Engineers

RECCE	Reconnaissance mission
RSM	Regimental Sergeant Major
RTR	Royal Tank Regiment
Schmeisser	British generic term for German <i>Maschinenpistole 40</i> , or MP 40
SP	Self-Propelled (gun)
Sp.	Support
Spandau	British generic term for German machine gun
Stonk	Artillery or mortar bombardment
WASP	Universal Carrier fitted with flamethrowing equipment
WEASEL	Light, thin-skinned, wide-tracked amphibious transport vehicle

Foreword

This study has evolved as a result my previous research into the British Army's use of specialist armoured vehicles during the Second World War. The first study, completed as a final year dissertation of my undergraduate programme, concentrated on the use of these vehicles on the British and Canadian beaches during the Normandy invasion of 6 June 1944. A second study, conducted as part of a subsequent master's research degree, focussed on the continued use and further development of these vehicles by the Anglo-Canadian forces in North West Europe from 6 June until the end of the Second World War. Both of these studies involved thorough investigations into the rationale behind the development of the vehicles themselves and their use, and sometimes misuse, during the Overlord campaign.

My studies revealed entirely reasonable and logical answers to the research questions that I had posed: that these vehicles had been developed and produced by the British and Canadians to deal with specific combat problems, such as prepared defensive positions and obstacles that would otherwise have been costly in terms of casualties to overcome, and also ensuring that infantry formations were properly supported by armour. At first glance this would seem rather mundane: the British and Canadian armies seem to have identified specific combat challenges and had developed a range of equipment to deal with them. In general, this equipment had performed as it should and so had the desired result: all well and good.

A deeper study of this equipment and its wider context, however, revealed some interesting questions. As early as 1918, the British Army had a range of specialist vehicles and tank attachments that had been developed to overcome problems very similar to those encountered in 1944-45. Why had the British army 'forgotten' this technology between the wars? Why was it not available to army formations until 1944? More questions are revealed when specialist armour in the armies of other nations are considered. The German Army, for instance, had a range of specially produced armoured artillery long before 1939, but its real strength, however, was in its incorporation into armoured divisions as an organic asset.

At first glance the US Army appears to have ignored specialist armoured vehicles, and it is true that, apart from the DD 'swimming' tank, the US Army did not use the designs developed by the British until much later, and in a much more limited way. The US did have its own dedicated specialist armour programme, but it is true that the Americans, in general, did not embrace the use of specialist armour in the same way as her Anglo-Canadian allies. It is worth remembering, however, that the thinly-armoured amphibious Light Tracked Vehicle (known as BUFFALO to the British) was a central component of the US forces in the Pacific campaign where it was used lavishly. Interestingly, this specialist vehicle was not made widely available to the Allies in Europe until 1945.

This very focussed study has revealed an interesting differences in approach to warfare, not just between Allied and Axis forces, but between the two main Allied forces in Europe, but one of the most interesting points in the development and use of these specialist weapons by the British, however, is that their Army appeared to be spending valuable time and resources developing these weapons specifically because they would make the infantryman's task an easier one and so perhaps also represented an effort to reduce

casualties among assaulting formations. Did this, then, represent a component of a 'cautious' British way of war, in which the infantryman was assisted from all sides by massive artillery power, squadrons of tanks and specialist vehicles, and Typhoon fighter bombers sweeping enemy tanks out of the infantryman's path with unlimited salvoes of rockets? These are questions that led to this study. Much of the historiography of the campaign suggests that the British way of war was indeed cautious and calculated to reduce casualties, but the primary sources I had consulted did not always confirm that this was the case. This was something that I felt should to be subjected to critical analysis, and so this project was born.

Introduction

This is a study of how the men of the infantry battalions of two British infantry divisions fought the war in North West Europe from June 1944 onwards.

Much of the history that has been written about this campaign has either been from the 'top down'; to examine command handling of the Overlord campaign as a whole, or has instead examined the main battles in some detail. Both of these approaches are entirely valid and logical, and have resulted in vital contributions to the campaign's historiography. These approaches, however, leave some aspects of the war in North West Europe unexplored; this thesis aims to correct this deficiency by taking a 'history from below' approach and considers the British infantry experience at battalion level over an extended period. This thesis, then, is really an exploration of the war that was experienced by those in the fighting components of a British infantry division from their deployment in France up until the crossing of the River Rhine in 1945. In taking this approach, this thesis directly addresses some of the deficiencies in the existing literature of this theatre of war, and so makes an original contribution to the historiography of the Overlord campaign. Although this thesis tends to corroborate some of what has already been written about this campaign, it also challenges some of the long-standing accepted views. For example, it is generally accepted that in France and Germany the British army fought a 'cautious' type of war under Montgomery's steady hand. This thesis generally supports that view, but only as

far as the preparations for the major battles and operations are concerned. In examining the activities of the divisions over an extended period it has become evident that the British army – at least in the two divisions considered here – were also fighting many smaller battles and engagements that were driven at a fast pace by commanders under pressure to produce results quickly. Under close scrutiny, these smaller engagements, and some of the larger ones too, appear to have been fought in a much less cautious way and sometimes without overwhelming material superiority and little time for planning. This thesis, then, goes some way to revealing the true way of war for the men of two of the infantry divisions of the 21st Army Group.

The divisions chosen for examination have been chosen for their typical ordinariness and their immediate histories. Neither of them had been actively deployed before June 1944, and so could be considered to be the optimum product of the British military system at that time (although they would not have had actual battle experience), and neither would have suffered from battle-related issues, such as deficiencies in manning or poor morale. These were two ‘average’ divisions which retained their original divisional commanders throughout the campaign. Although the experiences of these divisions provide a good representative insight into the British infantryman’s ‘way of war’ in North West Europe, only further similarly detailed studies of the other divisions in that theatre can provide a truly comprehensive view.

Within the chapters below there are many references to ‘the British way of war’; it is worth pausing a moment here to consider the phrase and what is meant by it within the context of this thesis.

Defining the British way of war

The term has its origins in Liddell Hart's 1932 book *The British Way in Warfare*, a collection of essays and lectures in which he describes Britain's strategic considerations to political and economic goals and how these shaped British approaches to warfare, and also how this changed during the First World War. Although the main thrust of his argument is perhaps flawed, there was a contemporary view that the book did much to bring the concept of a distinctly British way in war into mainstream consciousness¹, and this is a view that has endured.²

In 1990 David French published his book *The British Way in Warfare*, in which he examined around three hundred years of British strategic approaches to warfare in a similar way to Hart's original book. His conclusion was that: 'British decision makers pursued the country's best interests, alternating between a navalist approach and a commitment to the continent as appropriate, but always attempting to do so at the least cost (in a broad sense) to Britain.'³ The historical debate here is centred on differing paradigms on strategic warfare. French has considered Clausewitz's opinion and those of other historians, notably Correlli Barnett, G.S. Graham, Michael Howard and Paul Kennedy.⁴

The concept of a 'British way of war' is itself an enormous subject which must consider complex ranges of historical enquiry if the whole is to be understood.⁵ Neilson and

¹ 'No military writer in our time has done more to enlighten public opinion'. George Orwell, *The New Statesman*, 21 November 1942.

² Brian Holden Reid 'Hart, Sir Basil Henry Liddell', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33737>>, [accessed 15 April 2013].

³ *The British Way in Warfare: Power in the International System, 1856-1956*, ed. by Keith Neilson and Greg Kennedy, Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), p. 4.

⁴ David French, *The British Way in Warfare 1699-2000* (London: Unwin, 1990), xiii-xvi.

⁵ Even the term 'British way of War' has attracted considerable debate on what is actually meant by it and how it has evolved since Hart's first use of it. Good discussions on this can be found in Brian Holden Reid's 'The

Kennedy's *British way in Warfare: Power in the International System 1856-1956*, for instance, contains ten essays, each of which explores very different facets of the same subject.

Although this publication was produced in honour of David French it serves as a good illustration of the diversity of historical questions that are generated by the determination of a particularly British way of conflict. Since Liddell Hart's original concept of the way in (or 'of') war, the phrase has come to mean the many different aspects of war, not just the political strategies behind a certain nation's reasons and logic for engaging in military conflict. The British 'way of war' then (or German, or American and so on - the phrase is almost always used in conjunction with a nation name) has come to mean any aspect of how a nation 'does' war.⁶ It can still refer to political strategies – or 'grand' strategies – or it can mean many other aspects of war too.

It is in this context that this thesis sits. It might at first seem a tenuous association between Hart's two centuries of British 'grand strategy' and the man in an infantry battalion, but it must also be considered that it was the men serving in the front line, the farm labourer from Dorset, the clerk from Swansea, the hotel porter from Liverpool, and the young officers that were sent to lead them, that were personally delivering and enforcing Britain's political will in North West Europe from mid-1944 onwards. These were the men – Churchill's 'bayonets' - who had to fight their war in an army that had been shaped by a sequence of political and

British Way in Warfare', *The RUSI Journal*, 156:6, 70-76 (2011); and Ian Speller's 'Corbett, Liddell Hart and the 'British Way in Warfare' in the 1960s.' *Defence Studies*, 8:2, 227-239 (2008).

⁶ Examples: Mark Grotelueschen, *The AEF Way of War: The American Army and Combat in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); James Corum and Richard Muller, *The Luftwaffe's Way of War: German Air Force Doctrine 1911-1945* (Mount Pleasant: Nautical & Aviation, 1998); John Cann, *Counterinsurgency in Africa: The Portugese Way of War 1961-74* (Solihull: Helion, 2013); Robert Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War: How and Why They Fight* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). These 'way of war' discussions are, of course, not limited to early modern or modern periods, Victor Hansen and John Keegan's *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* (California: University of California Press, 2009) discusses very early 'ways of war'.

military decisions in the twenty or so years before they even set foot on continental soil; perhaps before they were even born.

This study, then, explores what Britain's way of war was on the ground in North West Europe from 1944 to the end of the Second World War, and what this meant for the men at the sharp end of Britain's foreign policy. For all the men in the Overlord Campaign, the way of war that they experienced was to be very different from that experienced by the BEF in 1940, or in North Africa, or Burma, or even Italy.

Historiography

The historiography of the Overlord campaign has evolved over the last sixty or so years.⁷ The immediate post war histories were influenced by memoirs of Montgomery and other officers who were involved in the campaign and were generally uncritical of the British participation. Histories such as these, however, were easy targets for later historians, who exposed them to some very critical analysis. This wave of revisionist publications portrayed the British army in a much less flattering light, and often compared the 21st Army Group unfavourably with the German military effort in North West Europe.⁸ Such histories tend to concentrate on the failures and weaknesses of the British contribution to the Campaign, and generally tends to depict the British way of war being characterised by cautious (sometimes overly cautious), rehearsed set-piece engagements supported by overwhelming armoured, artillery and air power.⁹ The pendulum of historiographical debate has, however, recently

⁷ An excellent examination of the historiography of the campaign in North West Europe appears in John Buckley's *Monty's Men: The British Army and the Liberation of Europe* (London: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 4-15.

⁸ Max Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy 1944* (Bungay: Book Club Associates, 1984), pp. 145-150.

⁹ Carlo D'Este is particularly scathing of the British Army in chapter 16 of his book *Decision in Normandy* (London: Penguin, 1994).

begun its return journey with the publication of several excellent books which deal with the Overlord Campaign. In particular, John Buckley's *Monty's Men* and Stephen Hart's *Colossal Cracks* go some way to redressing the balance of historical opinion of the late-war British Army.

Notwithstanding the fluctuating reputation of the British Army, the campaign in France and Germany has been dealt with by the books already mentioned and a host of others, such as Keegan's *Six Armies in Normandy* and John North's *North-West Europe*. The majority of these books, however, are generally a view 'from the top down'. Similarly, there are a number of books which focus on certain operation of the campaign, such as Ken Ford's *Assault Crossing* and *Geilenkirchen*, and Tim Saunders' '*Battleground Europe*' series. These are well researched publications and are particularly useful for their first-hand accounts, but they tend to present the experiences of participant units only for the duration of that particular operation. Also available are divisional histories, such as those written by Patrick Delaforce. These books are useful as they contain a wealth of first-hand accounts, but they are largely descriptive in nature. Viewed as a whole then, the historiography of the campaign does not have a study that takes a 'bottom up' academic enquiry into the experiences of particular units for a continuous period. This study aims to fill this historiographic gap by critically examining the experiences of two British infantry divisions, using their war diaries and published primary sources, for a continuous period from their landing in France up to the crossing of the River Rhine in March 1945. This, it is hoped, will lead to a better understanding of how the battalions of a division and their supporting formations fought their war for a period of nine continuous months. The rationale behind stopping research at the Rhine crossing is that from this point onwards, what remained of

the German field army was beginning to collapse and could no longer provide a properly coordinated defence: 'Opposition more often than not took the form of hastily assembled flying columns consisting of a few tanks, some self-propelled guns, and lorry loads of Panzer Grenadiers.'¹⁰ The future for the *Wehrmacht* from the crossing of the Rhine onwards was certain.

Of the monographs noted above, Stephen Ashley Hart's *Colossal Cracks* concentrates specifically on Montgomery's prosecution of the Overlord campaign and his relationship with his two army commanders, Dempsey and Crerar. Such a book must, almost by definition, comment on the 'way of war' that was imposed by a commander upon his soldiers, and Hart's arguments on Montgomery's way of war are impeccably researched, balanced, and convincing. Ashley Hart, however, acknowledges in his introduction that he does not examine the period 1919-43, scarcely touches the minor tactical level, and that operational analysis needs to explore corps, divisional, and even brigade levels.¹¹ It is intended that this study will go some way, or even act as a starting point, to address these omissions as it will concentrate mainly on the infantry brigades' and battalions' experiences during the campaign.

Some of the main themes of Hart's book are, however, still highly relevant to this study as they represent Montgomery's approach to war in North West Europe. Briefly, these themes are: Maintenance of Morale; Casualty Conservation, and 'Colossal Cracks' (set piece battles and other elements). Broadly speaking, Ashley Hart posits that maintenance of morale and casualty conservation were a feature of Montgomery's considerations for the prosecution of

¹⁰ John North, *North West Europe: The Achievement of 21st Army Group* (London: HMSO, 1977), p. 220.

¹¹ Stephen Ashley Hart, *Colossal Cracks: Montgomery's 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe, 1944-45* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2007), p. 18.

the campaign, and that Montgomery's 'Colossal Cracks' approach was the 'key characteristic of operational technique in conducting the campaign', or, in other words – Monty's 'way of war'.¹² This study will examine to what extent these considerations filtered down to the officers and men of the battalions.

Methodology

Research for this thesis has relied heavily on the war diaries of the component units of the infantry divisions and, those of other units fighting with them. The War Diaries do have their limitations, and these are discussed below. On the other hand, it is arguable that they are the most reliable manuscripts available to the historian conducting research at the level considered by this study. The battalion war diaries have been interrogated in some detail to discover how these battalions fought their war. How much planning and reconnaissance time was allocated to operations of varying size? How did each battalion approach the task it was given? How many casualties did each battalion sustain, and how were they shared between the companies? How did the brigades and battalions deal with these losses? Which events did the war diary authors decide to record or omit? In interrogating the war diaries over a period of roughly nine months through periods of major assault, smaller actions, inactivity and rest periods, an overall picture of the activities of the battalions - their war - can be revealed. Where possible, the war diaries have been compared with published primary sources – eyewitness accounts of those who may augment, challenge, or corroborate what the war diaries record.

Normally compiled by the battalion or unit intelligence officer, the war diaries themselves are variable in what they record and what other documents the compilers chose to retain

¹² Hart, p. 69.

with them. Some battalion diaries might record a day's events by a whole battalion in only one sentence; another may consist of several pages describing a simple attack by a single company. The infantry diaries were often written some time after the events they record, occasionally up to six days later, as the author might often have more pressing demands upon his time. In contrast, the artillery diaries are often more detailed and will give exact timings of key events. This is because their diaries appear to have been compiled relatively quickly from other documents, such as signal logs, held by the unit. Very occasionally, these logs have been retained within the war diary and will give a minute-by-minute record of the day's events. Some units chose to retain related documents, such as maps, aerial photographs, map traces, regimental orders, and special reports written by company commanders. Sadly, although not uncommon, these documents are in the minority. For all their inconsistencies, frustrating omissions, and sometimes impenetrable handwriting, the war diaries are often, however, a very useful research source when viewed as whole. For instance, when a battalion records a day's battle, it might just do so in one line, but often where a company from another battalion is 'loaned', the company commander might have written a detailed report, or his battalion's war diary might give a more comprehensive account. The war diaries of the supporting units, the divisional artillery and support regiment, will also often give further information.

The records of two infantry divisions have been examined.¹³ This has meant that many primary sources have been consulted – a total of 18 infantry battalions and six support regiments (artillery, anti-tank, anti-aircraft, and mortar/machine gun). This is as

¹³ There were eight British infantry divisions deployed in North West Europe, accompanied by one Polish and two Canadian infantry divisions.

representative of the British experience of war at battalion level in the campaign as can be achieved within a study of this size.

Another point to consider when interrogating the war diaries is that they are products of an organisation with its own conventions and unwritten rules, so it is very rare to find outright criticism of other units, and there are very few comments which question higher command, although such things are hinted at or are sometimes to found as 'unwitting testimonies'.

The diaries are also, understandably, often quite good at recording the achievements of the battalion, but not its failings so, where possible, published primary sources have been used to give a balancing perspective.

The British Infantry Division

Before the campaign itself is examined it is worthwhile considering the composition of the divisions that are the subject of this study. In simplified terms, the typical British infantry division of 1944-1945 consisted of a central core of three infantry brigades, each consisting of three infantry battalions. In support of these brigades were a reconnaissance regiment, three field regiments of artillery (25-pounder guns), a regiment of anti-tank artillery¹⁴, a regiment of light anti-aircraft artillery (20mm and 40mm guns), a support regiment equipped with medium machine guns and 4.2" mortars, and a range of field engineers, and army service and medical corps. This was the typical organisation for the British Army infantry divisions for the duration of the campaign in North West Europe. It may be possible to find minor differences in organisation in other divisions, especially in other theatres of war, but this is a reliable illustration of how an infantry division was composed in North West Europe from June 1944 to the end of the Second World War.

¹⁴ Routinely equipped with the 17pr anti tank gun, but later supplied with self-propelled weapons of the same calibre.

Each infantry battalion consisted of a Headquarters company and four rifle companies (each containing three rifle platoons), and a support company (which comprised a mortar, anti-tank¹⁵, carrier, and pioneer platoon). The rifle platoons themselves consisted of a platoon Headquarters, three ten-man rifle sections and a light (2 inch) mortar section. As well as the mortar and their own personal weapons, the crew would carry 30 bombs for the mortar (12 high explosive and 18 smoke).

The rifle sections, the smallest unit level of organisation, consisted of a section leader (usually a corporal), six riflemen, and a light machine gun group. Each section would normally be armed with one 9mm Sten sub machine gun, eight .303 No. 4 Lee Enfield rifles (one per rifleman and two for the LMG group), and one .303 Bren Light Machine Gun. Ammunition was distributed among the section and would typically total 1,400 rounds (1000 for the LMG and 50 for each rifle). 10 grenades (type 36, 69 and 77) were also allocated to each section.¹⁶ The total strength of a battalion was around 845 (36 officers and 809 other ranks).

This then, was the ordinary British soldier's world in 1944. His immediate allegiance was to the men of his section, but he would also have had a very strong identification with those wearing the same cap badge as himself - the rest of his company and also his battalion. At the start of the Overlord campaign he would probably have been able to recognise many of the men in his battalion and would also have known many of them by name. He would have had a sense of belonging which was firmly engendered by the regimental system which, despite the shortcomings outlined in chapter two, was very effective in drawing together

¹⁵ Armed with the 6pr anti tank gun.

¹⁶ *Infantry Training Part VIII – Fieldcraft, Battle Drill, Section and Platoon Tactics* (London: War Office, 1944), p. 39.

those who wore the same unit badges and invoked the traditions and past victories (real or contrived) of the regiment, and who were generally recruited from the same geographical area and shared the same regional accent. One war diary recalls:

When as a largely locally-recruited unit of 43 (Wessex) Div. retained certainly the spirit and traditions of its West Country origin. Notwithstanding the long period of draft-providing, during 1941 and 1942, when both off[ice]rs and ORs had been drained away for service in MEF and INDIA, the voices of Wiltshire and Dorset and Devon could still be heard.¹⁷

The practice of teaming each battalion with two others on a permanent basis also ensured that although soldiers of the other battalions did not wear the same cap badge and so did not share the same regimental cachet, they were familiar with operating with them and would have developed an empathy with them based on sharing the same hardships and successes. This was the composition of the division.

Outline of chapters

The first chapter will examine how the British army had learned from its experiences by the end of the First World War, then consider the effects of political and military factors which shaped the army in the inter-war years. It will then go on to see how the campaigns of the early part of the Second World War affected British military thinking in the preparations to invade North West Europe. The following seven chapters will then examine, in some detail, how the battalions of the 43rd and 53rd infantry divisions went about the business of war and how they were supported. To avoid confusion, each chapter will concentrate on one division, but the chapters alternate between each division to preserve a general

¹⁷ The National Archives (TNA): WO171/985, 24 June 1944

chronological order of events. The concluding chapter will draw the experiences of both divisions together to give some sense of the realities of the battlefield and will explain how the war for the British infantryman in North West Europe was, in terms of pace of continuous operations and the 'drive' of divisional commanders, quite different to what has already been written and accepted.

CHAPTER 1

1918-1943: From Great War to Second World War

This chapter will examine the journey of the army from the apogee of its development in the Great War to its position as it approached the Allied invasion of France. Several themes will be considered; the inter-war political situation; the way in which the army absorbed the lessons of the Great War and responded to the needs of reassuming the role of a colonial police force under financial constraints, and the first few years of the Second World War. Viewed together, these factors are particularly important to this study as they explain the level of expertise the army had achieved by 1918, and how the British government managed to maintain an imperial peacetime army with added responsibilities under financial constraints, and how it 'grew' the army with which it had to fight the Second World War.

In terms of size, development of organisation and tactics, and technological advances, the British Army of 1918 bore little real relation to its pre-1914 incarnation.¹ As far as size was concerned, the army was rapidly and massively increased. In 1914 the BEF consisted of a small professional army of six infantry divisions and one cavalry division, by 1918 there were eighty infantry divisions and eight cavalry divisions on active service; of these, 61 infantry divisions and three cavalry were serving on the western front alone. In terms of increased

¹ The British Army of the First World War has been examined in Richard Holmes' *Tommy* (Hammersmith: Harper, 2005) and a plethora of books by Gary Sheffield, notably *The Chief* (London, Aurum, 2012), *Forgotten Victory* (London: Headline, 2002), and *The Western Front Experience* (London: Carlton, 2012). Artillery development in particular is explored in Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham's *Fire-Power* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2005).

commitment on the Western Front, the British Army's frontage in 1914 was around 25 miles of front, rising to a maximum of 123 miles in the early part of 1918.² In terms of air power the Royal Air Force - nonexistent in 1914 - had become the world's largest air force with 22,000 aircraft.³ At sea, there was little change as the Royal Navy continued to ensure that Britannia ruled the waves with what was then universally acknowledged as the world's premier navy.⁴ In stark contrast, the German army had, for many decades, operated a system of conscription which ensured that most adult males received two years military training which was followed up by periodic 'refresher' training of two months every five years.⁵ Consequently, it could rapidly mobilise its entire military capability to meet the Anglo-French challenge, thereafter training men as they came of age for military service.

There is a persistent and popular post-First World War view that the British Army's operations were characterised by foolhardy and costly mass frontal attacks on heavily-defended German positions, exemplified in battles such as the Somme, Ypres and Passchendaele; much of this view has been attributed to a wave of post-war literary output.⁶ Although there is an element of undeniable truth in this view, it has – along with the 'Lions led by donkeys' myth - largely been debunked by serious historical enquiry.⁷

Furthermore, the sentimentalist viewpoint overlooks the fact that the BEF at every level

² Brian Bond, *British Military Policy between the Two World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 2-6.

³ For a general Royal Flying Corps history, see Ralph Barker's *A Brief History of the Royal Flying Corps in World War One* (London: Robinson, 2002). On the precarious formation of the Royal Air Force, see John Sweetman's 'Crucial Months for Survival: The Royal Air Force 1918-1919' *The Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (July 1984), pp. 529-547.

⁴ Correlli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (London, Methuen, 1972), p. 73. Further reading on naval aspects of the Great War include Geoffrey Bennett's *Naval Battles of the First World War* (London: Penguin, 2002), Paul Halpern's *A Naval History of World War I* (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 2012), and David MacGregor's 'The Use, Misuse, and Non-Use of History: The Royal Navy and the Operational Lessons of the First World War' *Journal of Military History*, 56, (October 1992).

⁵ Martin Middlebrook, *The First Day on the Somme: 1 July 1916* (London, Penguin, 1971), p. 57.

⁶ Good examples of this are given in John Keegan's *The Face of Battle* (London, Pimlico, 2004), pp. 280-284.

⁷ See Ferguson's *Pity of War*, Corrigan's *Mud, Blood and Poppycock*; Sheffield's *Forgotten Victory* and *The Somme*.

learned valuable, if costly, lessons from its Western Front experience. Britain's armies on the Western Front had become highly skilled in assault tactics, having been engaged in continuous offensive operations since 1916. Furthermore, they had also spent most of the war pursuing an aggressive policy of dominating the area known as 'no-man's-land', mainly with trench raids, many of them in considerable strength, and patrols. Their French and German counterparts, meanwhile, were perhaps more frequently content to take a relatively reactive stance. The British view of 'quiet' periods in trench warfare was that they '...are to be utilised not for passive defence but for exhausting the enemy's troops and for training all branches in future operations'.⁸ These raids and patrols will again become a characteristic feature of the British way of war examined later in this study.

By 1918, through hard-won experience, the BEF had matured in its approach to battle tactics, and was realising the potential of a combination of traditional and novel use of massed artillery with infantry. Artillery in particular had become the most important part of the Army's fighting system. Although superiority in numbers was still an important factor, it was not simply a matter of amassing enough guns to bludgeon the enemy out of existence - new technology and new ideas gave British artillery an edge on the battlefield. Aircraft artillery spotters in contact with the guns by wireless allowed the gunners to engage targets that previously had been hidden in 'dead ground'. Furthermore, developments in sound-ranging permitted almost immediate location of enemy guns as soon as they were fired, enabling rapid and effective retaliation which subdued the enemy's artillery effort.⁹

Improvements were also made to the projectiles themselves; new shell fuses ensured that

⁸ Charles Messenger, *Trench Fighting 1914-19* (London: Pan/Ballantine, 1973), p. 65.

⁹ Michael V. Namorato, 'A Concise History of Acoustics in Warfare', *Applied Acoustics*, 59(2), (2000), pp. 101-135.

defensive wire obstacles could be more effectively destroyed, and the reliability of the shells was greatly improved, resulting in far fewer 'duds'.¹⁰

The British Army was also embracing other areas of new technology in the form of tanks.¹¹

Early tank designs were quickly improved upon and modified to provide specialist armoured support in the form of engineer tanks, armoured personnel carriers,¹² and self-propelled artillery.¹³ Tactics for tank fighting were also rapidly developed and the need for close cooperation between tanks and infantry was recognised and implemented with impressive results. Corporal Jack Dillon of the 2nd Battalion Tank Corps recalls assaulting the

Hindenburg line:

Our artillery had pinpointed the German artillery to stop them firing at the tanks. We had some form of tactical manoeuvre because there were plenty of tanks on the ground...the idea was to select a trench and at point X, the leading tank would cross and then move up to the next trench. The next two tanks would cross over the same fascine and turn right and left, clearing the trenches on each side. The last tank would follow along and overtake the first one so that the process could be repeated at the next line of trenches. The process of clearing the trench on each side was fairly simple...the tank would stop half way across the trench and fire a few rounds of 6-pounder down it, and that cleared it all right. The infantry would then come up and take over. As regards crossing the barbed wire, this was a miracle to see. The tanks cleared the wire for the crossing of large numbers of people by driving into it two abreast, dropping in steel anchors and then turning away from each other and going down the length of the wire. There wasn't a scrap of anything left, not even weeds.¹⁴

Jack Dillon's account clearly indicates that the British had embraced the possibilities that the tank offered. These tanks were not simply mobile pillboxes; they were used in conjunction

¹⁰ The dangerous 'Fuse, Graze, 100' was responsible for most of the premature detonations in Royal Artillery guns and depots, and was responsible for around a third of the unexploded shells in the barrage for the First Battle of the Somme. It was replaced by a British copy of a French design early in 1917. Mike Chappell, *The British Army in World War I (2): The Western Front 1916-18* (Oxford: Osprey, 2005), pp.13-15.

¹¹ A comprehensive discussion on British use of tanks and their development during the First World War can be found in J.P Harris's *Men, ideas and tanks: British military thought and armoured forces, 1903-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

¹² David Fletcher, *Vanguard of Victory: The 79th Armoured Division* (London: HMSO, 1984), pp. 8-13.

¹³ B.T. White, *British Tanks and Fighting Vehicles 1914-1945* (London: Allan, 1971), pp. 239-240.

¹⁴ Max Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of the Great War* (London: Ebury, 2003), pp. 248-9.

with artillery infantry as part of a system to overcome the defensive measures that had served the Germans so well.

In the air, the British had also made improvements, and had produced a range of modern aircraft in such numbers that air superiority over the Germans was established, enabling artillery spotting to be carried out with little interference. Importantly, the Royal Flying Corps (the Royal Air Force from 1 April 1918) also dedicated an increasing effort to ground support tactics. The RFC commander, Hugh Trenchard, firmly believed that: 'No call from the Army must ever find the RFC wanting'.¹⁵

Moreover, the British had learned to use all these arms of weaponry in concert as a weapons 'system' and adapting their use to reach a solution to each particular objective.¹⁶

The validity of this approach, which relied on inter-arm co-operation, is illustrated by an assault on the Hindenburg line in September 1918 where, in one sector, an assault was carried out by a joint Australian-US force (a potent mixture of elite and fresh troops) which was supported by a powerful but flawed artillery fire plan. Their assault was not a full success, but to their south, an assault by the 46th (North Midland) Territorial Division, an average formation with a chequered history - certainly not an 'elite' formation – made full use of savage, surprise artillery bombardments and high-quality intelligence reports to force a comprehensive defeat over the enemy; and this assault also involved a difficult canal crossing. The British way of war in 1918, even though considered by some to be 'a

¹⁵ J.P. Harris and Niall Barr, *Amiens to the Armistice: The B E F in the Hundred Days' Campaign, 8 August – 11 November 1918* (London: Brassey's, 1998), p. 50.

¹⁶ *British Fighting Methods in the Great War*, ed. by Paddy Griffith, (London: Cass, 1998), pp. 61-62.

superficial imitation of developing German tactics',¹⁷ allowed average conscript 'citizen soldier' troops to realize their full potential in taking objectives in a way that would have been unthinkable only a year previously. Surely, the British Army had found their war-winning formula.

The aforementioned British public perception of the First World War has tended to overlook the professional development and achievements of the British Army and forget its role in containing the last major German offensive, and the last 'hundred days' of 1918. In this time, the Americans, Belgians and French forces combined took a total of 197,700 prisoners and captured 3,775 guns; the British Army, with fewer men at its disposal than just the French Army alone, took 188,700 prisoners and 2,840 guns.¹⁸ This was an army, despite the casualties it had suffered and the mistakes it had made, which was at the top of its game. Its citizen soldiers, although not professional, had the *system* that would enable success; its General Staff had made the transition from Victorian empire policing to waging modern continental war.

Sophistication of tactics

The British way of war in 1918 was not just about its fighting system; there is evidence that British military sophistication extended into other factors, such as deceptive measures. For example, the Canadian Corps, known by the Germans to be a fresh and strong formation and therefore whose presence in any area would indicate a likely point of attack, was the subject of an ingenious deception plan in the build up to the assault at Amiens in 1918. The main Canadian force was moved to the Amiens area in preparation for the attack, but a

¹⁷ Dominick Graham, *Against Odds: Reflections on the experiences of the British Army 1914-45* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p. 28.

¹⁸ Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War: Myths and Realities* (London: Headline, 2002), p. 263.

small formation was left in the Corps' base at Arras to generate false radio traffic. This measure was good enough to fool not only the German Army (a captured map prepared for the opposing German army group clearly indicated the Canadians to be at Arras), but also the Canadians' Australian neighbours who were surprised to find them on their flank.¹⁹

The British high command had realised that major war-ending breaches of the strongly-defended and continuous German lines of defence simply could not be achieved without high cost. Instead, ascendancy was achieved over their enemy by the application of force in many different areas, which forced the Germans to increasingly use their assets on a 'fire brigade' basis, and so were frequently wrong-footed and unable to form a cohesive counter-effort. Consequently, the Germans were forced to yield ground until they could reach the in-depth prepared defensive position of the Hindenburg line. This represents the establishment of tactics that tended to avoid large-scale frontal assaults which were costly in terms of casualties. Generally speaking, this idea of keeping the enemy 'off balance' has a resonance in Montgomery's prosecution of the war during Operation Overlord, but, conversely, Montgomery's concept of 'Colossal Cracks' tends to reinforce the idea of the large-scale attacks of 1916 onwards.²⁰

By 1918, British commanders were acutely aware of the need to reduce casualties and were keen to avoid previous mistakes. The casualties that had been sustained earlier in the war were now politically unacceptable; more importantly, these casualties were becoming difficult to replace; one consequence of this developing manpower shortage was the reduction in the size of infantry brigades from four battalions to three²¹ (a measure which

¹⁹ Sheffield, pp. 239-40.

²⁰ Hart, p. 70.

²¹ Richard Holmes, *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front 1914-1918* (London: Harper, 2004), p. 177.

has a 1944 parallel when Montgomery was forced to disband a number of Infantry divisions to resupply others with replacement infantrymen). A more cautious ethos in offensive operation had evolved, of setting objectives that were more realistically achievable. Furthermore, commanders were careful not to overreach themselves in situations where their forces unexpectedly penetrated deeper into enemy territory. In short, commanders were encouraged to consolidate what they had won; this was to be a characteristic feature of British doctrine during the Overlord campaign, and would result in some missed opportunities.

The British dependence on massed artillery and ferocious barrages meant that the BEF logistics organisation not only had to be effective enough in supplying the huge amounts of ammunition required for its infantry attacks; it also had to develop the capacity to provide the same level of ammunition supply deep into newly-captured areas – a genuine novelty until the latter half 1918.²² This logistics headache, arguably as important as fighting tactics, would continue to plague the 21st Army group as it advanced across France and Germany in 1944-45.

In the final year of the Great War, the BEF had to rapidly respond to the changing nature of war on the western front from static trench warfare to more fluid open operations. That it managed this in what proved to be the last hundred days of the conflict is, in itself, remarkable and bears testament to the high state of sophistication and flexibility of thought of the army at that time. The extent to which the army had evolved into a true 20th Century modern continental field force is well- illustrated by an account given by Captain D.V. Kelly

²² Jonathan Boff, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front: The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 80.

of the 6th Leicesters. This is a lengthy quote, but it is worth reproducing in full as it gives a valuable view from an officer who had seen these improvements evolve, and was responsible for implementing them in his battalion:

[This attack] gave a striking proof of the enormous advance made by the new British Army in the technique of warfare, for it was a small masterpiece achieved with one tenth of the casualties it would assuredly cost us in 1916. The long western-front of the village, which appeared the main line of approach, was defended by numerous well-concealed pits for riflemen and machine guns, and had we been attacking in the 1916 method the course of events would probably have been as follows. A tremendous artillery bombardment, perhaps for two days, would have annihilated the village and churned up the ground, and at zero hour our troops would have advanced in waves across the belt of land commanded by the various posts who, as our barrage passed on behind them, would have opened a murderous direct fire on them and taken an enormous toll of casualties. Very possibly we should never have reached the village, but consolidated a line of shellholes a few hundred yards beyond the starting-point, from which a fresh attack would have been delivered perhaps several days later.

By September 1918, however we had acquired an improved technique. The Western side of the village was left severely alone, and the attack was arranged for the northern end of the village, a procedure which involved in itself a movement and assembly by night which would have been difficult for inexperienced officers. The artillery fired numerous periodic 'crashes', and their support at zero was arranged to appear merely a repetition of one of these and did not specially indicate the time or direction of the attack. Under cover of complete darkness the village was rushed and the defences taken in the rear, the whole affair being a complete surprise... It is very important to remember that the artillery had improved their technique just as had the staffs and the infantry: in 1916 one could hardly have relied on the accuracy and exact synchronization, which one had now learned to expect, required for such an operation.²³

Captain Kelly's account clearly differentiates between the 1916 and 1918 methods of assault, and gives an illuminating illustration of just how far the British had developed their fighting technique to achieve success. In this account, like Corporal Dillon's above, artillery is regarded as an essential part of the system, and is used coherently rather than as a simple blunt instrument to destroy the defenders.

The final year of the Great War, 1918, had seen the British army and its allies repulse Germany's last but powerful offensive 'Operation Michael' and followed this with victory

²³ Sheffield, pp. 260-261.

after victory until the armistice of 11 November. A contributory factor in some of these victories was without doubt the diminishing capabilities of the Imperial German Army, but it must be remembered that this army was far from a spent force and continued to be better at 'killing its enemies' than the Allies.²⁴ Furthermore, there was evidence that German resistance was stiffening as it reached the borders of the Fatherland.²⁵ It is evident, however, that the main factor was that the volunteer British army had made the transition from its traditional role of colonial policing to waging continental warfare on a scale it had never before envisaged with conscripted men. The crucible of this continental war had transformed the British army into a strong and highly sophisticated organisation capable of taking on, pound-for-pound, the best that the Imperial German Army had to offer. It would be too simplistic to say that that the British Army of 1944 required the same skills as the British Army of 1918, but there are compelling parallels; both of these campaigns consisted of a series of assaults against a retreating German Army that favoured well-prepared defences combined with large numbers of machine guns; the British assaults relied heavily on the use of massed and sophisticated artillery bombardments, and both campaigns took place at a time when Britain was experiencing an alarming shortage of infantrymen.

In the immediate post-Great War period the army was keen to reflect on from the lessons it had learned, and duly set up the Committee on the Organisation of the After War Army to investigate its previous shortcomings and propose possible solutions. The committee reported its findings in late July 1919 and acknowledged that the pre-war concept of a small professional army, capable of being adapted as an expeditionary force for minor conflicts was still valid. It also, however, rejected the pre-war idea of such an expeditionary force

²⁴ Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 313.

²⁵ Ferguson, *Pity of War*, p. 314.

being composed mainly of regular troops with a territorial force in reserve. Instead, the committee proposed a standing army of 20 divisions, with each division being capable of 'throwing-off' a second division once a state of general mobilisation was under way; such an army would necessitate an estimated annual recruitment of at least 150,000 men. The post-war politico-economic situation, however, dictated that this was unlikely to occur.

Political and Military factors in stagnation of the army in the inter-War Period: The 'Ten Year Rule', Geddes Report, and Imperial commitments

In the early part of 1919 the need to reduce naval and military expenditure had become the overriding factor in post-Great War defence policy. Accordingly, the 'Ten Year Rule', essentially a dictum from the Cabinet to the Service Departments on August 15 1919, stated that: 'It should be assumed, for framing revised Estimates, that the British Empire will not be engaged in any great war during the next ten years, and that no Expeditionary force is required for this purpose.'²⁶ This effectively negated the need for a large continental force.²⁷

Although it is likely that the Ten Year Rule was only intended to be borne in mind for the next year's estimates, it was quickly adopted on a permanent basis, as it was used as a guideline for the 1921 Committee on national Expenditure, revised in 1927, when it was amended to read: 'it should be assumed for the purpose of the Estimates that the British Empire will not be engaged in an European war during the next ten years and that the

²⁶ The National Archives (TNA): CAB 23/15.

²⁷ A detailed explanation of the 'Ten Year Rule' can be found in: John Ferris, 'Treasury Control, the Ten Year Rule and British Service Policies, 1919-1924', *The Historical Journal*, 30, 4 (1987), pp. 859-883.

immediate plans for the army should be based upon preparedness for an extra-European war.²⁸

On July 5 1928, the rule was once more modified by cabinet approval: 'That it should be assumed for the purpose of framing the Estimates for the Fighting Services that at any given date there will be no major war for ten years'. And went on to state that: This assumption should be reviewed annually by the Committee of Imperial defence before the Estimates are drawn up'.²⁹ In this incarnation, the yearly automatic 'renewal' was established and would remain in force until at least 1932.

The Committee on National Expenditure was formed in 1921 under the chairmanship of Sir Eric Geddes; the committee reported its recommendations regarding defence cutbacks the following year and these subsequently became known as 'The Geddes Report'.³⁰ The committee had to take into account all relevant factors, but the 'ten year rule' was perhaps one of the most important and influential. The main resulting proposals were:

- A reduction in Army manpower of 50,000.
- Savings as a result of new manpower-saving technology (tanks and air power).
- Comprehensive reductions in auxiliary services.
- A reduction in Army expenditure estimates from £75 million to £55 million.³¹

The Army responded with a vigorous argument against these proposals, but succeeded in winning only a few small concessions before they were duly approved: only 22 rather than the recommended 28 Infantry battalions were disbanded and the cavalry arm was reduced

²⁸ TNA: CAB 23/55.

²⁹ TNA: CAB 23/58.

³⁰ Wider implications for the armed forces can be found in: *Government and the Armed Forces in Britain 1856-1990*, ed. by Paul Smith (London: Hambledon, 1996), pp.121-125.

³¹ Bond, p. 26.

from 28 to 20 regiments. Lastly, seven, rather than the recommended nine, battalions were withdrawn from Empire garrison forces.

In the immediate post-Great War years and well into the 1930s, the armed forces, but the Army in particular, were forced to cut back on expenditure across the whole spectrum of its operational capabilities by the two main factors of the ten year rule and the Geddes report. It is true that at this time that there existed no military threat in Europe, as Germany had been militarily disabled (but still required a garrison force), and there was no other logical enemy in Europe; the only other potential enemies being, perhaps, the USA or even Japan.³² Between them, the ten year rule and the Geddes report provided a political context in British defence expenditure right up until it became clear that Hitler's ambitions in Europe could only be challenged by military force.

So much for European continental threats; Britain had commitments elsewhere and the post-1918 empire was a very different neighbourhood to police. Independence movements in the colonies had been invigorated by the First World War. Many sons of the Empire had paid for European freedom with their blood and wanted their own right to self determination. It was by now clear in the colonies that the British soldier was not invincible and, as the whole world could plainly see in any newspaper, was unable to enforce British political will in Britain's own back yard – Ireland. The potential for unrest in India was taken seriously enough to be cited as one of the factors highlighted by the War Office in its reply to the Geddes report.³³

³² Barnett, pp. 256-7.

³³ TNA: CAB 24/132.

In addition to its pre-1914 Empire, Britain had other territory to administer; notably the League of Nations 'mandated' regions of Tanzania, Iraq and Palestine. These would prove to be troublesome beats for Imperial policemen. As early as mid-1920 there was nationalist unrest in Iraq which was only suppressed with a reinforcing force of nineteen infantry battalions hastily sent from India. In addition to domestic troubles, a substantial part of the most productive area of Iraq, the Mosul Vilayet, was threatened by Turkish ambitions. This threat resulted in a substantial (32 Infantry battalion) garrison, a force which would be impossible to sustain on a permanent basis. From 1922, however, once the control of Iraq had been transferred to the Colonial Office, increasing use of air power was made to subdue internal disorder.³⁴ This novel use of the Royal Air Force was largely backed and encouraged by Winston Churchill, who sought to drastically reduce defence expenditure in Mesopotamia. This, for the time, relatively radical use of military air power produced remarkably successful results. Installation of eight RAF squadrons with nine battalions of British and Indian Infantry, with light artillery and some armoured cars under the sole control of an RAF officer, allowed the existing garrison to be gradually reduced until the last Army units were removed in 1929.³⁵ This novel combination of air power and armoured vehicles in lieu of infantrymen on the ground represented a colossal saving to the British tax payer – from over £20 million in 1921-22 to just over £1.75 million in 1927-28.³⁶ To those seeking to reduce the costs incurred by maintaining a large standing infantry arm by

³⁴ John O'Connell, *The Effectiveness of Air Power in the 20th Century: Part One (1914-1939)*, (US: iUniverse, 2007), pp. 182-185.

³⁵ The RAF stayed on in an official capacity until 1932, but its continued presence after that preserved a deterrent to insurrection in Iraq. David Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force 1919-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 31-37.

³⁶ Bond, p 16. Incidentally, the success of the operations and the savings made, effectively saved the RAF from being abolished and subsumed into its parent forces.

replacing them with newer aerial and armoured technology, this was an attractive and compelling precedent, and could not be easily argued against.

In another British mandate, Palestine, the potential for internal disorder was always going to be high due to conflicting British promises to both Arab nationalists and Jewish Zionists. The situation is illustrated by a War Office memorandum of 1922:

It is only the presence of sufficient numbers of British troops that secures the lives and property of the Jewish minorities, and the present garrison is barely sufficient for the purpose. In the event of co-ordinated attack by the Arabs, assisted as they might be by their kinsmen from Trans-Jordania, the garrison would be insufficient, and reinforcements would be required. These might well amount to *the infantry of a division and a cavalry brigade*, though artillery might be on a reduced scale [italic in original].³⁷

Clearly, in Palestine, the presence of British troops was considered essential to the maintenance of order, and this was to remain the case for some time despite the costs involved. On the other hand, in Persia, the problem of providing a military commitment was solved in 1921 by simply removing the garrison.

Similarly, in 1918 20,000 British troops were assigned to assist the Russian White Army, but as this was unpopular with the British at home (the Labour Triple Alliance ‘...proposed shortly to declare a general strike with a view to compelling the Government to withdraw at once all our troops in Russia and to refrain in future from all interference in the affairs of that country’),³⁸ the Cabinet authorised a complete withdrawal of troops by 1920.

As well as involvement in these areas, the British Army had its Imperial commitments to fulfil. In practice, this meant a standing force available for deployment within India or on its frontiers. The British Army met this commitment largely through the Cardwell System; an

³⁷ TNA: CAB 24/132.

³⁸ TNA: CAB 23/15.

arrangement introduced in the 1870s where, typically, a regiment was split into two battalions, one of which would serve overseas and the other would train on home service. Theoretically, this would provide enough manpower to garrison India (supplementing the 'proper' Indian Army) and also provide enough troops on home service to deal with a national emergency or form an expeditionary force if required. In practice it often proved impossible, due to recruiting and other problems, to maintain the strength of the 'home' battalion. A leading military commentator, Colonel Henderson, described the home battalions as 'squeezed lemons' and also commented that the 'real' army could only be seen in India.³⁹ This system was suspended for the duration of the First World War but reintroduced in 1918. From then onwards the Cardwell system struggled to cope with the Army's involvement overseas with the result that the 'home' battalions were strained to the limit to provide replacement drafts for the overseas battalion. This left the army with very little capability to form any sort of continental Expeditionary force from what remained of the home battalions without a considerable and radical shift in the size of the army. These factors illustrate how, due to changing commitments, the army had to quickly 'forget' how it fought the First World War, and adapt to respond to a different set of circumstances, and while this was not done 'on the cheap', it was certainly done with what the government felt it could afford rather than what the army wanted.

The Inskip report and 'Limited Liability'

The concept of 'Limited Liability' was to dominate the years leading up to the outbreak of war in 1939. Towards the latter part of the inter-war years Britain found herself in the unenviable position of facing several geographically diverse threats: in the Mediterranean,

³⁹ Bond, p. 100.

from Italy, in the Far East, from Japan, and in Europe from Germany. Furthermore, a tenuous and often overlooked long-standing threat to India from Russia, latterly the Soviet Union, continued to compel the Indian Army to keep a watchful eye on its northern frontier territories.

The armed forces of the British Empire could not hope to confront all of these threats, or perhaps even a combination of two of them, simultaneously. These threats, then, had to be rationalised and placed in an order of importance; the resulting Inskip report favoured a strategy known as 'limited liability', the basic premise of which was a cap of £1.5 billion spending on the armed forces over five years, and the establishment of defence priorities. The first two of these priorities were: 'two principal objectives, namely, to protecting this country against attack, and to preserving the trade routes on which we depend for essential imports of food and raw material.'⁴⁰ The third objective was: 'the maintenance of forces for the defence of British territories overseas, against attack by sea, land or air.', and went on to qualify this proposal: 'One of the main features which distinguishes our defence problems from those of certain Continental countries is that we require not only to maintain in peace garrisons and defences at naval bases and other strategic points throughout the world, but also to have available at all times forces for despatch overseas for the performance of what may be described as Imperial Police duties.'⁴¹ (It is entirely reasonable to assume that the 'certain Continental country' implied France). If this was not an explicit enough illustration of British reluctance to become involved in continental war, the final proposal was quite clear: 'Our fourth objective, which can only be provided after the other objectives have

⁴⁰ TNA: CAB 24/273.

⁴¹ TNA: CAB 24/273.

been met, is co-operation in the defence of the territories of any allies we may have in war.⁴²

The Inskip report went on to detail the role of the Army and its proposed limited continental commitment: 'the Continental hypothesis ranks fourth in order of priority and the primary role of the Regular Army becomes the defence of Imperial commitments, including anti-aircraft defence at home...it has, I understand, been suggested that France no longer looks to us in the event of war to supply an expeditionary force on the scale hitherto proposed in addition to our all-important co-operation on the sea and in the air.'⁴³

This report established the framework within which Britain's armed services were expected to work in the run up to the Second World War. As can be seen from the report's order of precedence, the defence expenditure 'winners' were always, and rightly so if these proposals were to be properly implemented, going to be the RN and the RAF, with the Army (Territorial and Regular) trailing a poor third with its Imperial policing and home anti-aircraft obligations taking precedence over any commitment to fighting a war in continental Europe.

These, then, were the salient political factors which were to determine the development of the British Army between the wars. Why were they so vigorously imposed? In answering this question it must be remembered that, just as in the rest of Europe, the Great War cast a long shadow in Britain; there was a prevailing sentiment across the population of 'never again' and there existed a general reluctance among politicians of every political hue to become involved in European entanglements which might result in another costly and

⁴² TNA: CAB 24/273.

⁴³ TNA: CAB 24/273.

damaging war. If there was little political will among British politicians to become involved in a European war, there was even less appetite among the electorate to, once again, 'do their bit'. The British public had not only become sick of war, they would not vote for any politician who appeared to be in any way a 'sabre rattler'. Notwithstanding this anathema for war, the British government simply could not *afford* to rearm for war in Europe; the effects of the great depression meant that the government had to spend a great deal of the national income on providing for its unemployed.

The evidence that the British government was to some degree complicit in the neglect of the armed forces, and particularly the army is compelling. There is no underlying accusation here that the inter-war administrations were in any way reckless or malicious in limiting defence expenditure. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any government being able to handle the unique problems facing Britain and the Empire between the wars in a way which could have preserved a cutting-edge British field army capable of continental commitment at short notice. On the other hand, however, the 'neglect of the Army conveniently served the larger purpose of obviating the very possibility of a Continental commitment'.⁴⁴ It would be easy for any soldier serving between the wars, of course, to blame Britain's politicians for the shortcomings of the Army; the following section examines how the Army dealt with the inter-war years and how culpable *it* was for its own state in 1939.

⁴⁴ Talbot Imlay, *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics, and Economics in Britain and France 1938-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 79.

Inter-war doctrine of the British Army

As we have seen, by the end of the First World War, the British Army was at a high state of sophistication; it was tactically superior to its principal enemy, enjoyed accomplished inter-arm co-operation, and fully embraced the cutting-edge technologies of armoured warfare and air power. By 1939, despite hurried but determined efforts to modernise the army, the British Army was outclassed in all the fields in which it once excelled. A lack of defence expenditure cannot be the sole cause of this tactical and technological atrophy.

The British Army established and disseminated what amounted to be its doctrine (although there was, in fact, no central 'official' doctrine) with the issuing of a number of *Field Service Regulations* (FSR). This manual, although prepared by the Director of Staff Duties at the War Office, reflected the wider opinion of the General Staff, as its first draft was usually compiled by an officer from outside the War Office and which was circulated around not only the War Office, but also the various GOC-in-Cs, and the Staff College for examination and comment. Between 1918 and 1939 four editions of FSR were issued (1920, 1924, 1929, and 1935); this alone would tend to suggest the War Office was in many ways keen to learn from the lessons of the last war and develop still further the 'British way of war', especially when it is considered that the *Reichswehr* produced only two comparable publications (in 1921 and 1933), as did the French – widely considered to possess Europe's premier army – with two editions of its *Instructions on the Tactical Employment of Large Units*.⁴⁵ This view of British compilation of experience must, however, must be tempered with knowledge that

⁴⁵ The *Reichswehr's* two publications, *Führung und Gefecht* (1921) and *Truppenführung* (1933) are both similar in their emphasis on the principles of mobility and combined arms (Richard Dinero, *Germany's Panzer Arm in WWII* (Mechanicsburg, Stackpole, 2006). p.95). The later edition remained the cornerstone of German military doctrine until 1945. France's *Instruction Provisoire sur l'emploi Tactique des Grandes Unites* were issued in 1921 and 1936 and concentrated on a defensive doctrine, but incorporated adjustments for technological innovation, including the Maginot defence system. (J.E. Kaufmann and H.W. Kaufmann, *Fortress France: The Maginot Line and French Defenses in WWII* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2007). pp. 4-50.

although the FSR were compiled with the best of intentions by senior officers who had personal experience of command in the last war, the War Office made no *official* attempt to identify, catalogue, and synthesise the lessons of the First World War at its immediate end; there was no office or department specifically dedicated to this task as there had been at the end of the Boer wars.⁴⁶ This oversight was only corrected in 1932, surely too late to be properly effective for an army that was by then far removed from its past campaigns.

So, what were the main components of British Army doctrine between the wars? One of the overarching factors, was that, although there was no logical European enemy to deal with, and the immediate challenges that the army had to face were a series of Imperial policing-type conflicts, the doctrine contained within the FSR was still aimed at fighting a war against a competent western-style enemy in a worst-case scenario. This tends to suggest that the General Staff were at least committed to maintaining the army's capabilities rather than simply reacting to the immediate tasks at hand.

All of the inter-war editions of the *Field Service Regulations* differed significantly from the pre-1914 edition in as much as they stressed the importance of close co-operation between all arms of service fighting together in a system, rather than the artillery and cavalry arms merely supporting the infantry. This is clear evidence that the army was not only willing to learn from its mistakes in the Great War but was also committed to establishing these principles as standard all-arms operational procedures for future conflicts. The Field Service Regulations contained eight broad principles (each edition listed them in different order, however) upon which they all generally agreed:

⁴⁶ Bond, p. 36.

- Maintenance of the objective (destruction of the enemy's principal force in the field).
- Offensive action (success could only be achieved through offensive operations).
- Surprise.
- Concentration of the strongest possible force at the crucial point.
- Economy of Effort.
- Security against enemy attack.
- Mobility.
- All-arms co-operation.⁴⁷

As well as establishing a doctrine based on rationalising the experiences of the army in the First World War, the differences in the inter-war editions of the Field Service Regulations from the 1909 edition also point towards a more progressive line of military thought among a General Staff. This does not mean that there were no conservative elements still within the army but it does point to a general willingness to identify and apply innovative operational practice. The army's approach of establishing a set of well thought-out principles from within its own general staff and promulgating the resulting doctrine in the form of the Field Service Regulations was sound enough. How that doctrine was subsequently interpreted and implemented was more problematic.

Although the doctrine of the British Army was perhaps well thought out, it was hamstrung by the command and control system in place in the army at the time. Partly as a result of tradition and partly as a result of Great War experiences, the high command was committed to a strategy of trying to impose some sort of order over the confusion experienced in

⁴⁷ David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany 1919-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 16-17.

battle. This strategy relied heavily on strict adherence to highly-detailed 'master plans' drawn up by the senior officer, and tended to negate or discourage junior commanders from employing their own initiative when dealing with unexpected circumstances. This highly autocratic system, although it tended to stifle free thought among more junior officers, allowed latitude in thought at the higher end of the command system. The army's senior officers, perhaps because of a prevailing British attitude of 'distaste for allowing their actions to be dictated by abstract ideas', and a resistance to the 'enforced pursuit of collective ends, however noble'⁴⁸ were free to interpret and implement the Field Service Regulations as they saw fit. In addition, the tradition that commanders trained the troops that they controlled in battle ensured that War Office training instructions could be translated to the detriment of their original intent, and also ensured that training of a common level and manner was virtually impossible to achieve.

Although the General Staff did acknowledge the weaknesses inherent in the existing command and control system, it tried, but ultimately failed to achieve, a good working balance between an autocratic leadership (which was intended to ensure optimum all arms co-operation) and allowing subordinate commanders freedom to act according to operational demands. Subordinate officers were still required to report changes in circumstances and await amended orders. Such an approach could only inhibit an ethos of exploitation of opportunities in battle.

Another major factor inherent in the prevailing inter-war doctrine was also a result of Great War experience; the British army placed great emphasis on the consolidation of territory won in attacks rather than exploiting opportunities presented by a weakened or

⁴⁸ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p. 21.

disorganised enemy. This was mainly as a result of experience gained in operations, where assaulting troops continued their pursuit of what appeared to be a routed enemy (and in doing so became disorganised themselves), and were often subjected to immediate and strong German counter attacks which frequently recaptured the initial British objective. The Field Service Regulations, then, subsequently reflected a British preoccupation with capture and consolidation of limited objectives rather than an ethos of deft but merciless exploitation of opportunities presented by a wrong-footed enemy.

Training

Underlying the Army's doctrine as contained in the Field Service Regulations, there co-existed with it another, older, deep-seated and firmly established doctrine of the traditional army 'way of doing things' ; the regimental system. Importantly, although the Army recognised the value of independent thought among its lower ranks, it consistently instilled in them a sense of unquestioning obedience at the expense of freedom of initiative. In 1932, almost a quarter of Army recruit training consisted of formal drill; educational training only accounted for just over a sixth.⁴⁹ Once recruits had passed to their regiments, they were subject only to the training regime that that particular unit's Commanding Officer favoured. Many (but not all) of these Commanding Officers again placed obedience over initiative in their training programmes and, as it was often the measure of a regiment's success and therefore reputation, also concentrated on their troops' sporting prowess. The end result was a rank and file who were not instinctively trained to think for themselves in combat situations; this situation was aggravated by the high ratio of commissioned officers

⁴⁹ Recruit training in 1932 stood at 420 hours, 104 of which were allocated to formal drill, while only 75 were allocated to educational training. Reforms had, by 1937, reduced formal drill training to 94 hours, the other 10 being given over to fieldcraft. French, *Raising Churchill's Army* pp. 56-57.

to enlisted men, which tended to make senior NCOs look instinctively to them to await their orders rather than act on their own accord.

Even among the officer corps, training was not initially geared up to produce tactical excellence. At Sandhurst, 515 of the allotted 1350 training hours were devoted to 'producing the private soldier cadet';⁵⁰ the remainder consisted mainly of educational training. One cadet remembers that 'independent thinking is frowned on as heresy – no divergence from official view allowed', while another recalled that, after expressing an opinion, being told 'You are not allowed to think, Sir!'⁵¹ Once graduated, officers would be sent to their respective arm of service training establishments, except for Infantry and Cavalry officers, who were sent to regimental depots where the training regime was basically one of learning how their particular regiment worked while continuing drill training.⁵² Infantry officers would have to complete a three month musketry course, but little else. The flaw in this system, of course, was that the opportunity to train all fighting arms of the army's officers to a common standard, and also to instil within them a shared understanding of all-arms tactical thinking was lost, as this type of training was left to the regiment to which the officer was eventually posted, where training was 'thoroughly idiosyncratic'.⁵³ When compared to the training of German officers, already trained as private soldiers by the time they arrived at their centralised training academies, and then trained to command at infantry battalion level (thus ensuring a wide understanding of

⁵⁰ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p.58.

⁵¹ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p.58.

⁵² The Royal Artillery, however, established a central artillery school at Larkhill; Russell Hart, *Clash of Arms: How the Allies Won in Normandy* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), pp. 32-33.

⁵³ *Military Effectiveness, Volume II: The Interwar Period*, ed. by Allan Millett and Williamson Murray (London: Unwin, 1988), p. 121.

tactical doctrine at entry level-officers), the British officer training model seems pedestrian and fractured.

Once officers arrived at their respective regiments, they were subject to the variances in training of each unit's commanding officer – some were very good and able trainers of men, others were not. Training opportunities were also hampered by isolation from units from other arm of service, which inhibited inter-arm training, and also from a dearth of training resources – a simple lack of men to exercise command over.

As we have seen, once the recruits and young officers had been passed to their regiments for further training, quite apart from the inconsistencies in training that the system allowed, they were immersed in the regimental system. Particularly in Infantry and Cavalry regiments, the regiment was an all-pervasive influence in the daily lives of all officers and men. The regimental system had hitherto fostered a strong sense of belonging, identity and loyalty among its members which had the effect of strengthening morale during the Great War. Once the Army had returned to peacetime duties, however, it had an isolating and restricting effect on outlook which was generally resistant to change, and also tended to have a fragmentary rather than unifying effect on the army as a whole (innumerable small packets each with different traditions and ideas)⁵⁴. Even the regimental system's by-product of healthy competition between infantry or cavalry regiments was largely negated by the snobbish 'pecking order' that regiments were generally placed in, which was not based not on military prowess, but on other, mainly social, criteria. Finally, the regimental system had a particularly bad effect on officer promotion between the wars because, in the

⁵⁴ Bond, p. 61.

context of a restricted army size, it slowed promotion thus causing discontent amongst serving officers, and acted as a disincentive to ambitious young men considering joining the army as an officer. None of the problems mentioned here existed within the Royal Navy or the Royal Air Force.

Taken as a whole, the Army's attempts at establishing an effective doctrine based on its experience in the last war and implementing that doctrine was only partially successful due to the half-hearted gleaning of 'lessons learned' and a training system that produced variable results due to its splintered application and low expectations of its rank and file. Notwithstanding the tradition and celebrated history of the regiments of the British Army, the British approach to doctrine and training seems to be amateurish, with little desire for reform. What desire for reform *did* exist was plainly subdued by 'the system' until reform could be resisted no more.

Recruitment

So much for the Army's doctrine and training; what kind of men would be subjected to it?

The British Army between the wars suffered from an inability to recruit sufficient numbers to maintain its complement until radical reforms in terms of service, pay and working condition were introduced in the last couple of years before the outbreak of war in 1939.

As previously stated, the officer corps, and particularly infantry officers, suffered from slow promotion, an unattractive proposition to those with ability and ambition. In addition to this, service as an army officer was increasingly seen as a second or third rate career option among young men and their families. This was because of the high expense of joining the army as an officer combined with the low pay earned by junior officers. Furthermore, the

army had been subjected to cuts and seemingly arbitrary changes unheard of in pre-1914 days, so the army had come to be seen as an unstable employer. Certainly, by 1923, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff complained that:

Another result of the present uncertainty is a growing doubt in the minds of parents as to the advisability of sending their sons into the Army. There has been a considerable falling off in the number of candidates competing for entrance to Woolwich and Sandhurst, with the result that Sandhurst is, at present, 88 cadets below establishment. Unless some practical assurance of a normal career in the Army can be supplied, a serious shortage of officers is likely to arise in 1925.⁵⁵

The army, then, was aware of its unattractiveness to potential officer recruits in terms of a career choice with limited opportunities but does not seem to have addressed this problem. Furthermore, life in the peacetime Army was generally dull and often involved lengthy periods of service away from home - principally in India, a generally unpopular destination. As a result of these major factors, for most of the inter war period, the Army had considerable difficulty filling the 650 places for new officers each year; by 1937 only around 550 new officers were being recruited a year.⁵⁶

If the inter-war situation for attracting officers was difficult, the situation regarding other ranks was arguably even more problematic. Service in the rank and file of the Army had traditionally been unpopular in Britain and carried with it a social stigma that many working class families sought to avoid. Added to this was the widespread revulsion of military service during the Great War, during which at least five million men were mobilised. These men no doubt at worst remembered the horrors of war and loss of life, and at best remembered the Army's relatively harsh discipline and pointless 'bull', and passed these folk memories on to any of their family who considered 'joining up'. The infantry, of course, was

⁵⁵ TNA: CAB 24/159.

⁵⁶ TNA: WO163/456.

even more unpopular with recruits as infantrymen learned no skills that were directly transferable to civilian employment. Along with their officers, rankers could also look forward to being relatively badly paid and being sent to India for much of their service. Conversely, the Royal Navy and Royal Air force, both of which enjoyed better pay, prospects and overseas service, had little problem in filling their recruiting quotas.⁵⁷ Another recruiting problem for the Army was that many men who did want to serve were unable to do so because they were unfit. For example, in 1928 12.4% of recruits were rejected on medical grounds.⁵⁸ Clearly, between the wars, the British Army suffered from an inability to attract recruits.

Did the British Army 'lose' the lessons of 1918?

The British Army did not intentionally forget the lessons of the Great War and it is certain that the Army, just like the rest of British society, never forgot the loss of life involved in that conflict. In addition, the Army was staffed with a great deal of men who had proved themselves in action and had gained vital experience in fighting modern war; many of these men were approaching or actually in senior positions (where painfully slow promotion permitted). The Army was, however, guilty of not *formally* learning the lessons of the First World War and actively pursuing reform to ensure it remained at the cutting edge of military thought. The reasons behind this are many: a great many in senior positions within the Army viewed the Great War as an aberration; a war which would never have to be fought again - it was, after all, the 'war to end all wars'. This view was perhaps reinforced by measures like the 'ten year rule'. Added to this situation was the widespread British

⁵⁷ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p. 50.

⁵⁸ *Big Wars and Small Wars: The British Army and the Lessons of War in the 20th Century*, ed. by Hew Strachan (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 46-47.

distaste for war and military 'sabre rattling' following the Great War. Such a pacifist electorate would perhaps not tolerate any government which even hinted at rearmament on a level which would allow Britain to field an army capable of continental operations. Those at the top of the Army tree, however, were not timid in fighting the Army's corner in its dealings with the Treasury, but even here they had to deal with stiff competition from the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force who were to be the main players in delivering the chosen policy of limited liability. Between the wars, the Army had been dealt a very difficult hand of cards – increased imperial responsibilities with fewer men with which to discharge them; a penny-pinching (but perhaps with good reason) Treasury; a government which was ambivalent towards the Army, but simultaneously receptive to the needs of the Navy and Air Force.

So much for the factors beyond the Army's control - much of the blame for the condition of the Army in the late 1930s, however, rests squarely with the Army itself (even if it is now widely acknowledged that the Army at that time was badly overstretched^{59, 60}).

Notwithstanding the advances that it did make, the Army failed to produce and consistently apply a universal doctrine based upon exhaustive evaluation of the First World War. It failed to establish a universal standard of training for its officers which ensured a wide understanding of all-arms warfare. It failed to train its other ranks and non-commissioned officers to make full use of their initiative at the expense of maintaining a deferential obedience. The training it *did* enforce had a default setting of caution and consolidation rather than on skilful exploitation of opportunities and was implemented at grass roots level

⁵⁹ Brian Farrell, *The Basis and Making of British Grand Strategy 1940-1943* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), p. 9.

⁶⁰ *The Oxford History of The British Army*, ed. by David Chandler and Ian Beckett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 257.

– a guide for those leading infantry sections published as late as 1938 warns that: ‘Exploitation can only be carried out after platoons have been completely reorganised, and in any case it will necessitate a fresh plan being made’.⁶¹ Lastly, the Army failed to tap into a generation of ambitious young men which could have had an invigorating effect on a tired organisation. In 1918 the British Army could be described as the world’s best; capable of taking on any other army in the world. By 1939, the remnants of that same Army could only watch as the new version of the German army it had soundly thrashed only twenty years ago, began to flex its muscles.

Imminent War – 1938-39

In the short period of time between the German invasion of Czechoslovakia and the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939, several factors played a part in a belated renaissance of the Army in terms of its roles as an employer and the Army’s role in the ever-increasing likelihood of war in continental Europe. When Leslie Hore-Belisha was appointed Secretary of State for War in 1937 he introduced relatively radical reforms in the terms of service for officers and enlisted men, and improved the public image of the Army. Almost overnight, these reforms resulted in a surge in recruitment and also aided the retention of existing army personnel, and went some way in alleviating the Army’s previously chronic recruiting problem. Hore-Belisha, however, could not convince the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, or the Treasury to commit to increased expenditure for the Army.

As the 1930s drew to a close, and the political events of that time unfolded, the British Government came round to the idea that it would have to reconsider its policy of ‘limited

⁶¹ *Infantry Section Leading*, (London: H.M.S.O., 1938), p. 61.

liability' in favour of providing a continental field army to assist the French Army in countering the German threat. At long last, in the spring of 1939, Chamberlain's government finally authorised a field force of around thirty-two divisions (Subsequent negotiations resulted in a target figure for the Army of fifty-five divisions). At the same time conscription was also introduced. Not only were these measures too late to form a BEF of sufficient size to either be capable of an offensive campaign or placate the French demands for assistance, their hurried introduction also hindered the effort of an Army already struggling with preparations for war in Europe. Furthermore, this BEF was to be only weakly supported by tanks; the development of which was largely stymied by restrictive Cabinet policies.⁶²

At the outbreak of hostilities between Germany and the Franco-British alliance, the British Army on paper totalled around 53,000 officers and 840,000 other ranks. This is an impressive number, but the Regular Army only contributed around 224,000 (all ranks) with Regular Army Reserve of 131,000 (of this number only 3,700 were fully trained). The Supplementary Reserve numbered 42,000 but again, was not properly trained. The 34,000 Militiamen the Army received on the introduction of conscription were also not fully trained, and would not be so until September. The Territorial Army, by far the largest reserve force, numbered around 438,000 (all ranks) with their own reserve of nearly 20,000; but, like the Militia, these men would need at least 18 months to two years training before they could be considered for active service.⁶³ If it is accepted that only the Regular Army (224,000) and the 3,700 or so trained Reserve were ready for active service, and that of this figure a great many would be required for garrison duties within the Empire or for Home

⁶² J. P. Harris, *Men, ideas and tanks: British Military thought and Armoured Forces, 1903-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 306.

⁶³ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, pp. 63-64.

defence, this left precious few to make up a BEF of any meaningful force. Nonetheless, by 27 September 1939, four divisions (around 16,000 men) had been landed in France.

The British Army of 1939, then, was not the army of 1918. It had suffered a considerable degree of atrophy due to the reasons outlined above, and simply could not lay its hands on the hard-won skills that it had painfully forged in The Great War in time for the imminent rematch with Germany. It would take over four years of playing 'catch-up' to rediscover these skills, and all this in a context of rapidly-advancing military technology. The first engagements that the British Army took part in would mercilessly reveal the effects of two decades of benign neglect and a flawed inter-war 'British way of war'.

Outbreak of war – the campaign in France

When the British Army went to war in 1939 it provided three Army Corps with an additional Infantry Division to the Western Front, but this force was not to see action until 10 May 1940 when the Germans commenced their campaign. A month before this, however, a campaign was mounted in Norway in response to the German invasion there. The conduct of this campaign has already been examined in some detail elsewhere,⁶⁴ but has been viewed, both at the time and ever since, as a series of disasters: 'British countermoves were slow, hesitant and bungling'.⁶⁵ The handling of the campaign was characterised by confusion at almost every level of command and resulted in a poor prosecution of an inexpertly-planned operation. Added to this already unsatisfactory state of affairs were the factors of chaotic logistic and air support for the Allies, and the communication difficulties

⁶⁴ As well as general Second World War histories, Kersaudy's *Norway 1940* and Henrick Lunde's *Hitler's Pre-Emptive War*, give a complete account of the campaign, as does T.K. Derry's 1951 official history *The Campaign in Norway*. Journal articles that deal with the fighting in Norway include James Corum's contributions to the *Journal of Strategic Studies*. An interesting first-hand account is Joseph Kynoch's *The Forgotten Fiasco*. There are further studies that tend to concentrate on naval aspects of the campaign.

⁶⁵ Basil Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (London, Cassell, 1973), p. 52.

that existed between the Allies due to lack of a common language. Any form of realistic tactical cooperation between the French and British forces, and the Norwegians was also severely lacking.

The handling of the campaign was so bad that it resulted in political action at the highest level and was the main reason for the resignation of Neville Chamberlain (who was not, however, the principal architect of the operation). The British Army had little chance to formally take stock and learn the lessons of the Norwegian campaign before it was almost immediately thrust into the Battle for France. Notwithstanding the weaknesses in command and control, the army did have the opportunity to gain some kind of experience in fighting what would prove to be its principal enemy for the next five years.

The Norwegian campaign's place in popular memory has tended to be eclipsed by the perhaps even more disastrous events in France and the heavily propagandised evacuation from Dunkirk.⁶⁶ Within the British Army, however, it tended to reinforce the notion that the British Army, although supported by a very powerful Royal Navy, did not perform well in amphibious operations - a painful reprise of the hangover inflicted by the Dardanelles campaign of 1915.

The events of the British Expeditionary Force campaign in France in 1940 have been covered in great detail elsewhere and are not the subject of the focus of this paper.⁶⁷ It will suffice to say that the BEF, and the allies which it was meant to augment, were defeated in a few short weeks from 10 May 1940. The BEF was evacuated from France during Operations Dynamo (27th May – 3rd June 1940), Cycle (10-13th June 1940) and Ariel (14-25th June 1940)

⁶⁶Francois Kersaudy, *Norway 1940* (London, Collins, 1990), p. 225.

⁶⁷ For an introduction to this campaign, see: Brian Bond's *Battle of France and Flanders: Sixty Years On*; Alan Shepperd's *France 1940*; Philip Warner's *The Battle of France*; Julian Kackson's *Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940*.

having been comprehensively outfought by the tactically-superior *Wehrmacht*. The way the British Army fought the campaign in France was largely the result of the political and military factors prevalent in inter-war Britain and has already been described in the previous chapter. What is important here is how the British Army responded to its defeat and its exposure to the German way of war.

With the fall of France and the evacuation and return of the BEF, Britain found herself, whether by accident or design, essentially in the position for which she had planned within the defence concept of limited liability. With a strong navy and relatively modern air force (which included a particularly well-appointed fighter arm), the army available for home defence, and a strong colonial army available for defence of the Empire, Britain took stock of her situation. The difference in this situation from the 1930s plan was that France, with her formidable army and considerable naval strength, no longer formed part of Britain's defence equation. In addition, Britain had already sustained heavy losses, as casualties or prisoners in Norway and France, along with many tanks and guns which had been left behind at Dunkirk. Even worse, Hitler's *Heer* was in a position to seriously contemplate an invasion of the British Isles and the *Luftwaffe* was preparing to mount an aerial offensive against Britain, most of which now lay within range of its bomber force.

The fall of France, however, necessitated a change in British strategy. At the start of war in Europe, Britain had hoped to provide a BEF to bolster the French army (or at least satisfy French requests for assistance) in holding the Germans in a defensive war while measures such as blockade and aerial bombardment gradually wore down German military capability. It was planned that while the German forces were held in check, Britain could develop a land force which was large enough and sufficiently trained and equipped to assist the

French in a joint attack once Germany and her army were sufficiently weakened and so allowed a good chance of success. This plan had, by the end of 1940, been overtaken by events and so lay redundant; the British strategy returned once more to a revised version of limited liability, with the focus of Britain's defence effort firmly placed on the Royal Navy, with its ability to provide defence of the British Isles and the Empire; and the Air Force, whose fighters could defend the UK. Indeed, it was Britain's strength in fighter aircraft and naval assets that together thwarted German attempts to force Britain to concede defeat or accept peace terms during the 'Battle of Britain', and it was now the only the aircraft of RAF's Bomber Command that could provide perhaps the only realistic way of delivering a violent offensive on Germany. In September 1940, the Chiefs of Staff deemed: 'The strength of the German Army and Air Force preclude any possibility of land operations designed to inflict direct defeat on the main German armies, until such time as they have been undermined and weakened by blockade, air action, subversive activities, and propaganda.'⁶⁸ The 'such time' was hinted at possibly being sometime in 1942. Once again, the Army was relegated to a secondary role to the Navy and Air Force.

The immediate task of the Army, however, was now that of home defence, a task it could reasonably carry out while improvements were made and also allowed for limited operations in other theatres of war – valuable time to reflect on its humiliating defeat. Not surprisingly, those within the Army and those with political axes to grind, cast about for scapegoats: Chamberlain and his appeasers, and the French Army were likely candidates for blame at the time, and there may be kernels of truth in those accusations, but the British

⁶⁸ TNA: CAB 66/11/42.

Army must shoulder a considerable degree of responsibility for its defeat in the campaign; it is how the army recognised (or failed to recognise) its shortcomings and acted upon them that is of interest here as it really the start of the story of how Britain was to ultimately build the army that was to make the return crossing of the English Channel.

In mid-June 1940, a committee of Army officers and representatives (the Bartholomew committee) was tasked with compiling the lessons of the French campaign, using the testimonies of those who had fought in it, with a view to recommending any necessary modifications to the Army's organisation and training in the context of an apparently likely German invasion. Committees with similar agendas were convened by the Artillery, Armoured and logistic arms at the same time. The main concerns of the committees were:

- Engendering a high level of morale and offensive spirit
- An improvement in physical fitness and discipline
- Adoption of 'defence in depth' strategies
- Combined use of infantry, anti-tank weapons and tanks to defeat armoured assaults and mount counter-attacks⁶⁹

These objectives required more wieldy and versatile formations, supported by effective reconnaissance and an artillery arm that was at once powerful and readily available. To achieve this, the existing divisional organisation was retained, but brigade structure was reorganised to comprise three infantry battalions, a battery of anti-tank guns, a field regiment [of artillery], a machine gun company, and an anti-aircraft platoon of heavy machine guns.⁷⁰ The Bartholomew and Artillery committees agreed that to improve artillery

⁶⁹ TNA: WO 106/1775.

⁷⁰ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p. 191.

support and cohesion with the battalions, the field regiment would be organised on a three-battery basis. Nonetheless, the infantry - who would not easily forget the ubiquity and accuracy of German mortar fire in France – insisted on a threefold increase of 3” mortars to each of their battalions. The composition of the armoured divisions was also set at two brigades per division, each with its own motorised infantry battalion, and a single supporting infantry battalion for the whole division in the support group (which had previously been a whole motorised brigade), leaving the armoured divisions arguably ‘top heavy’ in terms of armour/infantry ratios. Improving modifications to reconnaissance capabilities, however, were made to Infantry and Armoured divisional establishments.⁷¹

So much for reorganisation of the Army; what did the Bartholomew report have to say with regard to the particular British weakness in command, control and communications during the French campaign? The committee’s view was that it tended to reinforce the existing system, which relied on lengthy written orders from senior officers to be obeyed by those further down the command system. The weakness in the system, it was felt (despite some opposition), was that the orders that had been issued in France had failed because they were not explicit enough, and that even more emphasis should be placed on top-down command. The natural casualties of this approach were, of course, delegation of command and use of initiative at junior commander level, an area in which the army was already weak.

In terms of uniformity of training, the immediate post-Dunkirk Army was little changed. The same fragmentary system that had existed before 1939 still prevailed with no overall guarantor of uniformity. Training, however, became much more realistic and included emphasis on physical fitness and an element of battle inoculation, designed to inure the

⁷¹ TNA: CAB106/220.

infantryman to the sounds and confusion of battle and to learn to confront his fear of armoured vehicles. This was to improve further with the opening of the GHQ Battle School which provided the same training for instructors who were destined for individual divisional training schools and so provide at least a modicum level of uniformity.

In general though, despite the Bartholomew and other reports, the British Army failed to critically analyse the lessons of fighting the German army in France in 1940 and so provide an antidote to the way of warfare that that particular enemy was using at that time. It was perhaps all too easy to apportion blame to defeated allies, or to explain defeat as being a result of being under-equipped or being faced by apparently overwhelming amounts of enemy hardware such as tanks and aircraft. In fairness, though, the shortcomings of the British Army in command, control, communications and intelligence, and the resulting inability to respond effectively to German assaults in enough time to prevent deep penetration of territory (and so further degrade command arrangements) must have given the impression that the *Wehrmacht* was indeed lavishly supplied. In 1940, the British believed that they were facing in excess of 7,000 Armoured Fighting Vehicles when actually they were facing only 2,574 tanks. The Allies, in fact, between them enjoyed a general parity of equipment with what the German Army had to offer at that time.⁷² From the viewpoint of late 1940 and early 1941, the high command of British Army might be forgiven for thinking that they had indeed been successful in identifying, absorbing and acting upon the lessons to be learned from the French campaign when it enjoyed considerable success at the outset of its next venture – the war in the Western Desert.

⁷² French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p. 195.

The war in the western desert

The war in the western desert started relatively well for Britain. The small force there easily repelled a much larger Italian invading army and forced it to retreat almost as far as Tripoli. At last, the army seemed vindicated in its choice of training and warfare as it could rightly claim a convincing victory; the British Army was undeniably better at fighting the kind of war that the Italian army at that time was prepared to deliver. Strategically, however, the British position was not so strong; in response to political intervention the British forces in the western desert were diluted to prepare to provide military assistance to Greece and also to deal with an Italian threat in East Africa. Replacements for formations detailed for these activities were inexperienced and were generally unused to desert conditions. In addition, most of the armoured vehicles which remained had been involved in the recent advance and were practically worn out. These factors, together with the fact that Tripoli remained in enemy hands, allowed a counter attack for which the British were not adequately prepared.

As the campaign progressed, however, the British Army began to deal more effectively with its principal opponent; Germany's *Afrika Korps*. This learning process involved using new concepts, such as luring enemy armour onto anti-tank gun screens to destroy them rather than using tank versus tank duels, and using infantry in concert with armour rather than as simple occupiers of positions destroyed by artillery bombardments. This developing maturation of the Army in the Western desert was aided by deliveries of better equipment: American designed and built M3 'Lee' and later M4 'Sherman' tanks (mechanically-reliable, their 75mm main armament also a great improvement on the obsolescent British 2 pounder), the 6 pounder anti-tank gun was also available from 1942. The western desert

campaign also saw nascent technological advances in the field of specially adapted armoured vehicles; in this case tanks modified to mechanically clear paths through minefields quickly and so retain an element of relative surprise – a recognised force multiplier. Nonetheless, the concept of complete all arms cooperation fighting together as a *system* had still not been properly implemented by the campaign's end.

One undeniable skill that the British army in the Western Desert possessed, and was to hone still further was that of providing effective logistic support; the British Army had traditionally fought at the end of long and often tenuous supply lines in Imperial warfare and so recognised the value of efficient logistics. In some cases, the British were able to 'win' actions by simply being able to remain on the field when the often logistically-inferior *Afrika Korps* had to retire having exhausted their supplies of fuel or ammunition.⁷³ This experience in the Western Desert would have gone some way to preparing the logistics organisation for the immense problems of supplying the 21st Army Group in 1944-45. The British had much to learn from their opponents, who were adept at combined use of all-arm assets, but still there was no real change in tactics or training doctrine to reflect this. One British survivor of the Gazala battle (May-June 1942) remembers:

A major tank thrust was to be launched against the enemy in the Cauldron... Regiment after regiment of tanks moved up on either side of us and halted. Almost as far as the eye could see stretched this long line of tanks. We had artillery support but very little; as far as I could remember we had four guns and there was certainly no preliminary bombardment. The plan was simple; this great line of tanks that stretched across the desert was to roll forwards, crash through the enemy and on to the undefended spaces beyond. I remember my commanding officer protesting bitterly at the madness of this attack...but all he got was the sack...and as we came into full view of the enemy so the shells arrived...In the first second we must have received at least four direct hits...almost every tank in that battle met with the same treatment and the whole line was halted.⁷⁴

⁷³ Graham, p. 78.

⁷⁴ Graham, pp. 124-125.

This quote clearly illustrates that in terms of a fighting *system*, the army had some way to go to match the expertise that has been seen in the eyewitness accounts from 1918.

Furthermore, this account also underlines the dissatisfaction among these troops at what they saw as inadequate preparations for an assault, and also gives an example of the treatment of those that questioned these tactics. On the other hand, especially towards the latter part of the North African campaign, the British and Commonwealth forces enjoyed clear material superiority in artillery. It was noted that although the use of heavy artillery bombardments in assaults actually killed relatively few German defenders and only temporarily subdued them, the artillery fire bombardment acted as a morale enhancer for the attackers. Montgomery saw the value of massed artillery bombardments as a motivator rather than a war-winning element in itself in North Africa;⁷⁵ this concept would be repeated on a much greater scale in the forthcoming campaign in North West Europe.

Army/RAF Cooperation

One of the main developments from the British experience in North Africa that was to bear fruit in the Overlord campaign was in army/air force cooperation. Since the 1930s, the army and RAF had bickered over how the army should be supported by air assets. After their experience in France in 1940, the army renewed calls for a dedicated air component which would be equipped with aircraft specifically designed for close ground support, with aircrews that were specially trained to use them; all under army command. The RAF, on the other hand argued that the army could be supported by existing fighter and bomber formations and that, in any case, the army were not capable of commanding air assets in a

⁷⁵ Jonathan Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign: The Eighth Army and the Path to El Alamein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 87, 285.

professional way. A letter written by John Slessor, Air Officer Commanding 5 (Bomber)

Group written as late as July 1941 remarked that:

The rising generation of soldiers (with about 2 exceptions) are quite unfit to command air forces, by training and tradition – they are only adjusting their mentality from 4 to 30 miles per hour, and it will take them another generation to adjust it to 400, by which time what is left of a field army will be a component of the RAF.⁷⁶

Slessor's contempt for the army's ability to manage air assets is clearly evident here and is indicative of the enmity that existed between the two organisations. The power struggle between the army and RAF was perhaps the greatest obstacle to proper cooperation between them, but experience in the North African campaign went some way to resolving this issue and provided a model for future air support in support of army operations. In this theatre, because air assets were very limited, all aircraft (bar a few light reconnaissance types) were under the control of the Air Officer Commanding, Western Desert, but the Air Headquarters in that region was ordered to be employed exclusively under the army commander. Once this control framework had been established, the way the assets were actually employed became the bone of contention, and this was settled by the intervention of the Prime Minister:

Upon the Military Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East announcing that a battle is in prospect, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief will give him all possible aid irrespective of other targets, however attractive. The Army Commander-in-Chief will specify to the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief the targets and tasks which he requires to be performed. It will be for the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief to use his maximum force for those objects in the manner most effective. This applies... to the whole air force available in the theatre.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ William Jacobs, 'Air Support for the British Army, 1939-1943', *Military Affairs*, 46, (1992), p. 175.

⁷⁷ Jacobs, p. 190.

No doubt the Prime Minister, in intervening in this way, was mindful of reaching a resolution to the Army/RAF squabbling in time to prepare for the inevitable invasion of Europe. In the event, British victory in North Africa validated his new arrangements for air power control, and it was this model that resulted in the formation of the 2nd Tactical Air Force in 1943, which was to provide the bulk of air support to the 21st Army Group in France and Germany.

In some ways, the war in North Africa did not offer lessons for fighting in North West Europe; for instance, the experience gained in the use of armour in the open desert could not directly be translated to the armoured operations in Europe with its natural topographical obstructions to tanks. But, as we have seen, experience in the use of artillery, improvements in rapid logistic supply, and the birth of a cogent method of air support were all directly relevant to the Overlord campaign. The war in the desert also heralded the introduction of technological improvements in military hardware, such as the 17-pounder anti-tank gun and a minesweeping tank, which would have important parts to play too. Nonetheless, the North African campaign did not result in better liaison between the infantry and armoured formations, and tended to reinforce the British reliance on highly detailed battle plans which would, as we shall see, shape the way the war was fought in Europe. The British way of war was changing.

This chapter has shown how Britain had to react quickly, but could not rebuild its army quickly enough, once it became clear that military intervention in Europe against Germany was highly likely; it has also shown how Britain's strategy had made a strong continental commitment difficult to produce. Nonetheless, it was this same strategy that had ensured that the British Isles themselves were not invaded. Early war experiences had exposed British deficiencies in fighting the Germans (but not so the Italians), but these deficiencies

were only rectified to a degree; some of the pre-war weaknesses, especially in training remained, and it would take the campaign in North Africa for the army to get to grips with the way of war that the Germans were waging at that time. The army was, however, in the favourable position of being able to train its troops at home based on its combat experience in the desert without having to transport large numbers of men with the risks that this would have involved.⁹⁵ Furthermore, the army had honed its skills in logistic support and also in ground support operations with the RAF. These factors would be vital in the campaign in North West Europe.

⁹⁵ Timothy Place, *Military Training in the British Army 1940-1944: From Dunkirk to D-Day* (London: Cass, 2000), p. 172-173.

CHAPTER 2

The 43rd Division's First Action: Doctrine Meets the Realities of the Battlefield

This study has taken two infantry divisions for consideration; the 43rd (Wessex) and 53rd (Welsh). The experiences of each division will be examined in turn in the following chapters to maintain a general chronological sequence, commencing with the 43rd. The 43rd was chosen because it was an untried 'average' division. Up until its deployment in France, the division had seen no combat and would have been shaped by the previous and current training policies of the army. In short, it was a division that was a product of the British way of war of the time; it stands as an example of the result of decisions made by the British government and the army – this is an infantry division that Britain 'grew' for the invasion of France. The division's ordinariness was the other factor in selection for study; this division, as a Territorial unit, was just about as 'standard' as possible in 1944. On its arrival in France it had not been battered or battle-hardened by action in North Africa or Italy, nor had it received specialist training or weapons. Like the 53rd, its commander remained in tenure for the whole of the campaign, which means that, unlike some formations, it enjoyed a stable continuity of command influence and ethos. This chapter will consider the division as it prepared for deployment, the character of its commander, and how it fought in the early

part of the Overlord campaign. This will give an insight into how this division prepared for war and how it performed once it arrived in theatre and participated in its first major action at Hill 112 during the battle of Caen.

This division was created as early as 1908 as a Territorial Army formation. It spent the entire First World War in India, from where it provided reinforcements to the war in the Middle East. The Division was traditionally composed mainly of men recruited in the counties of Somerset, Dorset, Wiltshire, Cornwall, Worcestershire, Gloucestershire and Middlesex.¹ The 43rd Division spent most of the Second World War until 1944 training in Kent, mainly around the area of Stone Street, but also included training on the South Downs, Lydd, and Hythe.² During this time each infantry brigade trained comprehensively with its allotted support units, such as its artillery (field, anti-tank and anti-aircraft), heavy mortars and machine guns, engineers, and medical services, and also included beach landing and river crossing exercises. As a result of this opportunity for extended periods of training, inter-arm cooperation within the division by June 1944 was at as high a standard as it was possible to achieve without actual battle experience. Divisional troops recall the training regime: Sergeant Cleal, 4th DOR: 'Many will say that our training... was physically harder than the real thing'. Corporal Levy, 8 MIDDX: 'We must have been a well-trained division. One scheme followed another with little time to get cleaned up in between.'

Private Kings, 1st WORC:

Our training was hard but purposeful, we were being whipped into a real fighting unit... we were really good and we knew it. There was a certain rapport between all ranks which is difficult to describe. No one dared let our Platoon Commander down,

¹ The West country 'feel' of the Division, however, was to become diluted during the Overlord campaign as replacements due to casualties were provided from a variety of sources.

²H. Essame, *The 43rd Wessex Division at War 1944-1945* (London: Clowes, 1952), p. 3.

or they were never allowed to forget it, we were behind Freddy Henry to a man. That feeling was the same for Major (Algy) Grubb.³

The man responsible for the division's hard training regime was Major General Ivor Thomas. Thomas had been in the Army since 1912 when he was commissioned into the Royal Artillery. He fought as a battery commander in a Royal Field Artillery unit on the Western front and was awarded a DSO and a MC (and bar). After the First World War he passed through both the Staff College at Camberley and the Royal Naval Staff College and then served in a Territorial Artillery unit. He went on to command the artillery of a division, and then a Corps, before being promoted Major General in 1942 on his appointment as commander of the 43rd Division⁴

Thomas' experiences in the Great War were to leave a lasting impression on him and were instrumental in forming his thoughts on how military operations should be conducted. Unsurprisingly, most of the actions his Division were involved with were characterised by heavy rolling bombardments from the divisional artillery and heavy mortars. Thomas was somewhat unusual among British divisional commanders in as much as he had ample time to impress upon the 43rd Division his own training regime, and was also able to maintain and develop his command over his troops for the duration of the time the 43rd was in the field, as he was in uninterrupted command from 1942 onwards.⁵ As noted above, Thomas was an energetic and ruthless trainer; he also demanded very high standards and unquestioning loyalty. Brigadier Carver (4th Armoured Brigade) remembers: 'A small, fiery, very

³ Patrick Delaforce, *The Fighting Wessex Wyverns: From Normandy to Bremerhaven with the 43rd (Wessex) Division* (Stroud: Sutton, 2002), pp. 12-13.

⁴ *The Times*, Friday September 1st 1942, p. 14.

⁵ This was not the case with other divisional commanders, who were sacked by both Brooke and Montgomery for a variety of reasons, and so had little time to impose a consistent regime of training or command.

determined and grim gunner, without a spark of humour, he would bite the head off anyone who attempted to disagree with him or question his orders, as I was soon to find out'.⁶

Even Thomas' corps commander, Lieutenant General Brian Horrocks, described him as 'a very difficult man'.⁷ Such a divisional commander, even though he had undeniably trained his troops to a very high standard and was 'an immensely able Divisional Commander'⁸, was unlikely to foster original and independent thinking among his subordinates.

Notwithstanding Thomas' strengths and weaknesses, his division maintained a reputation as a reliable formation and as such found itself constantly in demand.

First Action: Operation Jupiter - Hill 112

The battle that took place at Hill 112 is discussed in most of the monographs that deal with the Normandy campaign; some in more detail than others. For instance, John North's *North West Europe 1944-5* only mentions the battle in a passing sentence or two, while Max Hastings' *Overlord* description covers five pages. More helpful are publications that deal specifically with the battle. Major How's *Hill 112: The Cornerstone of the Normandy Campaign* and Tim Saunders' *Hill 112* give a detailed account of the planning and fighting involved. Also of interest are divisional or unit histories, such as Major General Essame's *The 43rd Wessex Division at War 1944-1945*.

The 43rd's part in the Overlord campaign began in late June 1944; most of the division had landed by 24 June and found itself in action shortly afterwards in the closing days of Operation Epsom, Montgomery's third attempt to take Caen. The division's first 'proper'

⁶ Lord Michael Carver, *Out of Step* (London: Hutchinson, 1989), p. 193.

⁷ Sir Brian Horrocks, Eversley Belfield & Major-General H. Essame, *Corps Commander* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1977), p. 60.

⁸ Horrocks, p. 60.

action, however, was the attack on Hill 112 as part of Operation Jupiter.⁹ Hill 112 was a geographical feature which, although only of modest elevation, provided commanding views of the Odon valley and surrounding area. The hill had been captured by British forces during Operation Epsom, but had since been abandoned as it occupied a vulnerable salient in German-occupied territory. The Germans, however, fully appreciated its tactical value and reoccupied it in force. In the light of a British requirement to 'thrust south between the Odon and the Orne in order to open lateral routes to the West',¹⁰ Hill 112 would have to be recaptured, both to deny it to the enemy and to provide a clear vista of the route of advance. This was to be the first major offensive of the 43rd Infantry Division.

To achieve these objectives, Major General Thomas' plan accordingly called for a straightforward capture of Hill 112. Briefly, his plan was for 129 Brigade to evict the enemy from the ridge of the hill itself and install a series of artillery observation posts before falling back to a defensive line. In supporting operations, 130 Brigade would clear the lower ground to 129's left and 214 Brigade were to secure crossings over the Orne and form a substantial bridgehead. These operations would be supported by armour from 31st Tank Brigade and 4th Armoured Brigade. Further armoured support was supplied by 79th Armoured Division in the form of Crocodile flamethrowing tanks and Kangaroo armoured personnel carriers.

Opposing the 43rd on Hill 112 was the 10th SS *Frundsberg* Panzer Division, of which 21 SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment¹¹ with 22 SS Panzer Grenadiers held the position between Hill 112 and the River Orne. Their artillery support consisted of 10th SS Artillery Regiment, 8

⁹ A sketch map showing the area of the battles in the Odon Valley can be seen at Appendix 'A', Figure 1.

¹⁰ Montgomery's M505 directive: Tim Saunders, *Hill 112: Battles of the Odon – 1944* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2001), p. 38.

¹¹ A *Panzergrenadier* regiment was of similar strength to a British infantry brigade.

Werfer Brigade, and the guns of II SS Panzer Corps. In addition, the 277th Infantry Division was in the process of occupying the area to the west of Hill 112, and the 9th SS *Hohenstaufen* Panzer Division, which had recently been withdrawn from Hill 112, was stationed nearby and positioned to respond to attacks by either British 2nd Army or the US 1st Army.

How did the battalions and their artillery regiments receive and implement their orders for this offensive? How much time was given for briefing and other preparations such as rehearsals and cooperation between Infantry, armour, artillery and air assets? Addressing each of these questions will reveal the level of preparedness of the assaulting troops and their supporting assets. The Divisional Headquarters records a warning order for a staff conference for Operation Jupiter at 2255 on 3rd July, with the conference itself being held at 1400 the following day.¹² It is apparent from the infantry battalion and artillery war diaries that they were all aware of the planned attack on the Hill 112 area by the 3rd of July and that it was subsequently postponed. It is interesting to examine, however, what preparations for the forthcoming battle were recorded; the war diary for the Headquarters of 129th Brigade war diary simply states: '10 July, 0500, Op Jupiter' and then gives an overall account of the offensive.¹³

The individual battalions give more detail: the 4th SOM mention that on the 4th July preparations 'for attack' postponed 24 hrs, and on the 5th that the attack was 'again postponed'. On the 8th the Battalion was still awaiting a Canadian advance in the Caen sector before attacking. Finally, on 9 July 'Information received from 129 Inf[antry]

¹² TNA WO 171/479.

¹³ TNA: WO171/658, 10 July 1944.

B[rigade]de that attack will be launched on 10 July'.¹⁴ The diary of 4th WILTS records more detailed preparations for Operation Jupiter: '4th July. Recce for future Op[eration] down to pl[atoon] c[omman]ds' and an 'O g[rou]p for future op[erations]s' at 1800 the same day'. On 7th Jul: 'CO with 2IC tank Regt carried out recce of routes for op[eration] JUPITER'. On the 8th July: 'Preparations for op JUPITER. Several recces carried out in areas GOURNAY and FONTAINE ENTOUPEFOUR'. 9th July: 'Further recces and tying up with tanks for op JUPITER'.¹⁵ The 5th WILTS only reference to Jupiter is moving battalion HQ on the 9th July.¹⁶ 130th Brigade Headquarters' diary notes that the plan for 43rd Division's attack was 'hatched' on the 2nd July and that reconnaissance and further planning continued on the 3rd. Further reconnaissance was carried out on the 4th and Jupiter postponed same day. The 130th were taken out of the line for rest for two days; further reconnaissance and planning were recorded on the 9th of July with a final 'brigade conference' taking place at 1630 that day.¹⁷ The 4th DOR war diary records their CO being briefed about 'the attack' on 3 July followed by a series of reconnaissance patrols and briefings for company commanders.¹⁸ Similarly, 5 DOR also received their orders on the 3rd July and also initiated a succession of reconnaissance patrols and briefings for company commanders. On the evening of the 9th July a 'sand table discussion' was held with all commanders, including platoon commanders and supporting tank commanders being present.¹⁹ The 7th HAMPS war diary simply records

¹⁴ TNA: WO171/1372, 4-9 July 1944

¹⁵ TNA: WO171/1394, 4 -9 July 1944

¹⁶ TNA: WO171/1395, 9 July 1944

¹⁷ TNA: WO 171/660, 2-9 July 1944

¹⁸ TNA: WO171/1286, 3-9 July 1944

¹⁹ TNA: WO171/1287, 3-9 July 1944

preparing to make an attack on Maltot on the 3rd July followed by a postponement on the 5th. On the 10th 'the brigade was ordered during the night to attack'²⁰

214 Brigade HQ's war diary only records issuing its admin order (Number 1) for Operation Jupiter on 9 July and an amendment to it on the 10th.²¹ This Brigade was, strictly speaking, not involved in the initial assault on Hill 112, but was to move to the start line and then remain in reserve to seize a bridgehead over the Orne in the third phase of the assault, once the other two brigades had achieved their objectives.

The war diaries of the support regiments mention preparations only sparsely. The 94th FRRR war diary does not mention any preparations for Operation Jupiter, but records issuing of firing task tables for Operation Solomon (a Canadian operation).²² 112th FRRR commenced their preparations for Jupiter on the 9th and received their fire orders on the same day for a barrage commencement of 0430 on the 10th.²³ The 179th FRRR make no mention of Operation Jupiter until 10 July.²⁴ The 8th MIDDX diary states: 'The attack projected for 43 Division on the early morning of 5 July was postponed. Orders were to-day issued for the attack by 43 Division, which had been postponed four days earlier.'²⁵ The 110th LAA Regiment makes no mention of Jupiter until the 10th July.²⁶

As far as other activity in the run up to Operation Jupiter is concerned, almost all of the infantry battalions in the line were engaged on some kind of patrol or other. One or two others were in a rest period immediately before the 10th July. The only battalions which

²⁰ TNA: WO 171/1306, 3-10 July 1944

²¹ TNA: WO 171/708, 9-10 Jul 1944

²² TNA: WO171/983, 3-10 Jul 1944

²³ TNA: WO171/985, 9-10 Jul 1944

²⁴ TNA: WO171/999, 10 Jul 1944

²⁵ TNA: WO171/1347, 4-9 July 1944

²⁶ TNA: WO171/1129, 10 Jul 1944

recorded any systematic preparations for Operation Jupiter were the 4th and 5th DOR, and 4th WILTS, with their comprehensive reconnaissance patrol schedule and sand table discussion, which included commanders down to platoon level and supporting armoured commanders. Interestingly, Captain Robbins of the apparently relatively well-informed 4th WILTS recalls: 'We were very well prepared for the battle. As I listened to the orders at 0330 hours I thought that it was just like an exercise. We all knew exactly what to do.'²⁷

At this early stage of the 43rd's war in North West Europe, at least at battalion level, there seems to be little evidence of wide and consistent information dissemination to platoon or section leader level (although there is evidence of battalions being provided with air reconnaissance photographs), or carefully rehearsed and choreographed set-piece battle planning which has been claimed as being a feature of the British war of war in the campaign. This may be due to the differences in individual war diary keeping: some units may not have thought such activities worthy of recording, but the infantry battalions of the 43rd appear to have been given only a relatively short time to prepare for Operation Jupiter sometime on or around the 3rd of July, which was around the same time that General Thomas was given his orders.²⁸ The opportunity for further planning and preparation presented by the subsequent postponement due to bad weather and waiting for the Canadians to complete their operations at Carpiquet appears to have been, with the exception of further reconnaissance patrols, for the most part wasted.

The detailed conduct and prosecution of the battle at Hill 112 is not the main focus of interest here. It is in any case extremely difficult to ascertain with absolute accuracy exactly

²⁷ Saunders, *Hill 112*, p. 52.

²⁸ Saunders, *Hill 112*, p. 46.

what happened and when, and conflicting accounts are often impossible to resolve. What is important to note is that the 43rd and their supporting Infantry units did not achieve their planned objectives in the initial assault and became involved in a stalemate with the defenders which continued until around the end of July when the tactical importance of Hill 112 declined. What will be examined here is the type and amount of support that was used to assist the Infantry in their assault and what impact this had on the success of the operation. In addition, command reactions to the ongoing operation, and the cost to the 43rd will also be considered. This will tend to illustrate whether the British Army, or at least the 43rd, actively practised a policy of casualty conservation, as alluded to in Hart's *Colossal Cracks*, through strong supporting arms used as a system (as in 1918), coupled with careful planning and execution of the operation at this relatively early stage of the Overlord campaign.

Artillery assets assigned to this attack were very strong. The artillery commander assigned to Operation Jupiter, Brigadier Heath, was able to call upon not only the artillery establishment of the 43rd, but also the combined artillery regiments of the supporting 53rd (Welsh), 15th (Scottish), and the 11th Armoured Divisions - a total of around 260 25-pounder field guns. In addition, Heath had also been allocated the guns of the 3rd and 8th Army Groups Royal Artillery.²⁹ Finally, Heath could call upon, if needed, the Naval Gunfire Support of *HMS Rodney*, *HMS Belfast* and *HMS Roberts*, all on station off SWORD beach. The fire plan for Operation Jupiter included a ferocious initial barrage which included targets of all known enemy resistance points, counter-battery and counter-mortar capability, and incorporated a very heavy mortar component.

²⁹ These 'AGRA' were composed of a range of Field, Medium, Heavy and Super-Heavy guns, but their principal weapon was the 5.5" gun.

The war diaries of the divisional artillery often do not reveal their full impact on the battlefield. The 94th FRRR diary entry for the first day of the battle - 10 July, for instance, simply complained that the reconnaissance and digging parties that had been despatched to Mouen to prepare new gun positions had left C[ommand] P[ost] staffs shorthanded to deal with the heavy firing commitment. On the other hand, the diary also records individual acts of bravery; when the 4th WILTS were held up by a German self-propelled gun, 'Capt. Greenshields took charge of an Inf[antry] 6-pounder and manhandled it to the crest [of Hill 112] under cover of a smoke screen brought down on his own orders, he then lifted the screen and destroyed the SP gun. The advance resumed'.³⁰

The other two divisional artillery regiments' diaries reveal rather more. The 112th FRRR gives some idea of the scale of the gunnery task when, in response to German counter attacks 'the regiment engaged with 'U'³¹ targets which produced 1260 rounds per minute for 19 minutes'. The diary also records its shortcomings, such as dropping some smokescreen 'shorts' among the 7th HAMPS which led to some confusion, and losing communications with one of its battery HQs for over an hour. The 179th FRRR war diary for 10th July records: 'calls for fire continued almost incessantly throughout the day. In one 15 minute period the regiment fired 1800 rounds in response to DF calls'.³² This impressive rate of fire was apparently sustainable as: 'The ammunition supply has been most satisfactory and the infantries (sic.) calls have never been stingily responded to. Our affiliated infantry have sent several messages of appreciation for the fire response they

³⁰ TNA: WO 171/983, 10 July 1944.

³¹ Suffixes 'M' 'U' and 'Y' were used to designate artillery tasking. 'Mike' (M) targets were targets for single regiments, 'Uncle' targets for divisional concentrations, and a 'Yoke' target is an AGRA task.

³² TNA: WO 171/999, 10 July 1944.

have received, and it is almost certain that art[iller]y fire has saved them from severe counter attacks'.³³

The contribution of the divisional heavy mortars should also not be underestimated. The 8th MDDX describe their 4.2" mortars as 'being constantly in action', their fire usually being controlled directly by their own observers but also on call from the infantry over the brigade wireless system. Even by using this method, 'bombs were often on the target 2.5 minutes after the receipt of the call'.³⁴ Furthermore, with considerable foresight, the company commander had taken the trouble to identify likely targets from maps and photographs before the start of the action and had allocated them code numbers; 'it was often found that these coincided with what was actually called for, with a consequent saving in time'.³⁵

Perhaps a better idea of the British artillery and mortar effort during the Hill 112 action can be gauged by the reactions of those on the receiving end of it. One prisoner described the 25-pounder as an 'automatic supergun'.³⁶ Extracts from an interrogation report (dated 23 July 1944) of German prisoners of war include: 'I fought in Poland, France, the Balkans and Russia, I can honestly say that I have never in the whole of my experience as a soldier experienced anything which remotely compared to the Br[itish] art[iller]y fire'. 'There is no greater hell than Br[itish] art[illery]'. 'I have fought on all fronts, but I never seen such art[iller]y. It was withering. For accuracy and strength, it far surpassed anything I have ever experienced'.³⁷ Gunter Balko of the 21st SS *Panzer Grenadier* Regiment recalled:

At Tarnopol we endure[d] heavy Russian artillery fire but in Normandy we were hit again and again, day after day by British artillery that was so heavy the Frundsberg

³³ TNA: WO 171/999, 10 July 1944.

³⁴ TNA: WO 171/1347, 11 July 1944.

³⁵ TNA: WO 171/1347, 11 July 1944

³⁶ Chris Henry, *The 25-pounder Field Gun 1939-72* (Oxford: Osprey, 2002). p. 36.

³⁷ TNA: WO 171/983, Annex 'J9' to July 1944.

bled to death before our eyes. It was worst during an attack, theirs or ours, when we would be terribly blasted. I saw grenadiers struck dumb and unable to move and others made mad by the unceasing 'drumfire'. Your artillery is my worst memory of Normandy.³⁸

The views of captured troops are perhaps not the best way to measure the means of their defeat but these views, and many others, tend to give the impression that British artillery was generally effective at subduing the enemy. Furthermore, these troops make the point that British artillery was more effective than that encountered on the eastern front, and the Red Army's artillery arm had been the strongest the world had seen since the summer of 1943.³⁹

British infantry opinion of its own artillery appears to be almost consistently positive. War diaries speak of German counter attacks, including those with tanks, being broken up by artillery and 'ungrudging support of the Gunners'. 'Whenever we came under mortar or shell fire 220 Bty RA, who were in support of the B[attalio]n, were quick to get on to it.

Spirit of co-operation between the Gunners and the Infantry was of the highest standard'.⁴⁰

Numerous other examples exist.

The British armoured support for Jupiter included the 4th and 31st Tank Brigades and included three batteries (36 guns) in US-designed M10 self-propelled anti-tank vehicles. Although the Royal Scots Greys were equipped with the relatively lightly-armoured M4 Sherman (one in four of which were armed with a 17-pounder gun), the majority of the British tanks in these units were the Mk VII Churchill which, although more heavily armoured, were still vulnerable to German 88mm and 75mm anti tank ammunition and

³⁸ Saunders, *Hill 112*, pp. 55-56.

³⁹ John Keegan, *The Second World War* (London: Random House, 2011), p.389

⁴⁰ TNA: WO 171/1287, 12 July 1944.

determined attacks from infantry. Furthermore, the Churchill's main armament, the 75mm gun, was inadequate when dealing with the Tiger and Panther tanks it was to meet at Hill 112. Similarly, the M10 Tank Destroyer, in its British incarnation as the '17-pounder SP Achilles' was, due to its thin armour and open turret, vulnerable to all anti-tank weapons, artillery airbursts, mortars and other infantry weapons. Sergeant Jim Stevens remembers supporting the Churchills of the 9th RTR on the first day of Operation Jupiter:

One M10 had a mortar bomb drop straight into it killing instantly the No. 1 Sergeant, the gunner and loader. The Wireless operator and driver were badly burnt but managed to bale out and make it back to the RAP. 'E' Troop pushed on towards Maltot when the second M10 was put out of action by an airburst over that bloody open turret, wounding the crew and putting it out of action. The third M10 was hit by an 88 in the front, killing the driver and wireless operator. The fourth M10, realising that the Churchills that they were supporting had nearly all been destroyed, took up a hull down position and invited some infantry who were being slaughtered to come on board for protection. They replied "Not bloody likely, you'll not get us in that steel coffin". I think that says it all.⁴¹

In this assault, the 9th RTR themselves were 'unable to move due to Tigers and A/Tk fire' and 16 of their Churchills were destroyed.⁴²

It seems then, that even on a level playing field, British armour could not properly compete with its principal opponents. When it is also taken into account that the Germans were fighting a defensive war, a type of war in which they had become masters through experience on their Eastern front, it is not surprising that support of the infantry would be problematic, even when Allied air superiority and German deficiencies in replacements are taken into account. This weakness in armour would continue to be a thorn in the side for the British until quite late in the campaign, and measures to compensate for it (heavy

⁴¹ Saunders, *Hill 112*, pp. 75-123 .

⁴² TNA: WO 171/869, 10 July 1944.

artillery support) became a factor in defining how the British fought their war in North West Europe.

At times the infantry could be forgiven for believing that they had been forgotten by their armour, anti tank guns *and* their artillery, 7th HAMPS, 10 July: '0959 – B[attalion] forced to withdraw to Maltot as Tiger Tanks were attacking from the SW and SE of Maltot – the S.P. Guns of B[attalion] g[roup] had so far not turned up and the tanks supporting the b[attalion] stood off just North of the village'.⁴³ A few minutes later, while forming the defence of Maltot, the same unit called for artillery support to deal with this counter attack, but this could not be done 'owing to other RA commitments'. It was not until Germans were actually entering their positions that 'the call for fire was finally granted. A very accurate barrage was then laid. This undoubtedly saved the pos[ition]'.⁴⁴

As well as the artillery assets that were available, the division had its own Anti-tank weapons. The towed 17-pounder with which the 43^{rd's} anti tank gun regiment was equipped was an effective weapon and was generally capable of dealing with all types of German armour, but its blast shield left its crew exposed. This and the physical size and weight of the gun made it difficult for it to be used in an offensive role. The ageing 6-pounder anti tank gun, supplied to battalion support companies, was less able to deal with the newer German tanks but was more plentiful and a handier gun to operate. The problem with towed anti-tank weapons, however, was that they were difficult to use to their full potential when attacking and often exposed the crews to enemy infantry attacks. For example, the 7th HAMPS, while experiencing the aforementioned attack by three Tiger tanks on 10 July could not call upon their nearby supporting 6 pounders because 'they were unable to fire as

⁴³ TNA: WO 171/1306, 10 July 1944.

⁴⁴ TNA: WO 171/1306, 10 July 1944.

they were under heavy MG fire'.⁴⁵ According to the divisional history: '[a troop of 17-pounder guns] were quickly overrun in a German Infantry counter-attack and after expending all their small arms ammunition, removed the breech blocks and retreated to the infantry slits losing half the troop in the process'.⁴⁶ The attrition of British anti tank guns at Hill 112, either towed or self propelled, led to the Infantry relying ever more on their hand held anti tank weapons.

The infantry platoons were allocated one PIAT per platoon. The PIAT was a very close range (100-115 yards) weapon which took considerable nerve to use effectively. Infantry use of the PIAT, however, seems to have been, perhaps because of the British weakness in anti-tank guns, widespread. Recorded instances of PIAT use are fairly commonplace: Captain John McMath of 5th WILTS recalled that Company Sergeant Major Smith 'saw a tank shooting its way along the road, [he] grabbed a PIAT, ran through the cornfield, fired it from the hip and knocked out the tank'.⁴⁷ Captain Jobson of the 5th DCLI reported: 'Sergeant Hicks succeeded in collecting a PIAT gun, returned, and with great dash attacked a Tank single-handed from a hundred yards, obtaining one hit. Though fired at with the tank's Besa [machine] Gun, and slightly wounded, he closed courageously to sixty yards, scored two more hits, and finally crippled the tank from as close as ten or fifteen yards, the crew wounded and scattering'. The same report goes on to record that a Captain Blackwell stalked another Panther and disabled it with a PIAT from a range of about ten yards.⁴⁸ Several other PIAT teams were involved in this action, and those Panthers that were not

⁴⁵ TNA: WO 171/1306, 10 July 1944.

⁴⁶ Saunders, *Hill 112*, p. 121.

⁴⁷ Saunders, *Hill 112*, p. 95.

⁴⁸ TNA: WO 171/1280, Appendix entitled 'West Country Infantry 'Magnificent' in Tense Clash With Panthers'.

destroyed were driven off.⁴⁹ This suggests a co-ordinated, if impromptu attempt at dealing with enemy armour. In this case, the Panthers were not properly defended by their own infantry, and this situation would recur on many occasions during the campaign, which suggests that German armoured/infantry liaison and cooperation was not as good as it could have been.

The use of PIAT was not simply a weapon to be used in desperation; the 5th DCLI also sent out tank hunting patrols armed with PIAT with the specific object: 'To find and destroy Jerry tanks in the harbour areas' and to 'Find Boche Tanks'.⁵⁰ Furthermore, use of PIAT was not confined to the infantry; during a reconnaissance patrol, Regimental Sergeant Major West of the 94th FRR came across a Tiger tank. He then 'went back to obtain a PIAT from [the] inf[antry], and got in a position to shoot at the Tiger'.⁵¹ Unfortunately for West, the Tiger forced him to retreat using its main armament; the Tiger was subsequently dealt with by using a conventional smoke screen and 'a troop of Shermans'. Although West's PIAT attack failed, it is interesting to note that he felt he had sufficient confidence in the weapon to use it. Again, the Tiger was forced to defend itself due to an apparent absence of supporting infantry. These are not isolated incidents. Although an imperfect weapon which exposed the user to considerable danger it is clear that the soldiers had enough confidence in it to use it without any apparent hesitation. It must also be remembered that although PIAT attacks on German tanks often did not result in the destruction of the tanks, the attack alone was frequently enough to force the tank or tanks to retreat.

⁴⁹ Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, p. 34.

⁵⁰ TNA: WO 171/1280, 28 June 1944.

⁵¹ TNA: WO 171/983, 11 June 1944.

Only limited use of specialist armour was made in the attack on Hill 112. In the original plan, Churchill Crocodile flamethrowing tanks were allocated to 129 and 130 brigades for the first two phases of the operation.⁵² But, in the event, only one troop appears to have been used to support 'A' Company of the 4th DOR attack on Eterville, which was rapidly taken. Private Alfie Brown of 'A' company remembers sheltering behind a Crocodile fuel trailer and hearing: 'a rushing sound like a train and a loud 'wumf' as the hedge caught fire. I don't know if any Jerries were caught but I saw some further along, running back from bunkers to the mansion'.⁵³ The War Diary of 141 RAC for 10 July does not mention the attack on Eterville, but records only that one troop of Crocodiles was deployed to support the Somerset Light Infantry in their attack on Hill 112 which, 'judging from the badly shaken PW and the great impression on our own infantry, this was a very successful show indeed'.⁵⁴ Interestingly, 141 RAC's war diary notes that: 'It was Capt. Storrar's (the OIC) opinion that on a target of this nature the effect was moral rather than lethal, thus once more emphasising the necessity for quick follow-up by the infantry to winkle out the temporarily demoralised enemy and occupy the ground against enemy return.'⁵⁵

Crocodiles were used again to the west of Hill 112 on 15 July to assault enemy positions at Le Bon Repos (this attack also included AVsRE, elements of 107 RAC and divisional artillery). This time two troops of Crocodiles were used and before the attack took place 'a rehearsal took place with the infantry to demonstrate the safety of walking through the flame once it was on the ground'.⁵⁶ Infantry platoons were also detailed to follow the tanks closely, with a section placed immediately behind the 'flaming' tank. The operation was a complete

⁵² Saunders, *Hill 112*, pp. 47-48.

⁵³ Saunders, *Hill 112*, p. 67.

⁵⁴ TNA: WO 171/877, 10-13 July 1944.

⁵⁵ TNA: WO 171/877, 10-13 July 1944.

⁵⁶ TNA: WO 171/877, 15 July 1944.

success. Crocodiles were called upon to assist at Le Bon Repos once more to recapture the position after a strong and determined counterattack by 10 SS Panzer Division on 21 July. Again, six Crocodiles were employed (along with 107 RAC and the usual divisional artillery), this time supporting only two companies of 4th WEL. Again, the attack was a complete success. At Hill 112 at least, it seems that the Crocodiles were a potent force multiplier in terms of strengthening the morale of the attacker, and temporarily destroying the morale of the defender.

Phase three of the original Operation Jupiter plan called for elements of 214 Brigade to seize crossings across the Orne and to secure bridgeheads while mounted in Kangaroo armoured personnel carriers. As the battle unfolded, however, these troops were dismounted from their vehicles and used instead to bolster the troops already committed to the first and second phases. It is difficult to say what effect a larger contingent of specialist armoured vehicles would have had on the battle at Hill 112, but in view of the already high rate of tank losses suffered by the British, it is possible that they would simply have provided more targets for the German tanks and anti-tank guns that infested the battle zone.

Comment on air support at Hill 112 is largely absent from the war diaries of the 43rd with a few exceptions; namely 'friendly fire' incidents, air/artillery cooperation, and the massed aerial bombardments in the Caen area. These points are addressed in reverse order. The raid on Caen is described in most of the war diaries and individual accounts that can be found. The value of highly destructive bombing raids has been thrown into doubt as they frequently advertised impending assaults, provided ideal cover for defenders, and often did not have the desired effect of killing the enemy in large numbers. Furthermore, the

resulting devastation often impeded the advance of the attackers.⁵⁷ From the war diaries and accounts of the raid, though, it can be seen that the observers on the ground, at least at this stage of the campaign, drew some comfort and experienced a boost in morale from the impressive display of military might that *their* country (the aircraft were easily identified as Lancaster bombers) could deploy in their support.

There is evidence of apparently good cooperation between the 43rd's Artillery regiments and the RAF during the battle; the 94th FRR record firing smoke indicators on Esquay specifically for Typhoon attacks on 11, 12 and 24th July. Another indicator of effective use of air assets can be found in the use of air artillery spotters. Although not an RAF task, and therefore not strictly an indication of success of inter-arm cooperation, artillery spotting from the air was a vital part of this battle where forward artillery observers could not see their targets. There are several instances in the 94th's war diaries of 'Air OP' spotters successfully controlling shoots and being used to discover enemy positions. Although the war diaries of the other two field regiments do not record this type of interaction with air assets it is highly likely that they did carry them out in the same way.

The contribution of RAF ground attack aircraft, principally Typhoons, seems to go largely unrecorded in the division's war diaries. Simple notes, such as, 'Eterville was to be 'Typhooned'', and 'Typhoons attack MG position in front' can be found but are relatively rare. This is perhaps not an indication of scarcity of RAF ground attack effort, but may instead be an indication that this type of support was considered to be usual. Also rare, but understandably rather more well documented are incidents involving 'friendly fire'. The 7th HAMPS' diary, for instance, records being warned to withdraw its patrols in view of an

⁵⁷ Hart, pp. 86-87.

impending air strike by Typhoons. The Typhoons arrived before the troops were withdrawn and commenced their bombing operation. The infantry deployed yellow markers to indicate their presence, but by this time at least seven bombs had already landed in the battalion area. On this occasion only one man was injured, but six other ranks and one officer had to be evacuated due to shell shock.⁵⁸ The 4th DORs' attack on Eterville on the first day of the battle was supported by Typhoons. Major Symonds, 'B' Company commander, recalls having to wait for the artillery barrage and RAF bombing to cease before advancing. As soon as the indication that the barrage had ended (blue smoke shells) had been seen, he ordered the assault, when: 'about four fighters came over, presumably a little late, and dropped two of their bombs in the middle of my company while we were still in the open field. We could see the bombs falling so had time to take cover, but we suffered a number of casualties including Sgt Fowler who was killed'.⁵⁹ This account is not recorded in the Dorsets' war diary.

At Hill 112 the 43rd faced an enemy who, although not at full strength, remained formidable. The 9th and 10th SS Panzer Divisions were, in general, highly motivated and confident troops who proved to be resolute and determined in both attack and defence. They were also heavily armed with weapons that were usually superior to their British counterparts. Only in air assets were the defenders seriously outgunned. Most of the German troops at Hill 112 had also seen relatively recent action on the Eastern front and so were experienced soldiers. It must also be considered that the factors of superiority in tank design (but not numbers), an abundance of machine guns, and a situation that generally favoured defence,

⁵⁸ TNA: WO 171/1306, 17 July 1944.

⁵⁹ Saunders, *Hill 112*, p. 66.

and particularly favoured their anti-tank measures, worked as force multipliers for the Germans. Lieutenant Sydney Jary summed it up:

When we attacked a German position the problem, although a simple one, was very difficult to overcome. Vastly superior infantry firepower, both small arms and anti-tank, was their trump card. A German infantry platoon could produce about five times our own firepower. There was just no way through the curtain of fire from the MG42s. Sometimes, by stealth, we were able to bypass it; otherwise artillery or armoured support was necessary – often both. But due to their excellent anti-tank guns, the 75mm and the 88, the use of armour could prove costly.⁶⁰

This description of the problem of attacking German positions was one which would be faced by junior officers time and again for the remainder of the campaign.

As far as interference from the *Luftwaffe* is concerned, it is often and correctly asserted that the Luftwaffe was an ineffectual force during the Normandy campaign, this may be so, but it can be seen from the war diaries that the German air force was often in action during the struggle for Hill 112. The anti-aircraft regiment of the 43rd Infantry Division report engaging enemy aircraft in groups of between twenty and forty aircraft, usually single seat fighters such as ME 109s and FW190s and occasionally JU88 and ME410 aircraft. These raids, however, appear to have become more sporadic as July wore on and sometimes consisted only of raids by single aircraft.⁶¹ Almost all of the infantry and artillery diaries report enemy aircraft formations, some large, over the divisional area and occasional bombing raids which resulted in casualties. These raids, however, did not seem to be a major or significant cause for concern when compared with other German weapons, such as mortar fire, tanks and '88s', which feature heavily in the diaries. It would be reasonable to assume that, as the Luftwaffe was sometimes appearing in relatively large numbers, its inability to participate

⁶⁰ Saunders, *Hill 112*, p. 93.

⁶¹ TNA: WO171/1129, July 1944.

effectively at Hill 112 – a battle of sufficient tactical importance to merit commitment of two panzer divisions and a heavy tank battalion - was due to active suppression by Allied fighters. There is also another possible explanation for the apparent activity of the German air force. During this period the Luftwaffe was heavily engaged in mining operations off the North French coast; it is estimated that around 4,400 mines were laid in the Seine Bight in the month following June 6 1944.⁶² The aircraft involved in these sorties would almost certainly have overflowed the front line at some point, and so might easily be assumed that they were taking a more direct part in the campaign on the mainland.

By around midday on the first day of the battle it had become clear that the German defenders had contained the 43rd's attack. As a result of this two revealing developments relating to actions of the divisional commander, Major General Thomas, took place. Firstly, an argument took place between him and Brigadier (later Field Marshal, but at the time the youngest Brigadier in the British Army at 29 years old) Carver, commander of the 4th Armoured Brigade, when pressured to order his Shermans (originally assigned to support 214 Brigade in phase III of the operation) into the battle, he refused to do so on the basis that the area in question had not been cleared of enemy anti-tank guns as previously agreed and that as a result, casualties in his formation would likely be around 75% and still fail to achieve their objectives. When Thomas asked Carver which regiment he had intended to send into the battle he told him that it was to be the Royal Scots Greys. In response Thomas replied: 'couldn't you send a less well-known regiment?'⁶³ In the event, for better or worse, Carver got his way and the Greys were not sent in, but this exchange reveals how Thomas's mind was working at the time. Not only was he apparently out of touch with real-time

⁶² Sönke Neitzel, *Der Luftkrieg über dem Nordatlantik und der Nordsee 1939-1945* (Bonn: Bernard & Graefe, 1995), pp.221-226.

⁶³ Saunders, *Hill 112*, p. 93.

events on the battlefield, but he was prepared to accept high casualties as long as the regiment was not a prestigious one.

The second event concerns Thomas's controversial last attempt to take the actual point of Hill 112 on the first day of the battle. Once it had become apparent that the original plan had failed, Thomas decided to throw in his only uncommitted battalion, the 5th Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, in a final attempt to take the summit of the hill. Thomas's decision was controversial because the value of point 112 itself was questionable as it was now obvious that the Orne could not be crossed as per the original plan. Furthermore, the supporting armour consisted only of one squadron of tanks whose commander 'would not venture his t[an]ks over the crest owing to the enemy's superior armament'⁶⁴; at least one historian has made the case that the taking of point 112 could be viewed as a face-saving measure.⁶⁵ Whatever Thomas's reasoning, his late decision to commit the 5th DCLI meant that they were given very limited time to carry out effective reconnaissance and were badly supported in terms of armour, with artillery support being described as only 'adequate'.⁶⁶ In the resulting action, the 5th DCLI sustained very high casualties. These events, early on in the campaign, seem to portray a rather bold or even hasty approach to waging war rather than the cautious, well-planned attack supported by overwhelming material advantages which is suggested by existing historiography.

The different battalions of the 43rd did not adhere to a standard format for writing up their war diaries, so it can be difficult to ascertain with absolute accuracy how many men belonging to a particular company or battalion were rendered unfit for battle – some

⁶⁴ TNA: WO171/1280, Report in unlettered appendix.

⁶⁵ Saunders, *Hill 112*, p. 125.

⁶⁶ TNA: WO 171/1280, July 1944, report in unlettered appendix.

wounded men were patched up and sent back into action, other men suffering from exhaustion would probably find themselves back with their battalion within a week. Similarly, 'missing' men were sometimes found, or made their way back to their unit. It is possibly more revealing, then, to try to ascertain how many replacements were sent to each Battalion. Again, differences in diary conventions mean that some units did not record these events, but a good idea of the numbers 'per battalion' can be gained from those that did during the period 10-31 July. It should be remembered, though, that these were the first wave of replacements, posted to allow the battalions to function; more would arrive in August.

For instance, on 13 Jul the 4th SOM were withdrawn from the line and within five days had received 12 officers and 394 other ranks as replacements. Over several days the 4th DOR received 12 officers plus 350 other ranks. The losses among the 4th DOR's officers had been so great that the 5th DOR sent three of its officers to the 4th to replace the second in command and two company commanders (Another officer from the 5th DOR was sent to command 7th HAMPS on the 13th July). The 5th DOR later received 24 more officers over the next two weeks. The 5th DCLI received 12 officers and 345 other ranks between 14th and 16th July.

The 8th MDDX (Divisional Mortar and Machine Gun regiment) did not systematically record the amount of reinforcements it received, but does mention that by the 15 July, there had been 14 killed and 99 wounded, and that 'the reinforcement outlook was gloomy'.⁶⁷ By the 20th 'the reinforcement situation was still serious, and it was found necessary to supplement two platoons of A Company with the personnel of the third, the remnants of the latter being

⁶⁷ TNA: WO 171/1347, 15 July 1944

left in reserve'. Nonetheless, on the same day: '33 reinforcements arrived, but many of these were not mortar or machine gun trained, or were very rusty. This made 47 reinforcements to date.'⁶⁸

These figures, in the context of an infantry battalion total strength of around 36 officers and 800 men, give an indication of the amount of 'new faces' that would have to be absorbed into the battalion to make it a cohesive unit once more. Furthermore, almost all of the replacements were from units not previously associated or familiar with the 43rd, and many of these were replacements for the key positions of company and platoon commanders.

Conclusion

So, how had the 43rd handled their first major battle? First, it must be remembered that the 43rd had only been in Normandy for a few days before this battle, so they could be considered to be 'green' troops. Despite this, they had fought hard and had applied their training to actual combat, sometimes with good results but at other times, depending on the situation, with failed objectives.⁶⁹ It must also be remembered that the 43rd had been fighting an enemy who was experienced and was still, at this point, well motivated and supplied; the only major German deficiency was in the air. In view of the actions that had taken place, weaknesses in the British forces seemed to be in infantry/armour cooperation, fragile tanks, and worst of all, in anti-tank measures. Time and time again, the infantryman, and sometimes his artillery colleagues, had to resort to using the PIAT. From information gleaned from the war diaries, it is evident that the supporting artillery (usually the divisional artillery), responded almost on demand to calls for fire, and was instrumental in breaking up German counter attacks, including those strongly supported by armour. It must have been

⁶⁸ TNA: WO 171/1346, 20 July 1944.

⁶⁹ Saunders, *Hill 112*, p. 103.

obvious to those who took part in the battle that, despite the training that they had received, the 43rd had some lessons to learn from their combat experiences at Hill 112. Certainly, the divisional commander was keen to promote this, and issued a note stating that 'All units would hold informal discussion groups starting on low levels in order to suck dry fighting lessons'.⁷⁰

Although the 43rd had not achieved all their planned objectives at Hill 112, they had fought their opponents to a standstill, and none of the German units that faced them would ever regain their pre-Hill 112 strength and therein lies a victory of sorts; they had ground down their enemy - but at what cost? Several historians have commented that the casualty rates at Hill 112 resemble those of the worst battles of the First World War. The cost to the 43rd was around 2000 men, replacing them would change the complexion of the division for the rest of the war.

So, what was the infantryman's experience of battle at Hill 112? There seems to be little here of the 'cautious war' that Montgomery is often credited with imposing on his divisions. The initial plan, although delayed, permitted time for adequate reconnaissance, but sometimes not to the level of platoon commander. There is no evidence of 'rehearsal' of operations, other than the demonstrations provided by 141 RAC when introducing infantrymen to flamethrowing tanks. There seems to be little involvement of specialist armour, and troops initially nominated to deploy from armoured personnel carriers were dismounted to fight on foot. Lastly, there seems to be little evidence of 'casualty conservation' other than at Brigade level. This appears to be at odds with the concept in *Colossal Cracks* that casualty conservation was important to both maintaining morale and

⁷⁰ TNA: WO 171/479.

avoiding further depletion of the already diminished pool of infantry replacements. Conversely, artillery and mortar support played a crucial part in support of the infantry – temporarily neutralising German positions in assaults, and providing (usually) timely firepower to break up the almost inevitable German counterattack. The infantrymen of the 43rd generally had a hard time at Hill 112. It is unlikely that they could have performed any better without better armoured support. The accounts of the fighting at Hill 112, tend to show that that, throughout the division, the units had operated as they had been trained. In many ways, this first action was to set the tone for the British way of war (at least as far as this division was concerned) for the remainder of the campaign. In particular, the reliance on artillery to cover for the deficiencies or absence of armour was to become a recurring theme, as was the sometimes very limited time allowed for planning; this was a crucial and limiting factor in an army which was trained to adhere strictly to ‘the plan’.

CHAPTER 3

The 43rd Division Incorporating Lessons Learned: Onwards to the Seine

Towards the end of July 1944 the battalions of the 43rd were taken out of the line for what was planned as a few days for rest and recuperation. Most of the troops enjoyed bathing facilities, fresh clothing and entertainment before their rest period was interrupted early in order to take part in Operation Bluecoat in the Mount Pinçon area with other elements from XXX Corps. This chapter will examine in some detail the battles that the division was engaged in from this rest period to the crossing of the River Seine at Vernon. This is highly relevant to this study as these actions were been conducted in the light of very recent experience of fighting at Hill 112 and the casualties that had been sustained there, and so should reveal any change to the division's way of war. Furthermore, a detailed examination of these actions would reveal any cautious or casualty-limiting ethos that might have been imposed or adopted as a result of combat experience. Finally, some measures taken for maintenance of morale – rest and recuperation – will also be examined.

Operation Bluecoat – Mont Pinçon

Operation Bluecoat was planned as a two-corps action. An attack by VIII Corps was to take place around the areas of Le Beny Bocage and the Vire, while XXX Corps, which included the 43rd, were to break through the enemy front line at Bricquessard and then to move onto and take possession of the high ground around the Ondefontaine, or Mont Pinçon, area. Montgomery's instructions regarding the operation were vague in as much as they did not give a specific geographical objective, but instead were a continuation of the Second (British) Army policy of engaging the main enemy force while the First US Army continued its advance.¹ Accordingly, the orders that the 2nd Army Commander, Dempsey, gave to his corps commanders included: 'To draw onto itself the maximum German strength – particularly armour – and weaken it', and: 'To help First Army in every way possible to get to Brittany'.²

As this operation was ordered to take place almost immediately, opportunities for effective planning were severely limited. Given the time lag between briefings and 'O' groups (literally, a grouping of subordinates so that a commander can disseminate his orders), this time was whittled down even further as instructions cascaded to battalion, company, platoon and section level; there was also little chance for 2nd Army logisticians to stockpile the usual requisite ammunition and equipment for such an attack. Furthermore, Montgomery had ordered that the formations detailed to the operation be committed piecemeal as they arrived at the front.³ As if this did not seem risky enough, Montgomery had stated in a letter to Eisenhower that 'I have ordered Dempsey to throw all caution

¹ Hart, p. 72.

² Peter Rostron, *The Military Life & Times of General Sir Miles Dempsey GBE KCB DSO MC, Monty's Army Commander* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword, 2010), p. 120.

³ Hart, p. 38.

overboard and to take any risks he likes, and to accept any casualties, and to step on the gas to Vire.’⁴ Even if a cynic might view this last statement as being designed perhaps to dispel American concerns about British caution, these factors tend to suggest a decidedly *incautious* way of war, and there is no sign here that either Montgomery or Dempsey were primarily concerned with casualty conservation or preserving morale of the 43rd, who had very recently finished fighting at Hill 112, and had had their rest period interrupted for this major assault.

The plan for the 43rd's part in the operation, at the centre of XXX Corps, was for 130 Brigade, augmented by 4th SLI (‘borrowed’ from 129 Brigade), to penetrate the German defences and form a bridgehead over a stream to allow engineers mounted in AVsRE to prepare a path for the armoured support. 214 Brigade would then pass through and advance the four or so miles to the crossroads at Pierre du Fresne. It was then the task of 129 Brigade to carry on the advance. ‘H’ hour for this operation was programmed for 0800 on 30 July. The attack was to be preceded by artillery concentrations on likely targets and a heavy aerial bombardment by the RAF.

Most of the units of the 43rd which were to take part in the initial phases of the attack received their orders in the early morning of the previous day (29th July) which, when travelling time is taken into account, left little time for good reconnaissance. The Commanding Officer and company commanders of 4th DOR, however, managed ‘a last final

⁴ Hastings, p. 294.

rece to view the ground over which the attack was to take place' at 0515.⁵ Some of the divisional artillery units received their fire plans on or around 0545.⁶

At 'H' hour, the 5th DORs' three-company assault quickly ran into trouble; in avoiding a known minefield, 'C' Company ran into an unlocated one and suffered casualties, including its commander. 'B' Company made some progress before being stopped by heavy mortar and artillery fire which neutralised the entire company headquarters team except for the commander himself. 'A' Company made some headway but were stopped by heavy fire and later had to withdraw due to 'heavy casualties'⁷ The battalion found itself around 300 yards from its start point and unable to move due to the combined factors of heavy enemy fire, mines and booby traps, and the restricting nature of the bocage countryside. Tanks were summoned to assist, but were unable to do so for the same reasons. 'D' Company remained at its forming up point, unable to move forwards. The battalion remained in their positions for the remainder of the day, by the end of which a company commander and two platoon commanders – all officers – had been wounded, 15 other ranks were killed and 65 were wounded; 15 more were missing. As a result of the inability of the 5th DOR to advance, the 4th DOR's advance was postponed and then cancelled. The other assaulting units were more successful. The 7th HAMPS waited in their forming up point, where they were intermittently shelled and mortared (and sustained several casualties) until they made an improvised assault on the right flank, screened by smoke shells, at 1700. Their attack was successful and they began digging in on their objective at 2215. They were then subjected to a series of counter attacks until dawn, which included an air strike carried out by around 12 enemy aircraft . The 4th SOMLI were on their objective by 1300 despite encountering *Teller* and

⁵ TNA: WO171/1286, 30 July 1944.

⁶ TNA: WO 171/985, 30 July 1944.

⁷ TNA: WO 171/1287, 30 July 1944.

Schu mines, and company-strength opposition and took 32 prisoners. Corporal Doug Proctor in 18 Platoon remembers: 'Scrambling out of our slits we began to advance and immediately ran into a hail of small arms fire. The field was strewn with anti-personnel mines. It was a lottery where one trod.'⁸ In the absence of flail tanks, mines had to be lifted manually by pioneers while under small arms fire to prepare a way through for the armoured support.

The divisional artillery was on hand to provide the usual support, and the 94th FRRA war diary reports many supporting tasks, including 'engaging with red smoke for Rocket Typhoons' but also records 'Minimum amm[unition] expenditure ordered on all tasks' but does not give a reason why this was given. A further indication of possible ammunition supply problems for this unit is noted on the following day when 'Ordered to thicken smoke screen 'Camberley' – am[unition] situation would not stand this as 1000 r[ounds] held up on road.'⁹ In the event, the task was taken up by another artillery unit.

In spite of the hold up with 5th DOR, phase II of the operation went ahead the following day with slow but steady success and by the end of the second day the division was in a position to be able to prepare for 214 Brigade to take part in phase III of Operation Bluecoat. By the end of 5th August the division had had a hard fight to get within striking distance of Mont Pinçon. 130 Brigade HQ war diary notes that:

This War Diary conveys very little of the fighting that has been going on for the last week. B[atallio]ns have been in action continuously for seven days and the t[roops] have stood the strain – a very great strain – magnificently. The enemy has been very loathe to leave his positions and has fought strongly. The B[rigade] has advanced fourteen miles in a direct line and NOT once has it NOT been in the forefront of the battle – no mean achievement. Casualties there have been – inevitable in a fighting

⁸ Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, p. 116.

⁹ TNA: WO 171983, 30-31 July 1944.

advance of this kind, and battalions are considerably below strength in officers and men.¹⁰

The sense of achievement is evident in this comment, and the reference to casualties highly relevant as these had indeed been high; 5th WILTS reported: 'Owing to heavy casualties 'A' and 'B' Companies join forces, also 'C' and 'D' Coys'.¹¹ The 5th DCLI give as an example: 'D' Company reduced to Company Command and 40 men.'¹² The establishment strength of a rifle company would normally be five officers and 122 men.

Other battalions had not had such a difficult time, but in general the infantry had had to fight hard for the advances made, often with little armoured support as the tanks simply could not operate in the close bocage of that part of Normandy. For their part, the Germans generally put up a resolute defence which had the usual features of very heavy machine gun and mortar fire assisted by tanks and anti-tank weapons; comprehensive use of mines and booby-traps also tended to blunt the 43rd's attacks. On 5th August, an attack by 4th WILTS on St Jean-le-blanc to the south of Mont Pinçon was abandoned due to it being too strongly held.¹³ Major 'Dim' Robbins remembered: 'There were a lot of casualties – on both sides. No Germans surrendered. They fought to the end and must have been a rearguard company set with that task. The cost of that little battle for that day was one officer and twenty-one other ranks killed, two officers and thirty-seven other ranks wounded and, with depleted companies, that's a lot.'¹⁴ Furthermore, German counter-attacks, by now considered to be almost inevitable, were also often strong and well-supported, and required artillery support to break them up.

¹⁰ TNA: WO 171/660, 5 August 1944.

¹¹ TNA: WO 171/1395, 6 August 1944.

¹² TNA: WO 171/1281, 3 August 1944.

¹³ On the orders of the GOC, Gen. Thomas.

¹⁴ Eric Hunt, *Mont Pinçon* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2003), pp. 96-99.

Operation Blackwater

On 6 August the 43rd was in a position to make an assault on Mont Pinçon proper as part of Operation Blackwater. General Thomas's plan was for 129 Brigade to make its attack from the west while 130 Brigade made a diversionary assault from the north west.

The feint by 130 Brigade, in fact, consisted of a three-phase assault by one battalion, the 7 HAMPS, commencing at 1100. The first two companies to advance (C and D) achieved their objectives unopposed, but the follow-up companies were subjected to heavy mortar fire. Of these, B Company managed to reach its objective but A Company suffered heavy casualties, including its commander, and was forced back to regroup in D Company's area. Artillery support was then called for and engaged the point of resistance three times. In view of the tenacity of the resistance here it was decided to by-pass it. Accordingly, B and C Companies advanced until they were stopped by heavy machine gun fire. A, B and C companies were then ordered to withdraw to Pleciere where they were 'sniped and mortared with great regularity' while the area of opposition was subjected to artillery concentrations until 2300. Approximate company strengths at the end of the day stood as follows: 'A C[ompan]y 2 officers and 23 O[ther]R[anks]. B Coy 3 officers and 27 ORs. C Coy no officers and 26 ORs.¹⁵ As previously mentioned, the compliment strength of these companies should have been five officers and 122 men, so the total depletion to this battalion must surely have affected its operational capability.

The main attack by 129 Brigade was a two pronged attack; 4 SOMLI to the left and 5 WILTS to the right, each supported by a squadron of 13/18 Hussars. 4 WILTS were in reserve.

Planning for their part in the operation went on through the night, and their advance

¹⁵ TNA: WO 171/1306, 6 August 1944.

commenced at around 1430 on the afternoon of the 6th August. They met with fierce resistance: the war diary for 4SOMLI records simply: '1500 - Leading Coys pinned by enfilade MG and heavy mortar fire. Efforts of rear Coys to lead on unsuccessful. Casualties moderate against such fierce opposition. 2230 – 5 Wilts flanked summit and Bn then advanced against a less determined enemy worn down by constant shelling.'¹⁶ The men involved in the attack have rather more to say. Sydney Jary:

'B' Company moved off quickly with our Company deployed about three hundred yards behind. Their forward platoons had barely crossed the stream when concentrated Spandau fire came from the front of both flanks. There must have been about twelve machine guns firing at one time. This devastating display of firepower stopped the battalion in its tracks. There was no way forward or round it and no way to retire. In my ignorance I expected that the enemy machine gunners would soon expend their ammunition. They did not. Nor did they in dozens of subsequent battles. Any movement by 'B' Company to our front brought down instant and concentrated Spandau fire. The same applied to us, a few hundred yards to their rear. Fortunately the enemy did not seem to have any anti-tank guns so our armoured friends were comparatively safe, but the fact remained that about twelve Spandaus had halted a battalion attack without our locating even one of them.¹⁷

Doug Proctor recalls: 'The enemy waited until all the battalion was exposed, every man jack of us, then they opened up with about a dozen Spandaus strategically placed all over the hillside and we couldn't spot them at all. All we could do was hug the ground. We hugged the ground for six hours.'¹⁸ Artillery support could only provide modest help. Captain Nicholls of the 94th FRRR recalls that: 'The F[orward] O[bservation] O[fficer] there was Capt[ain]. Clarke. Clarke crept forward and shouted fire orders back. Two Boche machine guns were shot up, but the enemy began to use heavy mortars and 105mm guns against us. The situation was grim.'¹⁹ These eyewitness accounts vividly convey the ferocity of the

¹⁶ TNA: WO 171/1395, 6 August 1944.

¹⁷ Sydney Jary, *18 Platoon* (Winchester: The Rifles Regimental Headquarters, 2009), pp. 8-10.

¹⁸ Hunt, p. 113.

¹⁹ Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, p. 132.

defence that was encountered here and clearly underline the importance of artillery in infantry attacks such as this. Later that evening, however, the battalion advanced unopposed under the cover of darkness and smoke screen to the summit.

To the right, the 5th WILTS made their attack. Their war diary records: 'B[attalion]n reached X [cross] R[oads] 821448 having suffered h[ea]vy cas[ualties] inc[luding] CO. Major Roberts, 4 Som[erset] L[ight] I[nfantry] took command of B[attalion]n. Only 63 Riflemen out of 4 Coys were then in action. These were formed into all round defence to hold X Rds 821448, which was vital to keep open the communications of the other B[attalion]ns of the B[rigade] and protect the right flank which was otherwise completely open.'²⁰ Again, this brief passage in the war diary does not convey the whole picture. Captain Peace remembers the beginning of the operation and the supporting armour:

We had formed into two companies – that's all we had the strength for. We did have a number of sappers, I remember and we also had the support of the 13/18th Hussars. They were splendid chaps; they were prepared to lead us into battle and not every tank squadron was prepared to do that. The start of the attack was delayed until about 2 o'clock, maybe 2.30. It started with the usual artillery barrage.²¹

The attack met with strong opposition. Lance Corporal Hennesey, a Sherman commander of the 13/18th Hussars recalls:

We had fought our way to the foot of the hill against very heavy machine gun and mortar fire, which was taking a steady toll of the infantry. The pioneers were working to clear the mines on the bridge under cover of a smoke screen and in the face of considerable enemy fire. As soon as the bridge was clear we went across the bridge in tanks with the infantry following. They had got about half way when the enemy came to life with machine guns and mortars, catching them in the open. Within minutes the two leading companies were practically wiped out.²²

²⁰ TNA: WO171/1395, 6 August 1944.

²¹ Hunt, p. 113.

²² Hunt, p. 114.

The 5th WILTS, however, continued with their attack – they had been ordered by their brigadier to take their objective ‘at all costs’. They were successful and managed to hold a vital crossroads to enable the advance of the 4th WILTS. They were however, in their depleted state, outnumbered by the prisoners that they had taken, which numbered ‘well over a hundred’.²³ This is just another example of British infantrymen being driven hard into attacks; there is little evidence of a cautious way of war here.

The 4th WILTS were ordered to make their advance at around 1800 on the same day, but at this time they were over two miles away to the north west and it would take them some time to arrive at the start line. In view of this and due to a developing enemy artillery barrage, the supporting CO of the supporting armour (13/18th Hussars) was unwilling to wait for their arrival and sent ‘A’ Squadron to mount a patrol of the hill. Captain Denny wrote later:

Lieutenant Colonel Dunkerly ordered Major Wormald to send a patrol to the top of the hill, warning him at the same time that there were almost certainly 88mm anti-tank guns and enemy infantry in position on the summit. For the best part of two months the regiment had been fighting in the closest possible co-ordination with infantry, and it was considered a very dangerous performance in the close Normandy country to advance without infantry and artillery support. By half past six we had seven tanks in an all-round position on the summit.’²⁴

The possession of the summit was quickly consolidated and allowed the advance up the hill of the infantry and further armoured support. This stands as a good example of an officer willing to break with ‘the plan’ to seize what he felt was a viable opportunity to exploit a situation. It also stands as an example that caution was not the main factor in the way of

²³ Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, p. 133-134.

²⁴ Hunt, pp. 119-121.

war here. This was by no means end of the action at Mont Pinçon, however. There were pockets of very strong resistance remaining on the hill itself and in the outlying areas, particularly at la Varnière, le Quesne and le Plessis Grimoult. These were dealt with by the battalions of 214 and 130 Brigades which had, by now, relieved the exhausted and depleted battalions of 129 Brigade. These actions were, of course, subjected to the usual enemy counter attacks and artillery bombardments, but the majority of enemy troops that had been on and around the hill during the night of 6 August were driven off the hill during the course of the next two days.

The action at le Plessis Grimoult was a particularly successful operation which involved a feint attack by one platoon of 1st WORCS and one squadron of 4/7th Dragoons with an artillery barrage. The main attack by 5th DCLI and two squadrons of the 4/7th took place an hour later and resulted in complete success in just over two hours of fighting. The total cost to the battalion was one killed, five wounded and one missing. Enemy casualties consisted of around thirty killed and 125 taken prisoner. 'Many P[risoners of] W[ar] had arrived in the village just in time to be attacked! Many Poles, also some Russians and Jugo Slavs'.²⁵ Also included in the enemy casualties was an armoured car and – a first in Normandy – a Tiger II knocked out with an incredibly lucky shot from 2" mortar. The success of this operation appears to have been a considerable boost to those in command and taking part; the relief and exultation hidden between the written lines of the war diaries is palpable.

The artillery contribution to the operations during Operation Bluecoat and on Mont Pinçon appears to have remained consistently dependable, despite the very occasional occurrence of 'shorts'. The only other discernible limitation of the artillery was the previously-

²⁵ TNA: WO 171/1281, 7 August 1944.

mentioned measures to conserve ammunition and a shortage of particular types of ammunition. This is possibly a result of the Operation being executed with little time to stockpile the by now usual ample supply of ammunition.

For the 43rd's anti-aircraft artillery, the 110th LAA, however, changes were afoot. Since mid July the anti-aircraft gunners, although still engaging enemy aircraft, were being presented with progressively fewer targets. On 18 July a 2nd Army order severely restricted the gunners from firing at targets at night unless directly attacked. During the Bluecoat operation the 110th LAA war diary does not mention any engagements at all. Most days, in fact, are written up as 'Enemy air activity nil.'²⁶ The regiment was, however, being used to assist the division in other ways. For instance, on the 5th August the regiment 'supplied 18 Bedford LAA tractors to move Inf[antry] of 214 Brigade'; and on the 6th: '200 men of Reg[imen]t deployed at Hammel 7742 to recce route for F[iel]d Reg[imen]t area but operation was cancelled and men returned to B[atter]ys'.²⁷

Perhaps this was a pre-emptive approach to the deployment of the anti-aircraft gunners, as a 2nd Army order dated 4th August details the disbandment of a significant number of them. Correspondingly, on 7th August the 100th LAA war diary notes that: 'Reg[imen]t reduced by one 40mm Troop and one 20mm Troop per B[at]t[er]y'. The following day six troops were divided up and either redistributed within the division: 42-44 men directly to each infantry battalion, 54 directly to the division's Machine Gun Regiment (8th MDDX) and another 18 men and a number of officers redistributed within the divisional artillery organisation. The remainder, around 160 men and 15 officers, 'were dispatched to 30RHU for passage home

²⁶ TNA: WO 171/1129.

²⁷ TNA: WO 171/1129, 5-6 August 1944.

to be trained as R[oyal] A[rtilillery] and Inf[antry].'²⁸ Clearly, the casualties among the infantry divisions had been severe enough to commence redeploying first-line troops within their own organisations without a period of training or retraining.

Command handling

Command handling of Operation Bluecoat and the action at Mont Pinçon merits examination as it illustrates well what the British way of war was at this stage of the campaign and was directly responsible for the deployment of the division. It has already been explained how the operation was conceived and executed in a very short space of time, which allowed only limited planning and organisation of assets. This is at direct odds with the view that Montgomery was waging a cautious or methodical war and would only commit to an assault once he had accumulated enough formations and logistic support to virtually guarantee success. Another factor to be considered is Montgomery's handling of his senior officers. Early on in the operation the commanders of XXX Corps, General Bucknall, and 7th Armoured Division, Major General Erskine, were sacked. Montgomery commented:

It was clear that great energy and drive would be necessary, and great risks could be taken. It is in these latter days that General Bucknall has failed. He is very careful. He is nearly always 24 hours too late. General Dempsey and myself have tried to guide General Bucknall and quicken him up. But I am now convinced it is not possible.²⁹

Montgomery's view was backed up by General Pyman: 'The dismissal of Bucknall and Erskine was fully justified – they made no effort to push hard.'³⁰ In looking for a replacement, Montgomery looked for someone to: 'drive them headlong into, and through,

²⁸ TNA: WO 171/1129, 6-8 August & Appendices 'A' and 'B'.

²⁹ Rostron, p. 122.

³⁰ Rostron, p. 123.

gaps torn in the enemy defence – not worrying about flanks or anything’.³¹ It would appear, then, that the two generals had been replaced because they did not drive forward their men hard enough and had worried a little too much about their flanks (a feature of the desert fighting to which they were accustomed). In other words, they were sacked for being too cautious; this certainly appears to question Montgomery’s apparent preference for caution – at least at the sharp end of battle.

The circumstances of these removals were open to debate and Bucknall certainly challenged the decision, but the removal of these two fairly senior officers, together with their respective staffs – totalling around a hundred key officers within their organisations – is likely to have had an adverse affect on the conduct of the battle in progress. They, after all, had planned their operations and were actually in the process of executing them.

Furthermore, the message would have been clear to all the other British and Canadian commanders (including, of course, Thomas and Ross of the two divisions considered here) - all of them career soldiers with an eye on promotion - that failure to drive your men hard in battle and to not take risks was a career-limiting option. It is abundantly clear that Montgomery wanted dynamic officers who were willing to take risks and fight very hard; these are logical qualities for fighting men who are to win decisive victories; but they are often difficult to reconcile with a view that the British Army command was overly concerned with conservation of its casualties. There is evidence that this ruthlessness in dealing with officers who did not drive their formations hard enough had filtered through divisional organisations: ‘In the afternoon, the Div[isional] Com[man]d arrived forward and ordered Lt. Col. B.A. Coad who was commanding 5th DOR, to take over com[man]d of the B[rigade] from Brig N.D. Leslie – operations had apparently NOT gone as quickly as the Div[isional]

³¹ Rostron, p. 122.

Com[man]d desired.’ In this case though: ‘The acting B[riga]de Com[man]d then called off any further operations and made a new plan’³² The evidence here is clear – these operations were hastily conceived and prepared and the troops were expected by their commanders to be driven hard into battle. These are not factors that can be described as cautious or designed to conserve casualties.

The actions on and around Mont Pinçon during the first week of August 1944 represented some of the fiercest fighting thus far in North West Europe. Certainly, some elements of the 43rd had again sustained very high casualties very soon after those taken at Hill 112. These were casualties that the British army – particularly the infantry – simply could not afford. The war diaries do mention the casualty situation, but very rarely judge the command decisions that produced them. The annexes to the war diary for the 5th DCLI, however, contain an interesting digest of the action at Mont Pinçon, and the lessons that the unit drew from their experiences there. Firstly, the report makes an interesting comment regarding the latitude given to the battalion commander to exercise his initiative in a developing situation:

At 0930 hours B[attalio]n C[omma]nd, on his own auth[orit]y, decided to put the time [of the attack] back 15 minutes owing to the necessity of co-ordinating the various s[u]p[port] arms and to ensure that C[ompan]y Com[man]ds saw the ground, the mist having cleared to some extent now. Later an extra 30 min[ute]s was requested to allow Typhoons to operate against the t[ank]s. This was refused.³³

This shows that battalion commanders did exercise a level of autonomy, but also appears to suggest that creative measures to prosecute an attack – and deal with enemy armour when anti-tank measure were in short supply - were negated by those in higher authority. This

³² TNA: WO 171/660, 13 August 1944.

³³ TNA: WO 171/1281, Appendix ‘A’ to August 1944.

tends to reinforce the picture of British officers at battalion level not being able to react quickly to events on the ground due to higher level insistence on 'following the plan' in accordance with pre-war training doctrine, or: 'being "locked" into the timetables of meticulously planned large battles'.³⁴ As the attack progressed, the infantry were stopped by around seven tanks. These could not be challenged by British armour as the supporting tanks 'could not find a suitable tank run into the enemy positions. The only tank run was covered by an enemy t[an]k in a hull down position'³⁵ This tank was subjected to determined infantry attack - one Lieutenant Goudge managed to hit it with a PIAT four times - but with no effect. An hour later, attempts were made to destroy the tanks with artillery fire and also anti-tank guns which only now were being brought up 'for consolidation'. Half an hour later 'the enemy tanks had reduced the two leading companies to a mere handful. Most of the PIAT men had been knocked out and a number of PIATS destroyed'.³⁶ Once the enemy had withdrawn, it was discovered that three German tanks had been knocked out, one by British tanks, one with a 17-pounder anti-tank gun, and one by PIAT.

The document goes on to list several other 'lessons learnt' from this action. These have been included below as they illustrate well the first-hand dissatisfaction with existing arrangements :

Lesson 2. The infantryman is NOT adequately armed to deal with t[an]ks by day. The PIAT, while a useful weapon, must not be over-rated e.g. in this action all the enemy t[an]ks were hit several times but only one destroyed. It is suggested that the proper way to deal with such pos[itio]ns, if we are to avoid h[eav]y infantry losses, is by t[an]k hunting patrols to attack the t[an]ks in their harbours at night. At least 24hrs to be spent collecting inf[ormatio]n and planning such op[eratio]ns.

³⁴ Jary, p.19.

³⁵ TNA: WO 171/1281, Appendix 'A' to August 1944.

³⁶ TNA: WO 171/1281, August 1944, Appendix 'A'.

The message here is quite clear; the Infantry did not consider themselves to be adequately equipped to be able to deal with enemy tanks in open combat on their own. The proposal here was not that the enemy tank problem be given to the RAF, the artillery, or even the Anti-tank regiment – they seemed happy enough to be allowed to deal with them through proactive patrolling themselves, given enough time. The *Infantry Training Handbook of 1944* certainly suggests that tank hunting at night, as mentioned by this report, might be a viable solution to the tank problem.³⁷

Lesson 3. One pl[atoon] [of] each rifle company should be organised as a heavy pl[atoon], each sec[tion] being armed with a PIAT and other a[n]ti t[an]k weapons of the gren[ade] variety. The remaining two pl[atoon]s to be armed as at present or, alternatively, a h[eav]y PIAT sec[tion] in each pl[atoon].³⁸

Here, the 5th DCLI were simply proposing that more infantry anti-tank weapons be made available to them to defend themselves against the armoured threat. This illustrates British problems with the supply of hand-held infantry weapons and providing coherent ant-tank support in assaults in 'close' terrain. As we have seen, towed anti-tank weapons were difficult to use in the attack mode, and British self propelled anti-tank armour was both fragile and scarce.

Lesson 4. In many aspects this is a patrol war and it is further suggested that small inf[antry] patrols by day with wireless sets can be used to locate enemy pos[itions] and bring h[eav]y [and] med[ium] art[iller]y onto t[an]ks. This b[attalio]n has sent a number of small three men patrols deep into enemy territory with little or no difficulty. A sq[adro]n a t[an]ks should be permanently att[ached] under [the] command [of] each Battalion Command for this close country warfare and live in b[attalio]n HQ mess. This will lead to eventual close co-operation.

³⁷ *Infantry Training Part VIII*, (London: The War Office, 1944), pp. 127-128.

³⁸ TNA: WO 171/1281, Appendix 'A' to August 1944.

Lesson 5. Each carrier in the carrier pl[atoon] should also carry a PIAT.³⁹

Again, here the DCLI proposed an infantry based solution to the enemy tank threat, and also drew attention to a need for better understanding and closer co-operation between the infantry and their own armour by the permanent allocation of armoured support. This idea perhaps had its basis in the success of the permanent artillery/infantry allocation already in existence.

Lesson 6. 2-in[ch] mor[tar] coloured smoke could be used, if obtainable, by the forward pl[atoon]s to indicate exactly to the RAF where the t[an]ks are. We would be willing to accept a safety limit of 500x [yards].

Lesson 7. We are too r[oad] bound. Specially equipped co[mpan]y patrols could be pushed through the wooded country to lay mines and trap the enemy tanks.

Lesson 8. Could b[attalio]n c[omman]ds be trusted with the full plan so that planning a feint attack could be executed with the necessary economy of forces.

Finally. Some-one on the very highest level has really got to get his thinking cap on to work out quickly the necessary adjustments in our tactics and organisation to meet the peculiarities of the terrain and enemy def[ending] rear-g[uar]d tactics, as we cannot afford heavy losses in trained riflemen. This is not the Desert War nor is it 1914-18. It is perhaps nearer the type of the Burma fighting except there are more r[oad]s.⁴⁰

The first six of these 'lessons' tell a tale of infantrymen perhaps being at the end of their tether in having to deal with enemy tanks with little support, and the apparent lack of PIAT weapons suggests that the battalions did not enjoy the massive material superiority that has often been suggested in the campaign's historiography. The last two paragraphs, however, are perhaps the most telling. They are an accusation that commanders at battalion level were not being properly briefed in enough detail so that appropriate planning (to conserve casualties) could take place. Lastly, there was significant – significant enough for it to be put

³⁹ TNA: WO 171/1281, Appendix 'A' to August 1944.

⁴⁰ TNA: WO 171/1281, Appendix 'A' to August 1944.

into print – dissatisfaction with the tactics being used by the command ‘at the very highest level’ and baldly stated that, at battalion level, the current losses were unsustainable.

There are some indications, however, that the units of the 43rd and its accompanying armour were beginning to work well together, and were actively seeking ways of improving their combat efficiency. For example, Operation Bluecoat is the first action in which the participants comment on the use of ‘quick lift’ – the practice of tanks advancing to the start line carrying their infantry units on the tanks themselves. The taking of Mont Pinçon was not the end of Operation Blackwater, the final phase of which was for the 43rd to advance to the river Noireau (‘black water’) to establish a bridgehead.

Rest

During the period from 7th to 22nd of August, the battalions of the 43rd were allowed short opportunities for rest and continued with operations. The war diary of 129 Brigade Headquarters mentions being relieved by 214 brigade on 7th August and then being at rest until the 10th, when it relieved 131 Infantry Brigade (of the 7th Armoured Division) and continued with a series of patrols, mine clearance and mopping up operations with slight or no opposition. The battalions recorded this period in more detail: The 4th SOMLI were relieved at 1330 on 7th Aug to rest, but were ordered to move at 2330 on 9th.⁴¹ The battalion then advanced meeting little opposition and taking a steady trickle of prisoners and deserters, either singly or in small groups.

The 4th WILTS were relieved at 1200 on 7th Aug to rest ‘well earned as there had been hardly any sleep for 48 hrs and the rifle companies had a great deal of marching’.⁴² Use was

⁴¹ TNA: WO 171/1372, 7-9 August 1944.

⁴² TNA: WO 171/1394, 7 August 44

made of bathing units and ENSA entertainment.⁴³ Overnight on 9th August, the battalion moved into the line and spent a quiet couple of days holding XXX Corps' left flank. The battalion was then relieved in order to take up the advance for the next few days meeting only light opposition. The 5th WILTS were relieved at 1900 hours on 7th August and moved back into the line in the early hours of 10th August and suffered several casualties due to shelling. Over the next few days, the battalion advanced to objectives encountering little or no opposition.⁴⁴

For 130 Brigade, there were similar experiences. The 4th DOR remained in the line and at a high state of alert, including mounting patrols, until 1600 on 10th August when it was told that it could rest in the positions it already occupied. At 1400 the following day, the battalion was put at one hour's notice to move, but the battalion went back on offensive operations at 0800 on the 13th August for a period of five days. Their advance met with little organised opposition, but the war diary records the formation being machine gunned by Allied Thunderbolt aircraft on the 14th August.⁴⁵ This was followed by four days rest.

The 5th DOR had rather better opportunities for rest periods, achieving around three days between 10-13th August and five days between 15-22nd August. This battalion also took part in a very successful operation at Proussy on the 14th August. Here, the infantry attack against a strongly-held orchard was supported by two troops of tanks, and 14 field and two medium regiments of artillery. Unsurprisingly, battalion objectives were taken within 130

⁴³ The role and value of the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA), and the Central Pool of Artistes (CPA) are often overlooked in the historiography of the campaign but the war diaries and first-hand accounts give a consistently positive and appreciative view of the entertainment provided. This, and other facilities provided during rest periods, however short, indicates that considerable thought and effort had been put into maintenance of morale. Good discussion and comment on entertainment as a factor in morale can be found in: Jeremy Crang *The British Army and the People's War 1939-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

⁴⁴ TNA: WO 171/1395, 7-13 August 1944

⁴⁵ TNA: WO 171/1286, 10-14 August 1944.

minutes and produced 165 prisoners. Casualties were relatively light and amounted to one officer killed and two wounded; three other ranks were killed and twenty more wounded.⁴⁶

Following the action at Mont Pinçon, the 7th HAMPS had several quiet days when they took advantage of the time for 'interior economy' and bath units. The 14th August saw them in action in an attack on St. Denis de Mère. Armoured support consisted of one troop of tanks. Artillery support consisted of a preceding 40 minute concentration by three medium and one heavy regiment; the attack itself was accompanied by a barrage by six field and three medium artillery regiments. In addition, protective artillery support from three field regiments was provided once the attacking barrage had concluded.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, opposition was encountered from machine gunners and self propelled guns. All objectives were achieved within 3 hours and 45 minutes for the loss of three other ranks killed. One officer and 23 other ranks were wounded.⁴⁸ In addition, four Shermans were lost to the Self Propelled guns. 74 prisoners were taken. The remainder of August, up until the preparations for the crossing of the River Seine commenced, were spent in operations that were unopposed or under rest conditions.

These two minor actions were very successful, and were reminiscent of events in the '100 days' of 1918, and show what the infantry could achieve – at relatively little cost – if the conditions were right. In these cases, the 'standout factor' is the artillery; as usual, the infantry here were supported by heavy, short, initial bombardments. Furthermore, they could also call upon massive (around 16 regiments of various calibres) concentrations from what appear to be highly competent artillery regiments. The division's own gunners, when

⁴⁶ TNA: WO 171/1287, 14 August 1944.

⁴⁷ TNA: WO 171/1306, 14 August 1944.

⁴⁸ TNA: WO 171/1306, 14 August 1944.

not actually engaged in these actions, seem to have been fully employed and continued to provide a consistently high level of support. From the war diaries it can be seen that the 94th FRRRA provided a 24-hour on-call support service until it was rested from 17th to 22nd August. The other two artillery regimental diaries are much less detailed but there seems to be little reason to doubt that they provided a similar service.

The battalions of 214 Brigade, meanwhile, were allotted a variety of tasks; 7th SOMLI remained in the front line in the Mont Pinçon area, and took part in assaults on le Plessis Grimoult. On the 9th August the battalion attacked Les Hameaux, Hau-au-Roi and Le Saussay, where a successful attack resulted in the taking of around 250 prisoners. The preparation time for this attack was severely limited; the battalion Commanding Officer left for his briefing at 0730 and returned to brief his company commanders at 1045 for an operation which had an 'H' Hour (start time) of 1200. It quickly became obvious that neither the infantry or the armoured support (one squadron of 4/7) would be ready for the proposed start time. Accordingly, the CO postponed 'H' hour to 1230 and informed artillery support of his decision. At 1145 the gunners replied that the postponement could not be complied with. As the attack commenced, the gunners then reported that the postponement could be complied with and the new 'H' hour would be in force. Once more, notwithstanding the necessity for battalion commanders to be able to react quickly and decisively to orders, this is another case of insufficient time to properly prepare for a battalion-sized assault; in this case it led to confusion with the supporting artillery, a vital component in any assault. In this attack, however, the squadron of tanks detailed for support 'were up on the objective with the leading troops. One tank accompanied D

Co[mpan]y all the way'.⁴⁹ As stated, the attack was a success, and all objectives were taken by 1830, but at a cost of 7 officers and 79 other ranks. Up until 22 August the battalion remained active in the front line area and appears to have been rested at Le Canet between 16th and 21st. The 1st WORCS were ordered to remain in the front line area and were deployed in a number of small but bloody attacks until the 17th August when they were allowed to rest until the 21st.

The 5th DCLI were given a day's rest on 9 August (except for 'B' Company who were attached to the 7th SOMLI to assist in their attack), and up until 18th August the battalion was engaged in front line activity, either holding the line while other troops could be relieved, or participating in small-scale battalion attacks. From the 18th to the 21st August the battalion rested and took advantage of training and entertainment programmes. During this period the battalion decided to reorganise the formation of its companies because of the casualties it had received. Even though 38 replacements had been received it was felt necessary to reform the battalion into three strong companies rather than continue with four weak ones.⁵⁰ This is a clear indication that the system in place for providing replacement riflemen was not coping with the level of casualties experienced by the 43rd. If any genuine measures had been taken to conserve casualties for the British Army in Worth West Europe, they were clearly not working.

Overall, from the start of operations on Hill 112, the 43rd seems to have operated with remarkably few opportunities for rest or retraining or assimilation of the replacements it received. Given that Hill 112 and Mont Pinçon were difficult operations which resulted in many casualties, and were fought under very demanding circumstances, it is surprising that

⁴⁹ TNA: WO 171/1373, Appendix 'B' to August 1944.

⁵⁰ TNA: WO 171/1281, 18-21 August 1944.

little seems to have been done, other than limited provision of baths and entertainment, to maintain the morale of the 43rd. Furthermore, this seems to be at odds with a view which tends to suggest that casualty conservation and maintenance of morale was an important factor in the campaign, and there seems to have been no change to the division's way of war at senior command level as a result of the division's experiences at Hill 112. On the contrary, the division was pushed hard by its commander. Nonetheless, the 43rd was no longer a 'green' division – it now had considerable battle experience fighting some of the most able and experienced elements of the German Army in North West Europe.

Crossing the Seine

As the Allied armies moved west, they encountered the natural obstacle of the river Seine. The bridges across the Seine had all previously been destroyed by Allied bombing in an attempt to seal off the beachhead and the general Normandy area from German reinforcement and logistics movement.⁵¹ This measure also gave the Allies a second opportunity to destroy German forces – especially those that had escaped from the Falaise pocket – that still remained to the west of the river. Indeed, one German division lost around 1500 of its horses trying to swim the river, and its fighting strength reduced to 300 men.⁵² It was also important that the Allies forced a crossing across the Seine before it could be properly invested as a defensive feature. The 43rd were chosen for the British crossing by XXX Corps Commander, General Horrocks:

Commander, Major General G. I. Thomas, though a very difficult man, was an immensely able Divisional Commander, and nobody in the British Army had given more detailed thought to the problem of crossing rivers in the face of opposition. For two-and-a-half years before D-Day he had exercised his troops in this most exasperating and complex type of operation, including the crossing of the Medway,

⁵¹ Ken Ford, *Assault Crossing: The River Seine 1944* (Newton Abbott, David & Charles, 1988), p. 9.

⁵² North, p. 79.

the Rother, and the aptly-named Reading Sewer, preferably in the tidal reaches and by night, in heavy rain and in mid-winter. With the forcing of a crossing at Vernon, in the teeth of enemy fire, one of the great rivers of Europe, over 650 feet wide, with a strong current and muddy bottom, his hour was about to come.⁵³

According to the corps commander, then, the 43rd were chosen on the basis of the training that they had received. Thomas was given his orders on the evening of the 22nd August: 'To force the crossing of the Seine at Vernon on or about the 25th August - to cover the construction of a Class 9, and a Class 40 bridge – to form a bridgehead of sufficient depth to allow the passage through of the remainder of the Corps'.⁵⁴ By 2100, Thomas had come up with his plan for the operation – codenamed 'Neptune' – and briefed the unit commanders involved that evening.⁵⁵ As Thomas left the briefing he remarked: 'This is the sort of operation that the Staff College would lay down that a fortnight's planning would be necessary to ensure success'.⁵⁶ Only a few days previously, Second Army HQ had estimated that seven to ten days would be a realistic amount of time to prepare for this crossing. Thomas was given two.

As if time and planning constraints for the operation itself were not enough, Thomas's immediate problem was how to get his troops to Vernon. The 43rd was over 100 miles to the west around Écouches, and to get there involved crossing the lines of communication of the US 5TH Armoured Division, which had been allowed by Montgomery to proceed East to Rouen in the path of the 43rd. Negotiations at Army level produced a solution where the British units could cross the US lines (vital to their own advance) during three four-hour 'windows'. Thomas's plans regarding equipment and numbers of troops were, therefore,

⁵³ Horrocks, p.61.

⁵⁴ Horrocks, pp. 60-61.

⁵⁵ A sketch map of Vernon and the surrounding area can be seen at Appendix 'A' Figure 2.

⁵⁶ Ford, *Assault Crossing*, p. 33.

dictated by the amount of vehicles that could physically travel through the US zone in these allotted times; furthermore, these groups of vehicles would all arrive at Vernon at different times.

The final plan for the initial assault involved a self-contained force of one whole brigade plus another battalion, supported by a regiment of divisional artillery (with anti-aircraft and anti-tank batteries), divisional engineers and a squadron of tanks. It was planned that troops actually crossing the Seine would do so in DUKW vehicles, with motorised 'storm boats' held in reserve. These troops would be in the first group to cross the US lines; the remainder of the Division and its attached formations, including other RE bridging units which were to construct the main bridges, would follow in the two later transport 'windows'.⁵⁷

Opposing the 43rd was the German 49th Infantry Division. This formation, in theory, consisted of three infantry regiments, an artillery regiment and a reserve battalion. At the time of the Normandy invasion it had been at the Pas de Calais from where it was progressively 'robbed' of men and weapons to resupply the 7th Army. By the time it was transferred to the 5th Panzer Army, the fighting capability of division had been diluted as it had been resupplied with a mixture of 'Volksdeutsch' conscripts and young Hitler Youth troops. The divisional commander appreciated the strategic value of Vernon as a crossing point on the Seine and deployed the few troops he had at his disposal to good advantage on the escarpments which overlooked Vernon and the smaller town of Vernonnet on the 'German' side of the river.

⁵⁷ This presented an additional logistical nightmare: at Vernon, the 43rd would be 120 miles from the nearest supply point. They would have to take sufficient food, fuel and ammunition with them until they could be resupplied by XXX Corps at a later time.

The 43rd's assault group arrived in Vernon at around 0800 on the morning of 25 August; the GOC being one of the first to enter the town. Close quarters reconnaissance revealed two problems: the gradient of the river banks would not allow the DUKWS to enter the river and the remains of the existing bridges appeared to be difficult, but not impossible, to bridge. The inability to launch the DUKWS directly into the river meant that the infantry now had to use the storm boats. They had no previous experience of using them and time to brief them was very limited. Again, this factor suggests that the 43rd were being hurriedly rushed into an operation they had not been properly trained for, and goes against the notion that they were fighting a 'cautious' war. On an encouraging note, however, consultation with local French Forces of the Interior (FFI, or *Maquis*) members had met with assurances that two areas of concern – a cut separating an island from the far bank on the left-hand assault, and shallows in the river on the right-hand assault – would not impede the attacks in any way. Meanwhile, back at the 'crossroads' with the US transport lines, the last 440 lorries containing RE bridging teams and their equipment had failed to pass through in the allotted time – they would have to wait for the next opportunity several hours later.

The assault

The assault was preceded by a 15 minute barrage by 94th FRRRA, 8th MDDXs' 4.2" mortars and 121 MRRA (which had arrived just 30 minutes before) commencing at 1845 hours. At 1900 the artillery switched to smoke shells to create a cover for the assaulting infantry. The assault plan for the infantry called for a two-pronged attack; the 5th WILTS on the right hand and the 4th SOMLI on the left. On the right, the assault was disjointed because the storm boats had to be manhandled to the riverbank (not an easy task – it required almost all of the men from 4th WILTS to simultaneously carry the boats for both assaults; these men should

have been defending the town). Because of the distance involved, they arrived in ones and twos and so set off with their troops in the same manner. Thirty yards from the far shore, most of the boats grounded on the shoals that the FFI had assured Thomas would not be a problem. Other boats suffered engine malfunctions or were otherwise stranded. As the smokescreen cleared, the boats and their troops presented easy targets for the defenders and so suffered heavy casualties. One storm boat, by taking a more circuitous route upstream managed to land its section unharmed. This boat, the only survivor of eight, continued to ferry the remainder of the assaulting troops using 'the long route' and avoiding the shoals. The troops of 5th WILTS, 'A' Company, that did make it across to Vernonette formed a fragile bridgehead and soon found themselves repelling increasingly more determined German counterattacks.

The left hand assault, by the 4th SOMLI, was a little more organised as the boats had been deposited a lot nearer to the riverbank edge and so were mostly ready at H-hour. All the boats bar one made it to their destination. As the troops made their way inland, however, they discovered that the 'cut' that had been identified as a dry and shingly by photographic reconnaissance, and 'pas de problème' by the FFI was, in fact a river that was '60 feet wide and 10 feet deep'.⁵⁸ The Somersets had effectively formed their bridgehead on an island with no way of making their way inland without bridging equipment.

The 1st WORCS were supposed to have followed the 5th WILTS on the right-hand assault but, as this was no longer a viable proposition, General Thomas ordered the WORCS to attempt a crossing of the Seine using the ruined road bridge, which although badly damaged, was still passable on foot. It was soon discovered that the bridge was booby-trapped and covered by

⁵⁸ TNA: WO171/983, 25 August 1944.

a well-fortified machine gun position; after taking some casualties this option was abandoned. The attack had stalled, but the RE bridging teams were impatient to start their task and were unable to get any information about their proposed bridging site. At 2215, however, the Brigade Commander agreed to allow the bridging to begin. A little risky, because at this time the far shore was still in enemy hands.

Sometime around 2300, General Thomas and the Brigade Commander met to reconsider their options. It was decided attempts would be made again to launch the DUKWs, and to land two companies of the 4th SOMLI, followed by their two 'stranded' companies a little further upstream, to the left, 5th WILTS would land downstream of 'A' Company. The 1st WORCS would again attempt a crossing on foot by the ruined road bridge, which was still impassable to any kind of vehicle, at daybreak. In the event, most of the DUKWs grounded, suffered mechanical breakdowns or were damaged by enemy fire, which slowed the river crossings. Those that stayed afloat were augmented by the surviving storm boats. A steady trickle of troops, however, made it across the Seine. To the left, the 4th SOMLI landed without opposition or casualty and made inroads into the German defences. This probably induced the Germans to retire from the pillbox overlooking the ruined road bridge, allowing the 1st WORCS to make good their crossing in the morning. On the right, the 5th WILTS 'C' and 'D' companies arrived in time to organise themselves to move into Vernonnet, but were too late to assist 'A' company which had spent the night beating off counterattacks, and who were overrun just as attempts were made to contact them.

By daybreak, the attack was behind schedule but the assaulting troops were finally across the Seine. None of the battalions, however, were complete and the 5th WILTS had lost an entire company. They were also only lightly armed and as yet were not supported by anti-

tank guns. None of the German positions in the overlooking escarpments had been taken, and as daylight allowed, they refocused their attention on the near bank and the bridging operation, which had to be abandoned due to high casualties. General Thomas, having first used tank support and his reconnaissance vehicles to ensure that Vernon was not threatened by the Germans from the flank, ordered the 4th WILTS, previously assigned to defending Vernon, across the road bridge to augment the assault troops. They were later joined by the remainder of 214 Brigade; General Thomas realised that he could not sustain further casualties in the RE bridging teams – the overlooking cliffs would have to be cleared before the even one bridge could be completed. By late afternoon on the 26th, this was largely accomplished and at 1730 hours the bridge became operational, allowing carriers and lorries to cross the Seine. Work on the larger Bailey bridge could now begin.

The first German counter attack came on the 27th August. Just before dawn, the 5th DCLI were attacked by elements of 148 Grenadier Regiment at Pressagny L'Orgueilleux. The attack came as a complete surprise and the DCLI were quickly overrun; the situation was only saved by a company commander calling for artillery fire on his own position. Although the Germans then fled, they also managed to penetrate 'D' Company's positions and wiped out one section. Later that evening, their Commanding Officer issued a Special Order of the Day in which he emphasised the importance of holding the current position and ordered that in future, defence would be 'to the last man and the last round'⁵⁹ an order remarkably similar to that issued by Sir Douglas Haig on 11 April 1918 during the German offensive of that month.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ford, *Assault Crossing*, p. 138.

⁶⁰ Martin Evans, *1918 The Year of Victories* (Kettering: Index, 2004), pp. 76-77.

Later the same morning, all six battalions of 129th and 214th Brigades advanced inland; by coincidence, they were advancing into a counterattack being mounted by 'Battlegroup Schrader'. This force was a collection of troops from three different regiments, supported by three Tiger tanks. The first encounter was between 'A' company⁶¹ of the 7th SOMLI, which had become lost in the forest of Vernon, and the right flank of Schrader's group. Two tanks and 'D' and 'C' companies were sent to rescue it, but the company was destroyed and the other two companies were checked in their advance. The two tanks reported that 'they were in difficulties and had to return'.⁶²

The rest of the battalions met Schrader's battle group across the bridgehead and a firefight developed which resulted in both advances being halted. Key developments included the 1st WORCS encountering Tiger tanks; the initial response was to try to stalk the first tank with PIAT sections, but as no suitable firing position could be found, the tank was instead engaged by the company's six-pounders using new APDS⁶³ ammunition. The Tiger was quickly destroyed but the anti-tank gun was, in turn, destroyed by a second Tiger when its crew was suppressed by infantry fire (this second tank caused the loss of many vehicles and dominated the local battlefield until it was eventually isolated from its supporting infantry and retreated). Nonetheless, the first Tiger's gun mantlet and hull had been successfully pierced several times. Elsewhere, in the absence of German anti-tank weapons, good use was made of armoured cars. Effective artillery support was provided by 94th FRR.

⁶¹ 'A' Company was at about half strength, commanded by a replacement officer untried in battle and contained many other new replacements. As such, the Battalion Commander had intended to leave it in reserve. At a subsequent 'O' group, however, General Thomas insisted that 'A' company take part in the advance.

⁶² TNA: WO171/1373, Appendix 'C' to August 1944.

⁶³ Armour Piercing Discarding Sabot.

During the evening of the 27th or early morning of the 28th, the Germans retreated from the positions at which they had been stopped during the day, effectively ending resistance at the bridgehead, which was now secure and providing valuable transport links across the Seine. In the three days of action at Vernon and Vernonnet, the 43rd had taken around 550 casualties, more than 400 of these belonged to the infantry battalions.

Conclusion

Several things stand out from the operation to cross the Seine:

General Thomas was given minimal time to prepare for this operation. This limited time, and the distance from the objective area also meant that there was very little time for company, section and platoon leaders to reconnoitre the ground over which they were to advance. Again, this is at odds with the general concept that Montgomery's 'cautious' approach to the campaign allowed for ample time to plan or even sometimes rehearse operations. In this case, quite the opposite is apparent and the limited time available to planners on this occasion was almost certainly a factor in only one photo-reconnaissance picture being made available by APIS⁶⁴ who (as well as the French Forces of the interior) formed the mistaken opinion that the planned assault routes were viable ones. More detailed photographic reconnaissance on this occasion might have resulted in the 5th WILTS taking fewer casualties in the initial assault and so being more able to resist the counter attacks that eventually destroyed them, and allowed the 4th SOMLI to make their assault directly on the far shore instead of being marooned on what was effectively an island. Much of the planning time that was available was devoted to the extraordinary transport arrangements in crossing the US lines of communication. The time/distance equation of

⁶⁴ Aerial Photographic Interpretation Section.

moving the division to Vernon was also problematical as engineer units, required for bridging operations at the Seine, had to be utilised in making the approach road passable for traffic and clearing obstacles, so were exhausted when the need for sappers became crucial later. Another feature of this operation was that the forces engaged in it had to take with them all the food and ammunition that they would need; there was no stockpiling of artillery or other ammunition as in other set-piece battles. When these points are considered, it seems as if this operation bears some similarities to the shortcomings of the later British attack at Arnhem.

The shortcomings in intelligence in the assault locations had led to problems with the equipment provided for it. The DUKWs, for instance, could not be launched as expected and manhandling the storm boats necessitated stripping the town of most of its defending units, a risky compromise. Furthermore, there is evidence that some maps seem to have been unreliable. Sydney Jary recalls: 'Our maps were poor and I suspect our briefing was inadequate and, consequently 'D' Company, which was the second in line of advance behind 'B' Company took the wrong track. We, to our surprise ran into a German blocking force of two tanks and some Spandaus.'⁶⁵ These maps may have contributed to the capture of the 7th SOMLI's 'A' Company which had become lost in the Vernon Forest.

General Thomas, like many others in his position, was keen to take a 'hands on' approach to the running of his division. This was unfortunate in as much as it meant that he sometimes meddled with the decisions and actions of his various commanders at sometimes even the lowest level. This was the situation with regard to 'A' company of the 7th SOMLI. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Nichol, had originally intended to leave the

⁶⁵ Jary, p. 31.

company in reserve due to the inexperience of its commander, the amount of new replacements it consisted of, and the fact that it was badly under strength. Thomas, however, personally insisted that the company be moved to a crossroads in Vernon Forest and Nichol had to change his existing plan accordingly. 'A' Company was subsequently overrun and the survivors captured. General Thomas subsequently sacked Nichol on the basis that 'A' Company had not fought hard enough and had surrendered too easily, despite protests from the Brigade Commander. Perhaps Thomas intended to divert attention from his own involvement in the matter; one person at Vernon recalls that 'Thomas was a shit. He would do anything to save his own neck'.⁶⁶ In any case, this instance provides clear evidence that Thomas drove his men hard and expected his subordinates to do so too. In this case, however, it appears that valuable infantrymen were lost due to this 'drive'.

When the initial assault first faltered, in a move reminiscent of the 5th DCLI's costly attack on Hill 112, the 1st WORCS were ordered to attempt a crossing of the Seine by the ruined road bridge. This would be a risky undertaking at any time as the bridge would surely be well defended in the opening moves of an assault. This suggests that Thomas was desperate to get his men across the Seine and was willing to take heavy casualties to do so. This is not a criticism of Thomas as a commander – he had a job to do which was likely to produce casualties – but it is not a cautious approach to the task in hand. Less easy to understand is the apparent neglect of what remained of 'A' Company which had made it to the far shore of the right flank and were eventually overrun for want of reinforcements and ammunition.

⁶⁶ Ford, *Assault Crossing*, p. 177.

Air support seems to be conspicuous by its absence. There is no mention of medium or heavy aircraft bombardments, and no ground attack sorties against the German positions on the overlooking escarpments. There also appears to be little or no fighter protection for the artillery spotter aircraft, one of which was shot down by a German aircraft on a reconnaissance mission of its own. As usual, artillery support for the operation at the Seine appears to have gone well, even though the opening assault had taken place with the lightest concentration of guns and mortars to date (but augmented by the main armament of tanks firing from the streets of Vernon). Once more the artillery had provided timely assistance whenever called for.

The infantry had, in general, fought well and they had done what had been asked of them.

Furthermore, there were signs that Infantry leadership was showing signs of maturing.

Sydney Jary: 'The attack on Vernonnet was the first in which I was able to call upon experience gained and instinct developed over the previous six weeks to enable me to "read the battle". In Normandy I had been incapable of doing so and, on far too many occasions, this had denied me the possibility of taking advantage of the enemy's mistakes.'⁶⁷

Major Algy Grubb: 'At that time, after the experience we had been through, one was attuned to it, inoculated against it. You really were, you became a little elated, unbalanced even.'⁶⁸

Around this time in the campaign, according to the war diaries, the infantry seemed to have been augmenting their own equipment with captured German items; the 7th HAMPS, for instance, report that 'one carrier sec[tion] KO'd an enemy patrol of eleven Germans (2 killed 9 wounded) and a 2cm AA/A/Tk gun (with their own gun of the same type which they had

⁶⁷ Jary, p. 30.

⁶⁸ Ford, *Assault Crossing*, p. 174.

captured at St. Denis-de-mere and brought along with them).⁶⁹ It is not made clear, however, whether this practice was due to convenience or necessity. Battalion orders of 5th DCLI, however, note that: 'The very high battle wastage for small items of arms, equipment and technical stores, is resulting in an acute shortage. All ranks will, therefore, be informed that it may not be possible in future to replace such items as 2" mortars or PIATs which are lost without considerable delay. The greatest care, must therefore, be exercised to avoid losses.'⁷⁰ Either way, discarded German weapons - with plenty of ammunition for them - were to be found in abundance. The practice of pilfering enemy equipment was strictly forbidden, and this was widely promulgated in Battalion orders of the time, but it is of note that there were official exceptions to this rule; 5th DCLI Battalion Orders include a covering rider to the general 'pilfering' notice: 'Pistols, Snipers Rifles and Schmeissers may be retained at the discretion of Company Commanders.'⁷¹ The use of enemy weapons and particularly small arms, therefore, may be far more widespread than previously thought and would have been a pragmatic solution for units at the furthest reaches from already extended and lengthening supply lines.

The division had been in action, with only a few days rest here and there, since it had arrived in Normandy on or around the 24th June. In the period between the end of the action at Vernon and Vernonnet until the 14th September, when the division began preparing for Operation Garden,⁷² the division was able to take advantage of a rest period and was also able to conduct training and assimilate its new replacements.

⁶⁹ TNA: WO 171/5200, 28 August 1944.

⁷⁰ TNA: WO 171/1281, Appendix 'C' to August 1944.

⁷¹ TNA: WO 171/1281, Battalion Orders Number 25, 30 August 1944.

⁷² Operation 'Market' was the codename for the three airborne division landings; Operation 'Garden' was the land-based part of the battle conducted by XXX Corps.

The war diaries of the three brigades together record 'Reorganisation and training', ENSA and mobile cinema entertainment, baths, church parades and so on. Sporting activities were organised (1st WORCS beat 7th SOMLI 5-1 at football) and there were also limited opportunities for personnel to visit Paris and Brussels. General Thomas seems to have made a point of addressing each of the battalions and awarding decorations personally. 130 Brigade hosted a 'cloth model discussion' presided over by their Brigadier and attended by commanding officers and company commanders from the entire brigade and supporting arms; this was a chance to take stock of the 'lessons learned' from the Seine crossing. A similar cloth model discussion took place later – chiefly concerned with fighting in wooded areas – took place on the 3rd September and was presided over by the divisional commander. Other training activities included assault boat training; river crossing techniques (including the use of DUKWs); firing of enemy weapons; PIAT and mortar training; fieldcraft techniques; route marches and, of course, RSM's Drill.

Most of the war diaries mention the arrival of a considerable number of replacements; the 7th HAMPS even being 'a little over strength'.⁷³ The 7th SOMLI even received an entire company of the South Staffordshire Regiment to replace 'A' Company. It would be wrong, however, to assume that all of the battalions of the 43rd were brought up to compliment strength. Sydney Jary, CO of the 7th SOMLI's 18 Platoon remembers during the same rest period that: 'Despite reinforcements, the Platoon was still not brought up to full strength. It never was, throughout the remainder of the campaign in Europe.'⁷⁴ By the 14th of September, most of the battalions had been ordered to move, or warned to move in preparation for Operation Garden, the accompanying ground advance to Operation Market.

⁷³ TNA: WO 171/1306, 7th September 1944.

⁷⁴ Jary, p. 34.

CHAPTER 4

The 53rd Division's First Action to Falaise: A Very Different Experience

This chapter will briefly examine the history of the 53rd and its commander, and then go on to consider its part in the campaign in France up to its involvement at Falaise. A detailed examination of the actions the division fought in will be useful here, as it will provide a comparison with the 43rd which, as we have seen, fought as a whole division, while the 53rd fought mainly in brigade or battalion actions. This comparison will also illustrate that although these divisions were deployed in different ways, the factors that characterised their way of war remain remarkably similar, and as such this will tend to strengthen and expand on the conclusions of the previous chapter.

Like the 43rd this division was chosen for research because of its ordinariness; its soldiers were not considered to be elite troops¹ and were a Territorial formation, so most of its soldiers had been 'part time' infantrymen or were recent conscripts. The division arrived in Normandy with almost no experience of combat, although the 71st Brigade - newcomers to the division in 1944 - had seen service in Europe in 1940 before the BEF was evacuated. As the division had very little combat experience, it also means that most of its troops would

¹ Hastings, p. 148.

generally have enjoyed a high level of morale even though their leave would have been restricted. It is highly unlikely that any of the 53rd's men would have been suffering from combat exhaustion. The 53rd arrived in Normandy after the initial amphibious assault, and at this point it can be considered to have been a product of the doctrine and training policies that had been implemented as a result of the combat experience that the British Army had digested and reflected upon so far. All of this, of course, would have been subject to the idiosyncrasies of the divisional commanders. Furthermore, this division, like the 43rd, had had maximum opportunity to ensure that a proper, comprehensive training programme was fully undertaken. In short, the 53rd (Welsh) Division would have consisted of 'average' Territorial and conscript soldiers arriving at the front line trained to the best of the British Army's ability at that time. Naturally, they would have been inexperienced, but their morale would have been strong. Another important reason for choosing the 53rd is that, like the 43rd, the divisional commander remained in command for the duration of the campaign. In view of Montgomery's practice of quickly sacking commanders who did not, in any way, 'come up to scratch', this must mean that these divisional commanders retained Montgomery's approval for the way in which they ran their divisions, and so were implementing Montgomery's policies to his satisfaction.

The 53rd (Welsh) Infantry Division had spent most of the Great War fighting in the near and middle east, notably in the Dardanelles campaign but also in Palestine. The division remained active during the inter-war years and provided the first Territorial Brigade to take part in the Army Manoeuvres in 1935; mainly on the basis that it was known to be trained to a high standard, and was also at near-complement strength.² From the outbreak of the Second World War, the Division was employed in defence of the UK, initially in Wales, and

² C. Barclay, *The History of the 53rd (Welsh) Division in the Second World War* (London: Clowes, 1956), p. 15.

from October 1939, in Northern Ireland. By December 1941 the 53rd was moved again to the Welsh marches and later on to Kent.

There were three Divisional Commanders from the outbreak of war; Major General B T Wilson, a 'fearsome old boy'³ who retired in 1941; Major General G C Bucknall, later GOC of the 5th Infantry Division (and who would later be removed from command of XXX Corps in August 1944); and from September 1942 until the cessation of hostilities, Major General R K Ross. General Ross was an infantry soldier who was commissioned into the Queen's Royal Regiment in 1913. During the Great War he served on the Western Front; by October 1915 he had been promoted to Captain and awarded a Military Cross. In 1916 he was appointed GSO3 in 30 Division, and later GSO2 in 60 Division as part of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. He continued to serve with the Egyptian Army and Sudanese Defence Force until 1932. In 1937 he was promoted Lieutenant Colonel and once again served in Palestine. In 1940 he was appointed commander of the 53rd's 160th Brigade and was subsequently appointed General Officer Commanding in the autumn of 1942. Like many of his generation, it is likely that his experiences during the First World War instilled in him a desire to conserve losses in his division. It is also possible, however, that he was singing Montgomery's 'party line' when he addressed his troops prior to their embarkation for Normandy and 'stressed the need for avoiding unnecessary casualties'.⁴

'Bobby' Ross was a popular but distant divisional commander. He liked to live well – the chef for his mess had previously worked at the Savoy - and saw to it that his troops were

³ Patrick Delaforce, P., *Red Crown & Dragon: 53rd Welsh Division in North-West Europe 1944-1945* (Stroud, Amberley, 2009), p. 14.

⁴ TNA: WO 171/1386, 12 June 1944.

entertained with events like concert parties.⁵ His liaison officer described him as: ‘popular with everyone – very gregarious, sense of humour – a father figure to the troops’; ‘a good delegator – did not bypass his Brigadiers’; ‘greatly respected as a commander’. On the other hand, the same officer also recalled that he found him: ‘rather impersonal’, ‘not charismatic’, and his messing arrangements curtailed informal contact with divisional officers below the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.⁶ There is also some doubt over his ability as a divisional commander to issue clear, concise orders to his officers, as a commanding officer of an armoured brigade recalled: ‘his orders groups seemed like ‘councils of war, rather than occasions when clear and definite orders reflected the grip of a commander on the situation’.⁷ Nonetheless, Ross must have been an able enough divisional commander to be approved of by both Montgomery and Dempsey as he remained in situ for the entire campaign. By 1944, the mid-war ‘Model’ composition⁸ of the division had changed; the 31st Tank Brigade left the Division and was replaced by the 71st Infantry Brigade. In this overwhelmingly Welsh formation the 71st were outsiders (1st E.Lancs, 1st Ox & Bucks, and 1st HLI). The division, however, had a long history of assimilating ‘foreigners’ and managed to retain its ‘Welshness’ for the remainder of the campaign.

Early days in Normandy

The 53rd was not part of the initial invasion on 6 June 1944, but was landed in Normandy between the 23rd and 27th June. On 29th June the division came under the command of XIII Corps and, accompanied by 44th (Lowland) Brigade, was detailed for defensive operations on the western flank of the beachhead. As the troops moved into their positions, they had

⁵ Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, pp. 21-22

⁶ Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, pp. 19-21.

⁷ Carver, p. 193.

⁸ Two infantry brigades and one armoured brigade, rather than three infantry brigades. Artillery establishment remained the same.

their first taste of combat, usually in the form of 'sniper'⁹ and mortar fire, which produced a minor but steady stream of casualties. The 1/5th WEL, for instance lost suffered '20-40 casualties through heavy shelling' including their Commanding Officer.¹⁰ In other battalions, casualties were lighter, but included a disproportionately high incidence among their officers. Although deployed in a defensive role, the battalions of the division all followed a policy of mounting aggressive reconnaissance or fighting patrols.

There is some evidence, at this early stage of the campaign, that British soldiers had difficulty identifying enemy vehicles, and assuming that every enemy tank was a 'Tiger': on 4 July, the 1st Ox & Bucks 6-pounders engaged what were reported to be Tiger tanks: 'scoring direct hits on one tank. The tank did not move and later began to burn.' The tank was later 'identified by an RAC officer as a derelict British Churchill.'¹¹ Mistakes like this were not confined to the Infantry; an armoured brigade commander recalls being 'infuriated when my tanks were shot at by tanks on our left which were clearly our own. They were from Erroll Prior-Palmer's 8th Armoured Brigade, who apparently had not seen Cromwell tanks before.'¹² Notwithstanding the confusion and demands of battle – the fog of war - this calls into question the effectiveness of training front line troops in identification of their own forces.

⁹ An inaccurate term as relatively few *Wehrmacht* soldiers were trained snipers. The commander of 4th Armoured brigade gave orders that: 'snipers' were to be referred to as isolated enemy riflemen.' Carver, p. 192.

¹⁰ TNA: WO 171/1386, 1 July 1944.

¹¹ TNA: WO 171/1356, 4 July 1944.

¹² Carver, p. 182.

Operation Greenline

The first major action the division was heavily involved in was Operation Greenline from the 15th to the 26th July, which was fought in conjunction with 15 (Scottish) Division.¹³ This operation formed part of the supporting action around the Hill 112 area and took place to the immediate west of the positions and objectives of 43rd (Wessex) Division. The 53rd's part in the operation was as follows:

71 Brigade

The 1st Ox & Bucks were to protect the right flank of the main assault with a self-contained operation to the north of the river Odon. Their war diary does not record when orders for this operation were received or when the associated 'O' groups took place, and merely states that 'orders were received' on 15th July.¹⁴ Attacking troops actually crossed the start line at 0300 the following morning.¹⁵ There is a strong possibility, then, that sufficient time was allowed for this battalion-sized attack, although the plan was changed later in the day when information from deserters suggested that there were, in fact, three rather than one enemy formations of company strength defending. The original plan was for two separate companies to attack two separate objectives, with a third objective to be attacked with the remaining companies from whichever initial objective was taken first. The amended plan committed another company to the initial attack, leaving one company in reserve instead of two for the final attack.¹⁶ The ratio of attackers versus defenders, then, had gone from three attacking companies versus one company, to three companies versus three

¹³ A sketch map showing the deployment of the brigades and axes of attack can be seen at Appendix 'A', Figure 3.

¹⁴ TNA: WO 171/1356, 15 July 1944.

¹⁵ TNA: WO 171/1356, 16 July 1944

¹⁶ TNA: WO 171/1356, 15 July 1944.

companies, with only one further company in reserve instead of two. Support was provided by 81st FRRA, and 4.2" mortars and medium machine guns of 1st MAN (support battalion), but this was to be 'on call' as the attack was planned to be 'silent'.

The attack, when it happened, came up against stubborn resistance. By 1400 hours the situation was that all the companies had initially achieved their primary objectives, but were then forced to give them up when they were subjected to mortar barrages and counterattacks. Casualties had been heavy, particularly in 'C' Company, and all three attacking company commanders had either been killed or badly wounded. All of 'B' Company's officers were casualties. Private Sandford of 13 Platoon remembers: 'It was a hopeless situation, no ammunition, nothing to fight with and a lot of wounded infantrymen needing attention.'¹⁷ His platoon was subsequently overrun and captured. At 1400 another attack was mounted by 'A' Company with a preliminary bombardment from all three divisional artillery regiments, the mortars and medium machine guns of 1st MAN, and the remaining regimental 3" mortars. This time the attack was a success and the defenders eventually surrendered where they were being attacked, and evacuated some other previously fought-over positions.

Success had been achieved, but at a cost; three officers and 47 other ranks were dead; six officers and 90 other ranks were wounded, and 26 other ranks were missing.¹⁸ The battalion spent the next two days 'cleaning up and reorganising'. The planning behind this small but costly battle remains something of a mystery. The initial plan was altered to account for the newly-discovered 'extra' German companies, but the numerical superiority of the attacking force was nowhere near what the initial plan had provided. Furthermore,

¹⁷ Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 48.

¹⁸ TNA: WO 171/1356, 17 July 1944.

the attack called for a 'silent' assault rather than one which was preceded with artillery bombardment, although 81st FRR's War Diary records calls for artillery support to deal with enemy mortar fire at 0500, 0507 and with the division's artillery regiments at 0530, but also records that it was unsafe to engage some targets due to the danger to attacking troops.¹⁹ This means that the artillery could only assist by counter-battery fire, and not by directing their shells at the defending German infantrymen.

There is a possibility here that this 'silent' attack was an effort to conserve artillery expenditure; certainly, all three of the 53rd's artillery regiments had been involved in support of Operation Jupiter less than a week ago which had consumed a great deal of 25 pounder ammunition. By the 25th July, ammunition expenditure was restricted to 15 rounds per gun per day for regimental targets without reference to the Headquarters, Royal Artillery.²⁰ Whatever the reasoning behind the planning of the divisional and brigade commanders of what was, after all, a subsidiary and diversionary operation, casualty conservation does not appear to have been a high priority and casualties were indeed high.

158 Brigade

158 Brigade initially came under command of 15th (Scottish) Division as a reserve brigade. One of the 15th's main objectives had been the town of Evrecy, which was given to 227 Brigade to capture. The defenders at Evrecy had, however, managed to repulse all previous attempts to take it and so the attack was renewed by 158 Brigade. The salient points of the plan was that 7th RWF with 'A' Company 6th RWF would take the high ground south of Evrecy and then descend into the valley, cross a small river, and then capture the Ferme de Mondeville. Of the remaining three companies of 6th RWF, 'C' was to move up behind 7th

¹⁹ TNA: WO 171/979, 16 July 1944.

²⁰ TNA: WO 171/979, 25 July 1944.

RWF, and 'B' and 'D' companies were to move up behind 7th RWF and take up a defensive line; as part of this, 'D' were to clear the river line and were assisted by one troop of Crocodile flamethrowing tanks.²¹ Planning time for this operation appears to have been plentiful: the battalion knew that it was likely to be involved in the operation on the 14th July and the battalion commander held two brigade 'O' groups on that day; aerial photographs and maps were also issued. The Brigade Commander of 158 held an 'O' group on the 15th July, which incorporated a sand model. Reconnaissance parties were also sent to the start line, transport reloaded, and the battalion was made ready for the operation by nightfall that day.²² At a brigade commander's 'O' group at 1400, 6th RWF were ordered to attack 'the farm de Mondrville'. Reconnaissance was carried out during the remainder of the afternoon and a final commanding officer's 'O' Group was held at 2000.²³ Assaulting troops actually crossed their start line at 2330 the same day. These records tend to suggest that the 'O' group system was working well, but Nick Cunliffe, commanding 4th RWF's 'C' Company remembers: 'He [7th RWF Battalion Commander] arrived very late, gave his orders rapidly, obviously harassed by lack of time. All this for a night attack of considerable complications. I had not seen the ground not even the start line. The situation was manifestly absurd. I gave my orders with a certain amount of trepidation.'²⁴ This account reveals a glimpse of some of the pressure - at least on this occasion - behind the apparent efficiency of the planning and 'O' group system. For this operation artillery support was provided by all three of the division's field artillery regiments giving an initial bombardment.

²¹ TNA: WO 171/1390, July 1944, unmarked appendix.

²² TNA: WO 171/1390, 14-15 July 1944.

²³ TNA: WO 171/1390, 16 July 1944.

²⁴ Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 51.

Some tanks from 147 RAC were detailed for support, but these were delayed due to problems on a minefield.²⁵

The attack initially went according to plan despite encountering some stiff resistance; early objectives were achieved and it is believed that some platoons reached their final objective.²⁶ A thick fog, however, descended on the area which was aggravated by German use of smoke bombs and mortar bombardments. This led to units becoming disorientated and the attack losing cohesion. Furthermore, it soon became apparent that the anti-tank guns and other supporting weapons could not be brought across the river; this meant that even if the final objective was taken it could not be properly consolidated against the almost inevitable counterattack. In this confusing situation, heavy casualties were sustained.

An order was then given by the divisional commander to clear the river valley to the east of Evrecy instead, but he must have thought better of it as the order was quickly cancelled.²⁷

At 0700 the brigade commander gave the order to withdraw and also cancelled the river clearing operation. By this stage, however, many troops had already dug in or moved to other defensive positions in anticipation of their exposure to the enemy by the imminent dawn. Many of them were out of contact and remained in position until later that evening. Those that did get the order to retire did so just as the heavy fog began to lift and revealed their positions to the enemy, causing further casualties, despite provision of smoke cover by the artillery. At the conclusion of the first day's fighting, it was estimated that 7RWF had 98 other ranks missing; 100 other ranks killed or wounded; three officers were missing and one had been killed. Captain Evans recalled that 'after the evacuation of the CO the 2i/c Major

²⁵ TNA: WO 171/879, 15 July 1944.

²⁶ TNA: WO 171/1391, 17 July 1944.

²⁷ Barclay, p. 63.

Dickson took command of a battalion reduced to three rifle companies of two weak platoons each.²⁸ Casualties amongst 6th RWF were not so heavy, but the division's anti-tank regiment lost a whole troop (four 17 pounder guns) to an ambush while 'effecting an escape' resulting in the loss of all its vehicles and guns; casualties were 19 missing, one dead and two wounded.²⁹

The 158th were ordered to repeat their attack commencing 2100 that evening at a Brigade Commander's 'O' Group held at 1400. Evrecy was to be attacked before the Ferme de Mondeville and the clearing of the Guige valley. 4th RWF and 6th RWF were to lead, while 'B' Company of 4th RWF were in reserve. Support was from the divisional artillery regiments and tanks from 147 RAC. For the armour there was confusion from the start; they were not properly formed up by the start time, and 'B' Squadron's Commanding Officer, unable to locate his accompanying Infantry, was eventually told that they had been removed to assist in another assault.³⁰ The infantry's attack, like the previous one, started well but by 2300 the 'Battalions were in difficulties' and at 2330 'Battalions were withdrawn to start line'.³¹

The adjutant of 6th RWF explains the action from his battalion's viewpoint:

T[roops] crossed S[tart] L[ine] at 2120 with B Coy (70 strong) forward behind leading echelon of tanks and D Coy at a strength of 1 Pl were in reserve with 2nd echelon of tanks. C company were intended to take part as left leading coy but owing to casualties suffered during the previous 24 hrs and the fact that this coy was in no fit state to go into battle, it was decided to carry on without them. Remnants of A Coy, approximately 1 officer and 10 ORs were attached to D Coy for the operation. From the start 18 set communication to B and D Coys did not function. This was due to early casualties in signallers and initially it would appear that the sets will NOT operate satisfactorily after 24 hrs of continual rough usage and frequent "stonking".

I gave permission for the withdrawal of the tanks just before last light. Shortly after the tanks pulled out B Coy appeared (about 40 strong). Capt. Hill reported to me that

²⁸ Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 50.

²⁹ TNA: WO 171/923, 18 July 1944.

³⁰ TNA: WO 171/879, 17 July 1944.

³¹ TNA: WO 171/689, 17 July 1944.

his t[roo]ps were so thin on the ground that he couldn't get through the numerous Spandau and A tk gun posts along NORTH side of wood. I reported this to B[riga]de and informed them that we would have to withdraw to the start line as the remains of the assaulting force, about 1 Pl in strength was being fired on from three sides. We were heavily mortared on the way back and a few aircraft bombs fell on the area.³²

It is clear from this account that 6th RWF were simply not operating at anywhere near establishment strength when they were committed to the assault, and were suffering from communication problems due to casualties among operators and degradation of the radio sets. The war diary for 4th RWF records that: 'very heavy MG fire was encountered. The two leading Coys suffered very heavy casualties and were pinned down. All offrs of the three attacking coys with the exception of one offr of D Coy became non effective and the NCOs who took comd of the remaining men ordered a withdrawal.'³³ The supporting armour noted that every time tanks stopped to give support, their infantry went to ground behind them, and that 'very few, if any, of the inf[antry] were strong enough or fresh enough to reach their objective'.³⁴

These two failed attacks on Evrecy and the near-rout at Le Bon Repos were costly enterprises which achieved little other than to draw in German formations and armour and grind them down, but it must be remembered that this was part of Montgomery's overall plan for this period. Many Germans had been killed and taken prisoner but casualties among the 53rd's infantry battalions had been grievous. There appears to have been no discernible measures put in place to conserve casualties other than the use of Crocodiles to support the retaking of Le Bon Repos. In fact, failed attacks were repeated with troops which were already fatigued by very recent action, and at one point it appears that a snap

³² TNA: WO 171/1390, unmarked appendix.

³³ TNA: WO 171/5281, 17 July 1944.

³⁴ TNA: WO 171/879, 17 July 1944.

decision to change the objectives of the assault with almost no time for planning very nearly took place. The time allowed for preparation and reconnaissance opportunities seem to have been adequate, but no unit mentions rehearsals of the assault, and at least one officer remarks on the inadequacy of the 'O' group that occurred before the initial attack. This is another example of events which are at odds to the idea of caution (careful planning, rehearsals, support of specialist vehicles and crushing air support, all as measures to conserve casualties), as features of the British way of war at the time.³⁵ It seems, for the 53rd, that almost the opposite was the case. Even the Luftwaffe, frequently assessed as not being of significance in the campaign, was not suppressed; it managed to bomb divisional areas, and a raid on the evening of 16th July by Junkers 88 aircraft resulted in the assault being delayed by 30 minutes.³⁶

160 Brigade

At 0005 on the 18th July, 1/5th WEL moved to occupy positions previously captured by the Glasgow Highlanders, where it encountered some shelling but 'the situation was otherwise quiet.' At 1600 on 21 July, though: 'A' Company reported that it was under attack by a company of infantry supported by four tanks; by 1800 it was reported that a platoon of 'B' Company had been overrun, again, by 'infantry and four tanks'. By 1930 two squadrons of tanks which had been supporting the battalion: 'went out to the left flank to attempt to get the enemy in enfilade. They were unsuccessful.' At 2000 'A' Company reported enemy tanks 50 yards from their positions. By 2130 the tanks were 'within 10 yards of their position and that the enemy was on their immediate front.' This was the last communication from 'A' Company. Meanwhile, at the same time, 'C' Company was being

³⁵ See Hart's *Colossal Cracks*, Chapter 3.

³⁶ TNA: WO 171/1390, July 1944, unmarked appendix.

attacked by infantry, again supported by four tanks; two of the tanks (identified as Mk. IVs) were destroyed – one with a 6 pounder anti tank gun, the other with a PIAT. The war diary then records that ‘C’ Company’s ‘position had become practically untenable now as they were out on their own without A[nti] t[an]k guns and with the enemy within 50 yards of their p[ositio]ns.’ They were withdrawn at 0600 on the 22nd. This counterattack had cost 1/5th WEL 25 casualties as well the whole of ‘A’ Company (establishment strength was normally 5 officers and 122 men).³⁷ The divisional artillery was an important factor in fending off this counterattack; 133rd FRR records D[irect] F[ire] (SOS) tasks fired four times by Reg[imen]t. Later Div[isional] Ar[iller]y brought in’.³⁸ The war diary of 83rd FRR also records this action and remarks that the: ‘counter attack finally dispersed by own art[iller]y fire’. The war diary of the division’s anti tank regiment makes no mention of this action, so it is unlikely that any of its 17-pounders were used in the consolidation of 1/5th WEL’s positions.

The ground lost to this German counterattack was quickly recaptured by 4th WEL supported by Crocodiles in the action commented on above, but it is worth examining why 1/5th WEL were expelled from their positions. First, it seems that the troops here, although given time to consolidate their positions (albeit under shellfire), were not properly equipped to deal with a determined attack by infantry supported by tanks. The war diaries seem to indicate that there were few anti-tank guns present. Furthermore, there is only one recorded use of a PIAT. Either these weapons were in short supply in the consolidated positions, or the troops did not (for whatever reason) use them. Either way, the divisional artillery was a pivotal factor in breaking up the counterattacks that were contained.

³⁷ These accounts taken from TNA: WO 171/1386, 18-22 July 1944.

³⁸ TNA: WO 171/993, 21 July 1944.

After the failure of Operation Greenline, the division was deployed in defensive positions around the Hill 112 area and the River Odon. Operations for the division, however, continued in the form of raids and patrols. There were also a series of vigorous counterattacks. During this short period of combat, from around the 13th to the 26th of July, the Division had had a hard time; its attempts at attacking Evrecy had been a disaster and some of its troops entrusted with defensive positions had very nearly been routed. In addition to this, the division had sustained around 290 killed in action and 405 other casualties, mostly among the infantry battalions.³⁹ The total casualties for the division for the whole of July amounted to '37 Off[ice]rs 277 O[ther] R[ank]s killed, 84 Off[ice]rs 1655 O[ther] R[ank]s wounded, 17 Off[ice]rs 332 O[ther] R[ank]s missing'.⁴⁰ This period was also costly in terms of artillery ammunition: 83rd FRRR fired 19,598 rounds of 25 pounder high explosive shells between 17-23 July⁴¹ 133rd FRRR recorded firing 48,138 rounds of high explosive and 2376 rounds.⁴² 81st FRRR did not record its expenditure, but is likely to be somewhere between the other two regiments. It should also be noted, however, that the 53rd's artillery was also used to support attacks conducted by other divisions.

The rest of July and most of August was taken up with patrols and raids mounted from defensive positions. The main purposes of these were to maintain contact with the enemy, acquisition of prisoners for intelligence purposes, or simply to maintain an offensive stance. The 53rd, however, also mounted raids that were much more substantial and were

³⁹ Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 56.

⁴⁰ TNA: WO 171/556, 31 July 1944.

⁴¹ TNA: WO 171/980, 18 July 1944.

⁴² TNA: WO 171/993, 31 July 1944.

accompanied by strong artillery and tank support, and also specialist vehicles such as Crocodile tanks and Wasp carriers.⁴³

Raid Triangle

This raid was planned as an attack on a defended line of hedgerow in a triangular feature, and the assaulting infantry comprised only one company of infantry (4th RWF), but was augmented with a potent support force of five mortar platoons from other battalions, six Wasps (from 1st HLI and 7th RWF), the divisional mortar and MMG regiment, the division's three artillery regiments, one battery of 17 pounder anti tank guns, and 153 RAC (less one troop of tanks).⁴⁴ The object of the operation was that '158(RW) Inf[antry] B[rigade] will destroy or capture all enemy in Triangle'.⁴⁵ Planning allowed for anti tank guns and tanks to protect the objective against any interfering enemy armour, and platoons were formed, including Royal Engineer specialists, with the specific task of tank destroying. There was even a small diversionary operation involving tanks, artillery and mortars to the right of the intended objective.

The raid was, perhaps unsurprisingly, a complete success. The objectives were quickly achieved and troops were withdrawn in accordance with the plan. A post-operation report written by the Intelligence Officer of 4th RWF states that: 'MMGs - Excellent; RA – Excellent; T[an]ks – Engagement of Spandau posts in cornfields was done with amazing speed; Bofors – Moral effect very good; 3" Mortars – Caused some casualties to own t[roops] but this was

⁴³ A standard Bren Gun Carrier, or Carden Lloyd Carrier, modified to carry flamethrowing equipment.

⁴⁴ A diagram of Raid Triangle can be seen at Appendix 'A', Figure 4.

⁴⁵ TNA: WO 171/1389, Appendix 'C' to August 1944.

due to inf[antry] getting too close to the barrage. First class s[u]p[port]'.⁴⁶ A separate report was compiled on the use of the Wasps which commented that:

13 Pl[atoon] are convinced that the work of this vehicle was largely responsible for the slight opposition; several men reported that the enemy turned and ran. The captured officer is reported to have said that these equipments are more fearsome and terrifying than any artillery barrage.⁴⁷

Another report, however, complained that one of the Wasps 'threw caution to the wind and ran along one of the sides of the Triangle without any fire support. The result was that a number of the enemy ran away without a rifle or Bren being close enough to hand to stop them.'⁴⁸ Clearly the reporting officer, and perhaps the Wasp crew (but in a different way), were focussed on killing the enemy rather than simply evicting them or inducing them to surrender. This Operation was heralded as a clear success for the units involved, but what had actually been achieved? The object of the operation was to 'destroy or capture all enemy in the triangle'; German casualties were logged as: 'Dead – 9; Killed – 21; Probables – 5; Injured, later reported dead – 1; Wounded – 2 (inc 1 offr); P[risoner of] W[ar] – 1.'⁴⁹ A total of 39 German casualties. This number is unlikely to represent the sum total of Germans present at the Triangle, as 13 Platoon estimated that their objective was occupied by around two infantry sections and one machine gun, and two other platoons knocked out three machine gun posts between them. It may be, however, that the position was not defended in strength. The success of the raid must also be tempered by the fact no enemy tanks or anti-tank guns were encountered, and the response of the enemy's mortars and artillery was relatively weak.

⁴⁶ TNA: WO 171/1389, August 1944, unmarked Appendix.

⁴⁷ TNA: WO 171/1389, August 1944, unmarked Appendix.

⁴⁸ TNA: WO 171/1389, Appendix 'J' to August 1944.

⁴⁹ TNA: WO 171/1389, Appendix 'I' to August 1944.

Casualties for the battalion totalled 29 – 3 killed, 22 wounded and 4 missing; perhaps a high price to pay when it is considered that the Germans had reoccupied their positions (in much greater strength) by 0745 that morning. But perhaps the battalion profited in an intangible way: after the recent failures of the division this operation could rightly be claimed as a genuine victory and must have gone some way to restoring morale. The general tone of reports and the war diaries for this operation certainly have an upbeat feel to them. The experience of soldiers at platoon level here was that they could convincingly defeat the Germans. This action also set the tone for what would be expected in coming operations - plentiful and potent artillery and armoured support. It should also be remembered that these troops had fought well and aggressively (perhaps a little too aggressively)⁵⁰, and were doing exactly what Montgomery wanted them to do – to pin and grind down the German war effort on their front.

At 2100 the same day (2 August), another strong raid by 'B' Company of 4th WEL was mounted on the crossroads at Le Bon Repos, a much fought over position which had been the objective of a raid by the same battalion on the night of 23/24th July. The object of this raid was 'to secure a minimum of 15 prisoners for the purpose of establishing the fact as to whether the 10 S.S. P[an]z[er] Reg[imen]t were still holding the line.'⁵¹ Again, this raid was composed of one company of assaulting infantry with another strong support line-up of all three regimental FRRAs, one medium RA regiment, the mortars and medium machine guns of 1st MAN, one squadron of tanks (around 16 tanks) and two troops of Crocodile flamethrowing tanks. The raid was reported as a success; the officer commanding the raid,

⁵⁰ The war diary for 4 RWF contains a report in which records that 'Five P[risoners of] W[ar] taken by this [15] pl[atoon] were accidentally killed shortly after capture'. This sentence is omitted from an otherwise near-identical report held within the war diary of 158 Infantry Brigade Headquarters.

⁵¹ TNA: WO 171/1389, Appendix 3 to August 1944.

Lt Col. Williams, remarked, however, that some of his troops: 'were delayed owing to the late arrival of the t[roop] of Crocodiles, this troop was unfortunately 5 mins late and somewhat delayed the advance, and the benefit of the barrage was to some extent lost.'⁵² The Crocodiles ('C' Squadron, 141 RAC), however, were only informed of the operation at 1540 hours that day. Their movement order was not 'decoded' until 1640 hours, when they started a 25 mile journey to the forming up point. The Crocodile commander, Captain Barber, had only 30 minutes to be briefed and then brief his own troops, but his crews were familiar with the terrain.⁵³ This 'late call' for the Crocodiles is particularly surprising, as the commander of the previous raid had specifically remarked in his report that: 'Crocodiles are of doubtful value to the inf[antry] ... unless adequate time is allowed for liaison between inf[antry] and Crocodiles.; in this case...the right hand company were not pleased at having themselves involved in fire. This was solely due to the fact that the crocodiles were not allotted before 1700 hours [operation commenced at 2130].'⁵⁴

It seems that in the case of the tardy Crocodiles, lessons of previous and recent operations were not being heeded, and hints that perhaps there were other shortcomings in operational planning. Nonetheless, the raid had met its objectives – 17 prisoners were taken; around thirty enemy killed by assaulting troops, and a strong possibility of more enemy losses inflicted by tank support. Casualties for the attackers were one killed, 29 wounded and 3 missing. It is not known how many of the wounded or missing subsequently returned to duty. Like 'Raid Triangle', it seems that a 'recipe' for successful operations of this kind was being quickly developed; only a small but relatively easily controlled infantry force backed up with considerable artillery and armoured support, supplemented with

⁵² TNA: WO 171/1389, Appendix 3 to August 1944.

⁵³ TNA: WO 171/877, Appendix 1 to August 1944.

⁵⁴ TNA: WO 171/1385, Appendix 4 to August 1944.

specialist vehicles. There is a possibility here, though, that troops at this level involved in operations similar to this one might view the presence of heavy artillery, tanks and specialist vehicles as prerequisites for success, as it had been on at least two occasions for men of this battalion.

From early August the composition of the division's brigades were rearranged. This was because where brigades were made up of battalions from the same regiment, such as the 158th Brigade (4th, 6th and 7th RWF), it had proved difficult to provide replacements when casualties had been heavy, particularly among officers who were even more difficult to find replacements for, and without which the companies could not operate. Other Infantry divisions also adopted this measure.⁵⁵ To achieve a more even distribution of regimental battalions, the brigades were reformed thus:

71st Infantry Brigade - 4th RWF; 1st Ox & Bucks; 1st HLI.

158th Infantry brigade – 7th RWF; 1 E.Lancs; 1/5th WEL

160th Infantry Brigade – 6th RWF; 4th WEL; 2nd MONS

Although raids and patrols were a feature of this period, there were also operations designed to take and hold ground. For instance, an attack by 158 Brigade on 12 August included two separate but related assaults. The first was by 1/5th WEL on the village of 'Fresnay Le Vieu'. Orders for the attack were received at 0630 for an 'H' hour of 1100. This left four and a half hours for planning, reconnaissance and liaison between infantry, artillery and armoured support, which in this case was the whole corps artillery and a squadron of tanks. The infantry plan was for two companies to attack from the left and right flanks

⁵⁵ Barclay, p. 66.

respectively, with one company attacking frontally, and one company being held in reserve. In the event, by 1225 the left flanking company had achieved their objective, but the other two were held up by the inevitable 'Spandau fire'. At 1514 the battalion commander committed his reserve and the objective was largely taken and stabilised by 1554. It was found that 45 of the enemy had been killed and 280 taken prisoner. The battalion had, however, suffered substantial casualties: two officers and 30 ORs killed and one officer and 60 ORs wounded.⁵⁶

The second attack was by 1st E.Lancs on the nearby settlement of Bois Halbout. It was intended that this attack would go ahead once 1/5th WEL had taken Fresnay and so 'H' hour was one hour later. The plan for the attack was very similar to 1/5th WEL's – two flanking company attacks with a frontal company assault with another company in reserve. Artillery support was the same, but this time there were two squadrons of tanks, including half a troop of AVsRE. Orders were given to this battalion at the same time as 1/5th WEL, but planning had to be done from maps as 'observation of the ground was impossible'.

Nonetheless, the short time allowed for planning did not even allow for reconnaissance of the route to the form up line. As 1/5th WEL had not taken their objective as planned, it was decided that this assault would continue with 'both flanks exposed'. Soon after this the assault appeared to lose its cohesion, and was counterattacked by four enemy tanks.

Nonetheless, the objectives were eventually taken and consolidated with anti-tank guns and other weapons. Enemy casualties were not fully recorded on this occasion, but the battalion had sustained 11 killed and 39 wounded.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ TNA: WO 171/1386, 12 August 1944.

⁵⁷ TNA: WO 171/1330, 12 August 1944.

Both of these attacks were successful, but the losses were quite high. One recurring factor in these attacks and raids appears to be the limited time allowed for planning of operations - in this case four or five hours. To put the planning times of this division and, for that matter the other infantry divisions into perspective it is instructive to compare what was happening in North West Europe to the British Army's experience in Italy, where in July the commander of the British 8th Army ordered that: 'in a set-piece attack, infantry brigade commanders should issue their orders forty-eight hours before H-hour and that six hours of daylight should be left to enable platoon commanders and tank troop commanders to make their plans.'⁵⁸ By September of 1944, Dempsey, commander of the Second Army in North West Europe, thought that if a battalion was assaulting organised defensive positions, two hours planning would result in a 50% chance of success and that four hours would guarantee success.⁵⁹ In terms of planning time, then, and at a time when the shortage of infantrymen was affecting the whole of the British Army, the formations in North West Europe were getting significantly fewer hours to plan their attacks than those in Italy. This is perhaps a reflection of a political need to force an urgent defeat in Germany on the Western Front, but on this occasion speed of operations was important if the 'Falaise gap' was to be closed before the majority of the German army units escaped. The other factor in the above mentioned attack that tends to reveal a tendency to disregard casualties, is that when 1st E.Lancs attacked with their flank exposed, they almost certainly took casualties from flanking fire from the objective that the 1/5th WEL had not yet managed to capture. These casualties, therefore, may have been avoided had a short 'wait' been ordered.

⁵⁸ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p. 245.

⁵⁹ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p. 245.

With the division now across the River Orne, the need to encircle the maximum number of German forces within the Falaise pocket became urgent. The Commander of the 4th

Armoured Brigade remembers:

We joined 53rd Welsh Division again, pushing south-eastwards against moderate opposition. At first Ross [the Divisional Commander] wanted to advance in a series of 'set-piece' infantry attacks, leapfrogging one infantry brigade through another. Not only would this be a very slow process, but he also spent hours in discussing his plans and issuing his orders. It was clear to me that the whole front was breaking up and that we could and should thrust forward more boldly. Exasperated by his ponderous methods, I said something like: "If you will let my brigade lead and give me one of your infantry brigades as well, we can forget all these divisional plans and get moving". Hardly surprisingly perhaps, he took offence; but in practice adopted my proposal.⁶⁰

This account gives an unflattering view of Ross and, in conjunction with Carver's earlier observation, calls into question Ross's qualities as a confident and dynamic leader. Whether Ross took Carver's advice is debatable, but the division did advance rapidly: 'In 7 days the B[attalion] has advanced 33 miles, 17 of which have been in the face of the enemy'.⁶¹ By the 16th of August the division was within six miles of Falaise where its task was to block the roads leading out of the town. This stands as explicit evidence that a cautious way of war was not being prosecuted by the 53rd and other units at this time.

Between 16th and 21st August the division encountered resistance which ranged from being very light to being very stubborn. Most of the more resolute of the defenders were bolstered by tanks and various types of anti tank guns, and often inflicted many casualties. 71 Brigade's battalions serve as an example of this time: 4th RWF met only slight opposition, while 1st HLI met a mixture of light and heavy opposition. 1st Ox & Bucks, however, on discovering in the early hours of 19th August, that the town of Pierrefitte was 'strongly held with one or two tanks in s[up]p[ort]' declined to attack. Later that morning, Brigade

⁶⁰ Carver, p. 197.

⁶¹ TNA: WO 171/1296, 20 August 1944.

ordered the battalion to attack the town with the support of 'Div art[illery] and [a] med[ium artillery] reg[iment]t and 1 sq[ua]dro[n] [of] t[an]ks. The attack commenced at 1515: 'Enemy resistance under this volume of s[u]p[por]ting fire was almost nonexistent. Damage and casualties in general were not great'⁶² and the supporting armour 'shot up the enemy escaping down the main road to Argentan.'⁶³

Meanwhile, the battalions of 158 Brigade were having similar experiences. On 12 August 1st E.Lancs, on attacking Bois Halbout, met with heavy machine gun and mortar fire which pinned down one company. In response to this a battalion attack was organised, which was supported by divisional artillery augmented with a medium regiment and a squadron of tanks. The attack met with limited opposition and the battalion continued with its advance. On 16 August 7th RWF were ordered to attack the town of Miette, which had previously been the object of an unsuccessful attack by the brigade: 'At 2300 CO gave out his orders for the attack', which was of two-company strength supported by divisional artillery. At 0155 'concentration by artillery on the actual objective began, the guns had been firing on other positions since 0130. At 0200 co[mpanie]s crossed start line under cover of art[illery] which went on until 0215, and MMGs of 1 Manchesters. Both coys advanced well. On reaching objective very little opposition was met the enemy it seems having evacuated owing to the artillery fire.'⁶⁴

On 1/5th WEL's line of advance enemy forces were sighted and a plan to attack them with the support of tanks was devised. This attack quickly lost cohesion, partly due to wireless communication failure. The assaulting companies were subsequently ordered to withdraw

⁶² TNA: WO 171/1356, 19 August 1944.

⁶³ TNA: WO 171/879, 18 August 1944.

⁶⁴ TNA: WO 171/1391, 16-17 August 1944.

after repelling very strong counterattacks. One of the assaulting companies sustained around 33 casualties.⁶⁵ As a result of this action one of the Company Commanders, who personally assaulted German positions and led his depleted company back to safety, was awarded the Victoria Cross.⁶⁶ There is no mention of support for this attack in the war diaries of any of the division's field artillery regiments or support regiment.

Conclusion

This is just a small selection of the 53rd's many actions leading up to the closing of the 'Falaise Pocket', but the instances related above do give an idea of what the characteristics of the 53rd's methods of fighting were. Typically in this period, because the enemy was withdrawing and the need for a rapid advance was important, it was difficult or impractical and, as Carver pointed out, slow to devise well-planned, rehearsed, set-piece actions. This in itself is evidence that the 53rd (in a similar way to the 43rd) were not fighting a cautious, methodical war. Instead, the way of war here is characterised by a rapid pace of operations during which the infantry were driven hard into attacks, often resulting in heavy casualties. Typically, advancing units were stopped by heavy machine gun fire with mortar support and perhaps a small number of tanks, self-propelled guns, or other artillery. The antidote to the opposition, as we have seen with the 43rd, was often the divisional artillery (with a medium regiment thrown in) divisional supporting medium machine guns and 4.2" mortars, and a squadron of tanks. The tanks were sometimes not able to provide the support that was expected, either through problems with the terrain or enemy anti-tank measures, but the artillery was a constant force in destroying the enemy's resolve to defend and subduing his artillery, and objectives were generally taken with little trouble after even a short

⁶⁵ TNA: WO 171/1386, 17 August 1944.

⁶⁶ Barclay, Appendix 'C' Citation Major Watkins' VC.

bombardment. Where artillery or other support was not used, attacking forces were often quickly pinned down by heavy machine gun fire and then subjected to mortar fire. Potent artillery support, then, was already a deciding factor in these battalion or company actions.

The role of the divisional artillery in these operations, and its impact on the conduct of the British way of war in North West Europe in general, is worthy of a much more detailed examination than this study can allow. It is, however, apparent that even at this relatively early stage in the campaign, that the field artillery regiments were quite capable of devising good, efficient fire plans in support of their own and other infantry divisions (often simultaneously) and also responding in good time to unexpected calls for support, counter-battery fire, and assistance in breaking up German counterattacks. This level of sophistication in artillery organisation and performance is perhaps one of the most crucial factors in the infantryman's war in this campaign.

By 31st August the 53rd had, since arriving in France, sustained the following casualties: 52 officers and 533 other ranks killed; 145 officers and 2711 other ranks wounded, and 18 officers and 360 other ranks missing.⁶⁷ Although these casualty figures are for all arms of the division, the majority of the casualties would have been among the infantry, and the total (3819) amounts to more than a whole infantry brigade. The amount of dead and wounded that the division inflicted on the enemy cannot be reliably calculated, but the division did capture 3823 prisoners.⁶⁸

After a few days rest the division advanced rapidly across France and met little determined resistance. By the 9th September the whole of the division had advanced to Antwerp where it spent some time defending the city and surrounding areas, mainly by extensive patrolling,

⁶⁷ Barclay, p. 69.

⁶⁸ Barclay, p. 69.

and also enjoyed some periods of rest and recreation. By this time, the division had attained a great deal of combat experience, and good cooperation between infantry and their accompanying artillery is evident. On the other hand, the division had not yet fought as a whole formation - operations so far had been only on a brigade or battalion basis.

CHAPTER 5

Colossal Cracks I: The 43rd Division in Operation MARKET GARDEN

The historiography of Operation Market-Garden is extensive. There are general Second World War histories and works which deal specifically with the battle; such as Cornelius Ryan's *A Bridge Too Far* and Martin Middlebrook's *Arnhem 1944: The Airborne Battle*. There are also works which consider specific aspects of the battle, such as Sebastian Ritchie's *Arnhem: Myth and Reality*, and Robert Kershaw's *It Never Snows in September* which, unusually, gives a German perspective. Other important texts of the battle include those published by British officers involved in the operation: *Arnhem* by Major General Urquhart and Lieutenant Colonel Frost's *Nearly There*.

What emerges from the historiography of Market Garden is a general consensus that the operation represents a departure from Montgomery's supposed cautious approach to the campaign and was 'uncharacteristically bold'¹ (although as we have already seen, the crossing of the Seine at Vernon was also a bold and risky operation). There is little need here to focus or comment on the conduct of the airborne division's, or even the whole of XXX Corps' part of the battle. Instead, this chapter will consider only the 43rd Infantry

¹ Hart, p. 91.

Division's involvement in the operation, and will examine how it prosecuted the war at this stage of the campaign in the face of stiffening German resistance and supply problems, and difficult operations that included another river crossing.² This is essentially an examination of an infantry division which was maturing in terms of combat experience and was now much more familiar with its enemy, and so will provide an illustration of the day to day way of war for the battalions of the 43rd.

Notwithstanding this chapter's focus on the 43rd, it is relevant to note at the outset Montgomery's underestimation of the German forces present in the Arnhem area. The commander of XXX Corps, Lt. Gen. Horrocks recalls that:

Our intelligence was of a very high order indeed: in fact it was unheard of for a fresh German formation to appear on my front without 24-48 hours' warning. Yet no information about the forces likely to be opposed to XXX Corps was ever disclosed.³ 'I had no idea whatever that the 9th and 10th Panzer Divisions were refitting just north-east of Arnhem, nor had Dempsey [British Second Army Commander], so far as I know, yet both Montgomery and Browning knew that they were there, as they had been identified by air photographs.⁴

This failure to inform the corps commander (and, by implication, all his subordinate commanders down to brigade, battalion, company and platoon level) of the disposition of enemy forces likely to be facing him is puzzling, and calls into question the assumption that Montgomery was briefing his commanders comprehensively or even adequately.

Planning

The 43rd's part in Operation Market-Garden really started on the 20th September. The division had been at first held in reserve for three days before being committed, and then

² A sketch map of the 'The Island' showing the locations of various Market Garden battles can be seen at Appendix 'A', Figure 5.

³ Horrocks, p. 82.

⁴ Horrocks, p. 93.

held up by congestion and by enemy attacks on the one road that was available for their advance. Planning for the operation was complicated as it was not, during the early stages of Market-Garden, known which bridges would be captured intact and which assault methods were to be used. The divisional commander held his first 'O' group for the 43rd's contribution at 1400 on the 16th September.⁵ Planning in the battalions, however, continued apace; one battalion history records: 'Altogether six plans were made today and we were prepared to carry out any one or all of them. This must be almost a record.'⁶ When the order to move forward was received two days later, however, 'Apparently yet another plan had evolved.' By 2030 that evening the same battalion's 'future role was still not clear'.⁷ Such planning and re-planning must have been exasperating and unsettling. This is not a feature that would normally be expected in a cautious and methodical style of warfare, but instead is perhaps more a hallmark of an infantry formation having to quickly adapt and react to the situation as it develops in the front line.

The general plan was for the 43rd to attempt to reach Arnhem to assist the 1st Airborne, who were holding out on the north bank of the Lower Rhine, just to the west of Arnhem. The 43rd was eventually brought into action from 0830 on 21st September, when 130 Brigade was used to clear the town of Nijmegen. The 7th HAMPS had 'by 0915hrs reported task completed having encountered no enemy'⁸ while the other battalion committed to the operation, the 5th DOR, had also quickly achieved their objectives also reporting not having encountered any resistance. Although in possession of the bridges at Nijmegen, the situation there was, however, far from clear; the delays in the approach to the town and the

⁵ WO 171/480, 16 September 1944.

⁶ TNA: WO 171/1287, 18 September 1944.

⁷ TNA: WO 171/1287, 20 September 1944.

⁸ TNA: WO 171/1306, 21 September 1944.

complicated traffic control arrangements had, for instance, meant that the 7th SOMLI's field kitchens were cooking the battalion's evening meal in the Welsh Guards' positions in the front line and so had to send the food back to Nijmegen where, according to Major Reeves who was trying to organise the following day's operations: 'The difficulty of collecting one's Order Group, of thinking and giving orders, of making oneself heard and linking the various sub units of supporting arms together – amongst the mass of the populace still crowded around, still cheering, was impossible.'⁹

From Nijmegen, the 43rd was to launch its next phase in the relief of the airborne troops at Arnhem. The basic plan was that 129 and 214 Brigades were to cross the Waal and advance to contact the following day, the 22nd September. 129 Brigade was to attack along the Nijmegen-Arnhem road. Although their objective was the town of Elst, their primary task was to keep German attention focussed on this road while 214 Brigade advanced in a westerly direction to attack Oosterhout, a town which overlooked the Arnhem road and which was also the right flank of the German front. This was the main effort of the division. 130 Brigade would form the Divisional reserve. The main defence force here and in nearby Elst was *Kampfgruppe Knaust*. Major Knaust's formation consisted of four companies of partially trained infantry and the remains of *Panzer Kompanie Mielke* (six PzKpfw III and two PzKpfw IVs) recently despatched from a training regiment in Bielefeld. Knaust was a popular and resourceful veteran of the Eastern Front, where he had lost his right leg in action and so controlled his battle group from his own personal SdKfz 251 half tracked vehicle.

⁹ Tim Saunders, *Operation Market Garden: The Island* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books, 2002), p. 52.

Opening moves - Oosterhout

The attack on Oosterhout was to be by the 7th SOMLI who, until 1830 the previous evening, had been assigned a different task. The war diary for the 7th SOMLI states that at 0530 the C.O. went for a brigade 'O' Group, but this is crossed out and 'C.O. made recce prior to issuing orders.' has been substituted.¹⁰ The Headquarters War Diary for 214 Brigade records an 'O' group taking place at 2200 on the 21st September¹¹ but, either way, this leaves relatively little time for orders to be disseminated to company and platoon commanders, or detailed daylight reconnaissance, when the 'move off' time was 0700 that morning.

The 7th SOMLI took with them 'A' Squadron 4/7 Dragoon Guards and a troop of 17-pounder anti-tank guns. Fire support was from 179th FRR, self propelled guns of 431 Battery, Essex Yeomanry, and the 8th MDDX heavy mortars and machine guns. Due to problems in preserving the integrity of extended supply lines, ammunition for these weapons was on a first scale basis only, with no prospect of ready resupply,¹² so the luxury of heavy supporting artillery fire was not possible for this operation.

At first light on the 22nd September, a squadron of 2nd Household Cavalry Regiment armoured cars made a dash along the Somersets' line of advance on their way to Driel in order to link up with a force of Polish paratroopers there. On their way past Oosterhout, they observed at least three of Knaust's Mk. III panzers and some German soldiers, but there was no reaction from them or exchange of fire. In view of this, and very aware of the

¹⁰ TNA: WO 171/1373, 22 September 1944.

¹¹ TNA: WO 171/708, 21 September 1944.

¹² Saunders, *The Island*, p. 56.

shortage of artillery ammunition, General Thomas cancelled the fire plan that was to accompany the 7th SOMLI attack.¹³

The Somersets moved off at 0700 towards the south westerly limits of Oosterhout, but by 0930 had been halted by the previously-observed Germans with their Mk. III Panzers. A PIAT attack on the tanks was attempted but was halted by heavy fire which also killed the Commander of 'D' Company, Major Sidney Young. 'C' company was sent to the north of the town to carry out a flanking attack, but again was halted by resolute defence. Attempts were made to dislodge the enemy with existing artillery support – 214 Brigade HQ records at least three separate artillery tasks.¹⁴ By 1400 it was decided to attack the town again, but this time supported by corps artillery. The attack commenced at 1500; by 1630 'P[risoners of] W[ar] [were] streaming back from attacking companies' and by 1800 'All companies reported on objectives and attack successful'¹⁵

The northwards advance by 129 Brigade on the Nijmegen – Arnhem road was stopped by strong resistance by the German defenders. Later in the day an attempt was made by B Squadron of 13/18 Hussars to exploit any disorganisation that might have been inflicted on the defenders in view of their defeat at Oosterhout by mounting a fresh attack. This was also stopped and four Shermans were destroyed in the process.

It is clear that, on this occasion at least, brigade strength infantry attacks, with adequate (but only frugally supplied) armoured and artillery support could not be successfully prosecuted against what amounted to a scratch force of defenders, supported by virtually obsolete tanks and limited artillery assets. The infantry were able to successfully defeat the

¹³ Saunders, *The Island*, pp. 53-56.

¹⁴ TNA: WO 170/708, 22 September 1944.

¹⁵ TNA: WO 171/1373, 22 September 1944.

defenders, however, once the kind of artillery support they had become accustomed to had been deployed. Once again, the morale factor of artillery alone (weather conditions precluded air support on this day) as a force multiplier for the attacker, and a morale breaker for the defender cannot be overlooked.

The shortage of artillery ammunition is a significant factor in this action (and indeed for the whole operation) and had a serious effect on the length of time this operation took.

Thomas could perhaps be forgiven for trying to conserve ammunition when it looked possible that the defenders had abandoned Oosterhout, but the cancelling of the firing order was probably responsible for extending the time taken to achieve the objective.

Moreover, when it had been decided to mount another fire plan, more time was lost for detailed reconnaissance. Lt Colonel Taylor commented: 'One of the difficulties that had to be faced up to at this period was the limited amount of artillery ammunition available. For this reason, 7 Som[erset] Light Infantry spent a great deal of time finding out exactly where enemy strong points were located before precious ammunition could be used'.¹⁶

In this case, had the exact location of the strong points and other German assets been determined (the existence of at least three Mk. III tanks was already known) through detailed reconnaissance before the operation commenced, it could possibly have been executed at the first attempt, and the whole operation completed in a much shorter time.

Time, of course, was a crucial consideration in this operation as the situation for the airborne forces was getting progressively worse, and it was the task of the 43rd to assist them. Their commander, General Urquhart, was not impressed; his opinion was that 'they

¹⁶ Saunders, *The Island*, p. 59.

had wasted most of a day, held up by a tank and some infantry';¹⁷ a frank and unforgiving remark, but perhaps uncomfortably accurate. Even worse, following this latest action, the corps artillery was now down to three rounds per gun - the divisional artillery had only a little more to spare. Nonetheless, the 22nd of September was not yet over, and in the remaining hour or so before sunset, elements of the 43rd were to make a remarkable ten mile advance to Driel, located on the south bank of the Neder Rijn to link up with the force of Polish Paratroopers that were holding out there.

Advance to Driel

The 5th DCLI had been held in reserve most of the day, but had been tasked with linking up with the trapped 1st Airborne Division at Arnhem and delivering two DUKWs loaded with ammunition 'and to take all risks in doing so'¹⁸ It was decided by the battalion commander that in view of the extreme urgency of the operation and impending nightfall, the practice of advancing in 'bounds' and picqueting of flanks would be discarded in favour of a 'dash' to the objective.

The revised plan was inspired by the successful 'dash' to Driel earlier in the day by the armoured cars of the 2nd Household Cavalry Regiment, but in this case there would be two vehicular columns; one armoured and one 'soft-skinned' (including the DUKWs with their cargo of ammunition) both carrying as many infantrymen as could be crammed onto and into the vehicles, with a further infantry column following on foot. The armoured column reached Driel within thirty minutes, the leading tank being disabled by a 75 grenade laid by the Polish airborne troops. The second column, however, had encountered enemy tanks

¹⁷ Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, p. 192.

¹⁸ TNA: WO 171/1281, 22 September 1944.

and after the initial confused identification of friend and foe, *ad hoc* anti-tank ambushes were organised. Major Parker recalls:

Accordingly we set our trap. I gave the order for complete silence and no rounds to be fired unless attacked by infantry because of the flash. PIATs were to be fired in a volley of three when given the order. No firing to take place until the leading tank hit the mines. We now heard German Tiger tanks shooting up B Company and as this was happening a German motor combination came up the road from Elst, presumably to contact the tanks. He literally blew up on our 75 mines. Next, we heard the tanks returning headed by a DR. He also blew up. The leading tank was firing Verey lights to light the way every 30 seconds. It was fairly obvious that they were 'windy'. These were the five tanks. As the first tank reached the 75 mines I gave the orders for groups Two and Three to fire. There was a tremendous explosion and six PIAT bombs hit the tank. This put him completely out of action. The next tank hit the mines and received the same treatment. The third tried to back out but hit a string of mines which had been pulled in behind it and came to a halt on the initial explosion, and every time he tried to move another mine went off. Eventually he too was knocked out by Private Brown, who went within a few yards of the tank with his PIAT before he fired. The tank was out, but so was one of the eyes of the PIAT firer. The last words of Brown before he lost consciousness were "I don't care, I knocked the bastard thing out".¹⁹

In their haste to escape, the other two tanks ditched at the roadside and their crews escaped. Thus, five Tigers were accounted for in one infantry ambush.

This is a long quote from one source, but it illustrates several points. First, this *ad hoc* ambush arranged by Major Parker shows that his men could quickly lay their hands on an adequate supply of Infantry anti-tank weapons such as 75 grenades (or mines) and at least six PIATs to deal with the five tanks, and that the commander was confident of at least a fighting chance of success. Second, this action shows that these men had some experience in dealing with enemy armour, as a successful infantry anti-tank strategy which could be rapidly deployed had been developed. Third, this extract shows that this force had confidence in its weapons, and was prepared to fight in a spirited and resolute manner. This

¹⁹ Saunders, *The Island*, p. 69.

also stands as another example of the Germans not always adequately defending their valuable armour from infantry attack with their own *Panzergranadiers*, something that has already been noted several times in this study.

The actions of the 43rd on the 22nd September are informative in an analysis on how the British Infantry executed the 'British way of War' in the autumn of 1944. On the one hand, the two set-piece battalion assaults on Oosterhout and the Arnhem road initially failed, perhaps due to the lack of the usual and customary heavy artillery comforting the attacker and numbing the senses of the defenders. On the other hand, a quickly thought out solution by a battalion commander, which exploited the situation, but which also took a calculated risk (he knew that enemy tanks were likely to be encountered) resulted in complete success in achieving his given objectives.²⁰ The 5th DCLI's 'dash to Driel' shows what British Infantry could achieve in the right circumstances without huge artillery concentrations. One recurring theme remains, though; the British infantry were having to deal with enemy armour themselves.

Crossing the Neder Rijn

On 23 September 130 Brigade advanced northwards to Driel while under fire from enemy forces in the Elst area and made contact with 5th DCLI and the Polish Airborne. It was from this consolidated position that the next part of the operation could be mounted the following day. General Horrocks issued his orders to General Thomas:

Firstly: In order to relieve pressure on the bridgehead, Thomas was to carry out an assault crossing that night, with at least one battalion of his own, to be followed by the Poles, with as many stores as possible – particularly ammunition. This, of course, depended on how many assault boats he could muster, I promised him the support of the Corps Artillery, though ammunition was getting dangerously short. Secondly,

²⁰ Ultimately, the operation failed as the DUKWs ditched before entering the river.

Thomas was to carry out a reconnaissance farther to the west, because if things went well that night I hope to side-slip the 43rd Division, cross the Neder Rijn farther to the west and carry out a left hook against the German forces attacking the western perimeter of the airborne troops.²¹

It is likely that when these orders were given, the decision to evacuate (rather than reinforce and resupply) the 1st Airborne had already been made, but was not widely disseminated due to security considerations.²² It should also be noted that the 43rd at this point were heavily committed. In addition to the evacuation operation, Elst, a town to the south, was to be captured; and the maintenance of both east and west flanks was to be ensured while also holding a brigade with an armoured regiment in reserve.²³

The troops selected for the river crossing were the 4th DOR, a battalion that had not taken part in the assault phase of the crossing of the Seine the previous month, so had no 'live' experience of assault river crossings.²⁴ In view of the restricted knowledge of the command intentions regarding 1st Airborne's evacuation, almost all of those involved in the assault believed that they were being committed to a reinforcing operation. The 4th DOR war diary records: '1800: CO 'O' G[rou]p. Intentions are that the B[attalio]n will cross river Neder Rijn at ferry 6876 and enlarge the Br[idg]e Head already held by parachutists also to get supplies through to the air-borne t[roo]ps. A + B coys to be in first flight of assault boats followed by C + D coys.'²⁵ Knowledge of the true reason for the assault - to prepare for an evacuation - was only entrusted to those of higher rank. The 4th DOR's CO, Colonel Tilly, was made aware of the evacuation plan at around the time of the 'O' group mentioned in the war

²¹ Horrocks, pp. 122-123.

²² Saunders, *The Island*, p. 81.

²³ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 135.

²⁴ The troops, from 129 Brigade, that *had* been involved in the Seine operation were at that time preparing to advance on Elst, well to the south.

²⁵ TNA: WO 171/1286, 24 September 1944.

diary. Major Roper of 'C' Company recalled: 'Colonel Tilly said, "Gentlemen, we've bought it this time." I think he realised it was a hairy operation. As for myself, I thought it unlikely we would get back. When I had my company 'O' group I tried to water it down as much as possible and told them we were going to do an important job to help the airborne people.'

²⁶ Major Grafton, the Dorset's second in command recalled being told that: 'I'm afraid we're being chucked away'.²⁷ Nonetheless, Montgomery maintains in his memoirs that the order to evacuate was given on the evening of the 25th.²⁸ Perhaps, then, there was another reason why the evacuation plan was kept from the rank and file: to preserve their morale. It was obvious to all involved that the Germans occupied the commanding Westerbouwing heights in some strength, and overlooked the landing site. The enemy were also alert to the possibility of a river assault as they had repelled a previous attack at a nearby site by the Polish airborne troops. Furthermore, although the men of the 4th DOR had not been at the Seine crossing in the assault phase, they would probably have been well aware of the high casualties sustained by the 5th WILTS when they made their assault there in storm boats.

Fire support for this operation was to be the division's own three artillery regiments and 8th MDDX 4.2" mortars and machine guns. 'H' hour was to have been 2200 (to take advantage of the relatively slack river current before rainfall increased it). In the event, due to mishap and confusion²⁹ only 12 storm boats, which had to be taken from the Polish paratroop unit, arrived much later than planned. The attack went ahead at 0100³⁰ on the 25th, when the river current was at its strongest and therefore likely to disperse the boats. Private Francis

gives an idea of the action:

²⁶ Saunders, *The Island*, p. 82.

²⁷ Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, p. 199.

²⁸ Field Marshal The Viscount Bernard Law Montgomery, *Memoirs* (London: Collins, 1958) p. 295.

²⁹ Of the five truckloads of storm boats, two slid into drainage ditches and could not be recovered and two more drove into enemy-held Elst by mistake. Five remaining boats were delivered to the Poles.

³⁰ TNA: WO 171/1286, 25 September 1944.

NCOs like mother hens, “keep up lads, close up, lads.” Original fear of going into action was subsiding, very cold and cheesed off. Follow white tapes down to the river, all hell let loose. First our guns to the rear of us, then heavy MG firing tracer, parachute flares which illuminated the scene. Jerry joined in and we just blundered on through shit, shot and shell while both sides attempted to outdo each other. Took what cover we could behind canvas boat until urged on: came to river, launched the boat. Balanced flat bottomed boat as best we could, paddled with rifles, spades and hands. If we had gone into the river we would have had no chance at all with all the impedimenta we carried.³¹

Perhaps inevitably, given the river current and the alertness of the defenders, the assault quickly became fragmented and disjointed, with scattered boat loads of the 4th DOR arriving at the far shore at the wrong place and in fewer numbers than was planned. Major Whittle:

Two of the ten boats in my Co[mpan]y group were holed badly before reaching the bank. A strong current swept my two leading boats rapidly westwards. Only two further boatloads joined us. Strength of ‘B’ Co[mpan]y was two officers and less than 30 O[ther] R[anks]. We started an assault and met very heavy opposition. We occupied the trenches at the top with around 15 men. We were joined by the CO and about twenty men of ‘C’ Co[mpan]y. They set out to the right to contact ‘A’ Co[mpan]y... and the CO’s party were soon surrounded and forced to surrender.³²

Certainly, the resistance of the defenders, despite the divisional artillery support, was sufficient to inhibit the attacker’s spirit. Private Francis again: ‘Suddenly a young Lieutenant jumped onto the ridge, shouted ‘charge’ – nobody moved. After a moment or two he was up again ‘come on lads, charge’. There was a bit of shuffling – no change. The Lieutenant waved his revolver and shouted ‘if you don’t charge, you bastards, I’ll shoot you.’³³

Later that morning, Private Francis remembers an incident which seems to prove that it was widely believed among the Dorsets’ junior ranks that they were fighting to open a bridgehead: ‘To our astonishment our officer Lt. Col. Tilley shouted to us all to ‘cease fire’; he continued ‘our position is hopeless. Our mission was to draw the Germans away from

³¹ Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, p. 200.

³² Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, p. 201.

³³ Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, p. 202.

the paratroopers for three hours whilst they were rescued.’ We were stunned. We had expected the might of the British Army behind us to reinforce the bridgehead we had made’.³⁴

There is a possibility of subterfuge here. River assaults had, for the 43rd, recently been costly in terms of casualties, and it was evident on this occasion that the defender’s morale was high and they occupied commanding positions. This was a dangerous and risky operation for any infantry battalion to carry out; the command may have had reason to believe that the Dorset’s morale was too fragile to fully commit to the task, and so allowed its soldiers to believe what it probably wanted the Germans to believe – that the airborne division was being reinforced rather than steps to facilitate their evacuation was taking place, ostensibly under the expedient of restricting information in case of capture.³⁵ If this is so, and Francis’s account is accurate, Tilly effectively gave the game away to his men just before they were actually captured.

At 0215 the river crossing ‘ceased due to h[eav]y enemy pressure’,³⁶ but it was also likely that there were no boats left in a fit state to continue.³⁷ It was estimated that around 17 officers and 298 other ranks³⁸ had landed on the far shore. Those that had landed were widely scattered, so their assault lacked cohesion and was therefore severely weakened. Many of those that landed attempted to fight their way to their objectives in small groups and were quickly surrounded and taken prisoner. Around eighty Dorsets managed to make their way to the Airborne’s perimeter and joined forces with them. Among these personnel

³⁴ Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, p. 202. .

³⁵ At least two copies of the orders for the evacuation of the airborne division, ‘Operation BERLIN’, were carried over the Rhine. Saunders, *The Island*, p. 89.

³⁶ TNA: WO 171/1286, 25 September 1944.

³⁷ Saunders, *The Island*, p. 88.

³⁸ TNA: WO 171/1286, 25 September 1944.

were 'A' Company's tactical HQ with its valuable wireless equipment and signals instructions. This, at least, allowed for much improved artillery support for the paratroops.

By daybreak there were few Dorsets left who were neither prisoners or in the relative safety of the airborne perimeter. Major Whittle had managed to accumulate a small group of men. Here he recounts the precarious situation of these survivors:

On checking up, I discovered my strength to be about thirty, comprising a few men of B, C and D Companies, about ten of S Company and an MO and quartermaster belonging to the airborne forces. We remained in this position throughout the day. There were several casualties from sniper and M[achine] G[un] fire, and also from a couple of well-meaning Spitfires who "Strafed" us. A German speaking reasonably good English did his best to make us surrender. After dark that night German patrol activity became very active, and one group was located infiltrating behind us. We had several skirmishes with enemy patrols, and about 2300 hours I decided to withdraw across the river. We had found one sound boat and the wounded and non-swimmers were pushed off in this; the rest of us swam back.³⁹

Major Hall recalls his arrival at Battalion HQ: 'The Brigadier congratulated him on his success and wanted to put him up for an MC. The Divisional Commander [Thomas] was also there – he wanted to court martial Mike [Whittle] for retiring in the face of the enemy without orders. I witnessed a stand up row between the two of them. The result was that the Brigadier was sacked and poor Mike got nothing!'⁴⁰ This incident is another example of how keen Thomas was to 'drive' his troops and how he viewed the possibility of 'stickiness' amongst his men.

The evacuation of the airborne troops commenced on the evening of the 25th September, accompanied by a distracting feint attack staged by 129 Brigade and a heavy artillery bombardment. More storm boats were provided by the 43rd's engineer formations and

³⁹ Saunders, *The Island*, pp. 90-91.

⁴⁰ Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, p. 203.

Canadian sappers from AGRE for the operation. The evacuation was misinterpreted by the Germans, who thought that: 'the enemy made renewed crossing attempts from opposite the 10th SS, which were mostly repelled by concentrated fire.'⁴¹ By dawn on the 26th "Over 2000 men of the Airborne Division had been swiftly passed to the rear. It had been hoped to evacuate the 4th Dorsets after the Airborne Division. Few, however, could be found'⁴² Only 75 of the original assaulting formation of 300 would make it back to the south shore; the 4th DOR had lost 213 men between 24 and 26 September. Surely, a proportion of them must have been taken prisoner but, as there are only fifteen known graves belonging to the Dorsets on the northern bank of the Rhine, many more must have perished in the river. The battalion had the highest number of men listed as 'missing' in the entire campaign.⁴³ With the battalion rifle companies heavily depleted, the battalion was quickly reorganised into two rifle companies with 'A' Company comprising the remains of 'A' and 'C' Companies and 'B' Company those of 'B' and 'D'.⁴⁴ Within ten days, 123 replacements had been sent to the battalion⁴⁵ but even this amount of replacements would not have brought the rifle companies up to complement strength.

Elst

While the 4th DOR were involved in their operation on the Rhine, and the airborne division was being evacuated from the north bank, the 43rds 214 Brigade was committed to the reduction of nearby Elst, where the remains of *Kampfgruppe Knaust* were defending. Other German units forming the German defence in the Island this time included a mixture of *Heer*, *Luftwaffe* and *Kriegsmarine* personnel and Dutch SS troops. Knaust's original tank

⁴¹ Saunders, *The Island*, p. 100.

⁴² Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, pp. 137-138.

⁴³ Saunders, *The Island*, p.91.

⁴⁴ TNA: WO 171/1286, Appendix to September 1944.

⁴⁵ TNA: WO 171/1286, 30 September – 9 October 1944.

complement had been bolstered by a total of 15 brand new Tiger I and Tiger II's from *Schwere Panzerabteilung* 506 (five of which had already been destroyed by 5th DCLI). There were also a number of new PzKfw IV Panthers, ten *Sturmgeschutz* III from 280 *Abteilung*, two batteries of SS *Nebelwerfer* mortars, and sixteen 88mm guns.⁴⁶

Before 214 Brigade could commence their attack on Elst, they first had to wait for 130 Brigade to pass through and clear the only road that could support wheeled and tracked vehicle at a crossroads at Valburg. The Commander of 214 Brigade later remarked: 'The difficulty of staging a brigade battle with another brigade advancing through your assembly area on the only available road will be realised'.⁴⁷ Characteristically, Major-General Thomas was not convinced by this explanation, and arrived in person at Valburg crossroads to assess the situation, whereupon he narrowly avoided becoming a casualty from a German artillery concentration.

At around 1530-1600, 130 Brigade cleared Valburg crossroads and 214 Brigade's attack began at 1600.⁴⁸ The 1st WORCs' 'C' and 'D' companies with 'C' Squadron 4/7 Dragoon Guards advanced to the left of the axis, tasked with sweeping aside enemy forces that threatened the road to Driel, with the town of Elst itself being their ultimate objective. The 7th SOMLI's 'C' and 'D' Companies with 'A' Squadron 4/7 Dragoon Guards advanced to the south of Elst to cut off the Arnhem/Nijmegen road that runs through the town. The operation was to be supported by the 'whole divisional artillery'.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Saunders, *The Island*, p. 107.

⁴⁷ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 130.

⁴⁸ Confusingly, 214 Brigade's HQ War Diary records the 7th Somersets crossing the starting point at 1655, and the 1st Worcesters at 1715. TNA: WO 171/708, 23 September 1944.

⁴⁹ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 130.

The 1st WORCS War Diary simply records: 'B[attalio]n left Valburg at 1630 h[ou]rs. 6 P[risoner]s [of] W[ar]. 10 SS P[an]z[er] Reg[imen]t. 1 Tiger tank knocked out.'⁵⁰ Major Watson of the 1st WORCS, however, vividly remembers coming under fire from small arms and 88mm guns:

The tanks replied, the company deployed, and the advance continued. At a bend in the road, a Panther appeared, but its life was very short for it was instantly set on fire by our own tanks. The farmhouses were searched and the enemy found in them were quickly disposed of. Another Panther appeared and was engaging our own tanks – darkness descended quickly and we struggled forward against strong resistance; at last the second Panther was destroyed.⁵¹

This stands as an example of how basic recording in war diaries sometimes did not convey the experiences and effort of those on the ground. As the Worcesters reached Elst itself, night was falling and it was apparent that as further progress could only be achieved through house-to-house fighting, it was decided to halt operations until first light.

To the south the 7th SOMLI reported: 'preliminary objectives taken without opposition. C, D & B Coys in action against enemy all going well. 1830: B[attalio]n occupied S.E. part of ELST as intended. C.O. told Coys to hold on to what they have got and dig in where they are'.⁵²

The Diary does not, however, record a 'blue-on-blue' incident remembered by Private Stokes of 'B' Company which had been halted by heavy fire: '[The company signallers] called for artillery fire but must have made a mistake with the map reference as the 3-inch mortars fell right on us. I was the sole survivor of the HQ Group I was with. After this

⁵⁰ TNA: WO 171/1373, 23 September 1944.

⁵¹ Saunders, *The Island*, pp. 110-110.

⁵² TNA: WO 171/1373, 23 September 1944.

shambles we had to retreat to our start line and in pouring rain, started the attack again and took the objective'.⁵³

At first light the following day, the attack on Elst recommenced. This brigade attack was to last the whole day. The 1st WORCS, tasked with clearing Elst, found itself 'involved in savage house-to-house fighting in which two company commanders lost their lives. The enemy consisted of *Waffen SS* and they fought to the end.'⁵⁴ This operation was almost a text book set-piece action, with one company protecting the flank of two other companies who were to do the actual house-clearing – the fourth company remained in reserve. The assaulting companies, in this case 'D' (leading) and 'B' met with heavy resistance. Stretcher bearer Bill Edwardes:

This was the first town we had attacked and the training we had done while we were waiting back in Vernon was paying off. It seemed that every house held enemy infantry. Our tanks followed the company and blasted hell out of the buildings with their guns and machine guns. In most cases, as our men arrived through the front door the Germans were going out through the back and withdrawing to the next building. We had to clear Elst house by house, street by street and it took a long time. In comparison with our previous battles, casualties were not particularly heavy.⁵⁵

This gives an idea of how proficient the British had become at training men to deal with the difficult task of house-to-house fighting, and Edwardes - a stretcher bearer - was well-placed to comment on the relative lack of casualties. Nonetheless, by the end of the day, Private Albert King remembers that 'D' Company's 12 Platoon was only eight strong⁵⁶ (establishment platoon strength at full complement was normally around 36 men) and even with the rejuvenating effect of 'B' Company's take-over of the assault, the Germans had still

⁵³ Saunders, *The Island*, p. 113.

⁵⁴ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 135.

⁵⁵ Saunders, *The Island*, p. 119.

⁵⁶ Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, p. 197.

not been properly cleared from Elst by nightfall. To the south, the 7th SOMLI spent most of the day consolidating their position; later in the day they were ordered to capture Elst station, but were repulsed by machinegun fire just before nightfall.

The following day (25th of September) was, according to the 1st WORCS' historian, spent clearing up and licking its wounds and encouraging the Dutch inhabitants of Elst to evacuate the town.⁵⁷ There still remained, however, a strong German presence in the east of the town but due to the Worcesters' weakened state – they had received no reinforcements and little ammunition – they were not in a fit state to launch an assault. Instead, the 7th SOMLI were to attack the remaining defenders from their positions in the south with 'B' company, supported by a troop of tanks. The 'O' group briefing for this operation took place at 0935 for a start time of 1000.⁵⁸ The operation itself unfolded in what, by now, a familiar pattern: two platoons advanced, one each side of a main road. One of the three tanks attempted a cross-country route and immediately ditched. The platoon advance to the right of the road was quickly held up by machine gun fire. The platoon on the left, supported by the company mortars managed to come within 300 yards of the objective before it, too, was stopped by machine gun and sniper fire. These platoons were also under 'heavy mortar fire'⁵⁹ during their advance. Shortly before this happened, however, both of the remaining tanks had been knocked out by an anti-tank gun positioned at the objective, so the infantry were without their armoured support. Communication with the command had been lost because both company signallers had become casualties but the Commanding Officer, after he had come forward to assess the situation, ordered a limited withdrawal to allow and artillery concentration on the objective, which took place at around 1500 hours.

⁵⁷ Saunders, *The Island*, p. 122.

⁵⁸ TNA: WO 171/1373, 25 September 1944.

⁵⁹ TNA: WO 171/1373, 25 September 1944.

The objective and the anti-tank gun were then taken without any further trouble. It was apparent that the Germans had elected to evacuate Elst.⁶⁰

These small company-sized operations around Elst, although only a small part of a much larger offensive, typify the type of fighting at this stage of the war that infantry units seem to have settled into: Infantry units generally advanced as ordered until halted by machine guns usually accompanied by 'sniper' fire.⁶¹ If their supporting armour was removed or unable to keep up, either through enemy action or due to other factors, the assault quickly lost momentum until artillery support, often augmented with heavy mortars and medium machine guns (sometimes AGRA artillery support) could be called upon to neutralise or demoralise the defenders. Once the defenders realised that further resistance was futile, they either surrender or retired to the next (usually previously identified) position of defence to regroup and normally mounted a counterattack. This is not a criticism; this is a pragmatic approach to the problems that the infantry have encountered. It does seem to be, however, a departure from the section and platoon tactics outlines in the War Office's 1944 edition of *Infantry Training* which gives clear instructions for infantry assaults at this unit level without artillery support.⁶² This perhaps represents a 'bottom up' evolution in infantry tactics, irrespective of the 'drive' that was imposed by higher command.

Although Elst was finally captured, fighting still continued on 'The Island' for some time. The positions occupied by the 43rd effectively became a salient in the Allies' front line in that area. General Thomas reorganised the positions of his brigades: the 43rd Reconnaissance Regiment, along with 8th Armoured Brigade and 12 KRRC defended the west flank, 130

⁶⁰ Saunders, *The Island*, p. 122.

⁶¹ It is unlikely that the German Army at this stage of the war had the resources to produce as many properly trained snipers that are claimed to be encountered by the British. It is much more likely that these 'snipers' were, in fact, regular riflemen.

⁶² *Infantry Training*, Chapter 4.

Brigade occupied the southern bank of the Lower Rhine (effectively the northern front line) and 129 Brigade, with 5 Guards Brigade and 69 Infantry Brigade occupied Elst and the eastern flank. 214 Brigade was moved into reserve. General Thomas was now effectively entrusted with the defence of the whole Island area with a force that was 'theoretically beyond the capacity of a divisional commander and staff to handle.'⁶³

On the 27th September, the Germans managed to secure a bridgehead over the Lower Rhine in the thinly-defended area of Randwijk. They were engaged by armoured cars of the 43rd's reconnaissance regiment, who managed to restrict their movement. The 7th HAMPS were alerted to the German presence at around 0400, and at 0830, with a troop of tanks, 'C' company was dispatched west to contain them. On encountering the enemy the Hampshires 'engaged them inflicting many casualties and pushing them back to the river bank where the enemy turned south'⁶⁴ This entry in the Hampshire's War Diary understates the ferocity of this encounter – by the end of the day their casualties for officers were one wounded and one missing; other ranks: two dead, two missing and 22 wounded.⁶⁵ It had become apparent that the German force was of approximate battalion strength and that further reinforcements would be needed to neutralise the threat it posed. Accordingly, at 1230 that day the 7th SOMLI were ordered to 'break up the enemy and drive them back across the Lower Rhine'⁶⁶. At 1530 they commenced their advance mounted on a squadron of tanks and came in contact with the Germans around an hour later. In their approach the infantry were denied the support of their tanks as 'the fire of 88's made it impossible for the

⁶³ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 143.

⁶⁴ TNA: WO 171/1306, 27 September 1944.

⁶⁵ TNA: WO 171/1306, 27 September 1944.

⁶⁶ TNA: WO 171/1306, 27 September 1944.

tanks to operate beyond the canal'⁶⁷ but were, as usual, well supported by artillery. The main assault took place at 0630 the following morning. Major Durie: 'The Div[isional] artillery saturated front of the orchard. 'C' Company followed the barrage, 'leaning on it'. At times the mediums were falling behind us. Ten minutes later objectives taken. Lots of demoralised Boche came in to surrender'.⁶⁸ Major Roberts of 'A' Company:

We shelled the wretched Germans mercilessly whenever they made the slightest move. At 0630 our attack went in with a Div[isional] artillery concentration and our 3-in mortars. A great success owing to the tremendous weight of artillery. The enemy in slit trenches experienced a foretaste of hell, many Germans totally dazed. The enemy lost six killed and 130 POW. 'A' Coy only 70 strong lost two killed and five wounded.⁶⁹

This effectively eliminated the German bridgehead. It is clear that in this tankless infantry duel, the weight and efficient use of artillery was the deciding factor.

The main German counterattack against the Allied forces on 'The Island' came on the 1st of October. A diversionary bridgehead was established further to the east of the last one, and was discovered at around 0615. This assault was prosecuted in a very determined manner, and the attacking SS soldiers sustained very heavy casualties. Nonetheless, the 7th HAMPS spent four days repeatedly attacking the bridgehead, assisted by Typhoon attacks, regimental, medium and heavy artillery, mortars and machine guns. The 8th MDDX War Diary reports: 'This platoon had now fired approx 1,000 belts on harassing tasks or in direct support of 7th Hamps.' and goes on to state that: 'The Mark VIII Z and 4.2 ammunition question was still causing concern, and barely sufficient was being released to carry out

⁶⁷ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 141.

⁶⁸ Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, p. 210.

⁶⁹ Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, p. 211.

these programmes'.⁷⁰ Even in view of this support, the Hampshires' attacks were hampered by bad visibility and 'very heavy MG fire'. Over four days, three officers and seven other ranks were killed; 72 other ranks were wounded, and a further 17 were missing.⁷¹ When the casualties from the earlier German bridgehead attempt are taken into account, the 7th HAMPS had suffered 12 dead and 94 wounded in less than a week. It is not known what proportion of the wounded would be able to return to combat duties or who would either subsequently die of their wounds. Even so, by the time the 7th HAMPS were relieved on the 4th October by the 502nd Regimental Combat Team of the 101st US Airborne division, the bridgehead had still not been eliminated.

As stated above, this bridgehead was intended as a diversionary measure to tie up Allied assets that might have been used to augment the main German attack that was taking place on the 43rd's eastern flank. It must be considered a success, as the 69th Infantry Brigade were to complain that badly-needed artillery support at the site of the main attack was late in arriving.⁷²

The main effort of the German counter attack which started on the 1st of October came on the eastern flank of the Allied positions and 69 Brigade took the brunt of the main force. The 43rd's 129 Brigade and 7th SOMLI, who were also part of the formation defending the eastern flank experienced some vicious fighting. The first day of the counter attack was fierce enough to worry General Thomas into requesting an RAF medium bomber bombardment on the German forming up area.⁷³ The German attack the following day was supported by heavy mortar fire and tanks, and at one point the 5th WILTS forward positions

⁷⁰ TNA: WO 171/1347, 2 October 1944.

⁷¹ TNA: WO 171/1306, 1-4 October 1944.

⁷² Saunders, *The Island*, p. 141.

⁷³ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 145.

were overrun. They were only regained the following day with heavy artillery support and tanks. The action over the next two days or so of fighting was characterised by the use of artillery, and armoured support where possible, to break up the German attacks, which frequently included tanks. At one point, and unusually, the WILTS complained: 'Art[iller]y fire not effective – 4.2" mortars brought into action'⁷⁴ The 8th MDDX's 4 platoon, providing MMG support 'were using their personal weapons as well as their MGs at short range'⁷⁵ and PIAT teams were dispatched to deal with tank threats. Losses were heavy for the Wiltshires; all of 'D' Company's officers had become casualties and command was assumed by the Company Sergeant Major. The survivors of 'B' and 'D' Companies were combined.⁷⁶

These were the last few days for the 43rd on 'The Island'; 129 Brigade moved to concentration on 6th October having been relieved by 9 Infantry Brigade. 130 Brigade moved to divisional reserve on 5th Oct 'Bns able to reorganise after a fortnights very hard fighting'⁷⁷ while the three battalions of 214 Brigade alternated between periods of rest and vigorous patrolling.

Conclusion

The fighting ability of troops of the 43rd, or at least XXX Corps, seems to have been called into question during this part of the campaign, not least by those serving in the beleaguered airborne division; General Urquhart's assessment of the fighting at Oosterhout has already been recalled. Even forty years after the event Colonel Frost, at a reunion, shook his fist and roared: 'Do you call that fighting'⁷⁸ The Commander of XXX

⁷⁴ TNA: WO 171/1395, 2 October 1944.

⁷⁵ TNA: WO 171/1347, 2 October 1944.

⁷⁶ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 147.

⁷⁷ TNA: WO 171/660, 5 October 1944.

⁷⁸ Stuart Hills, *By Tank into Normandy* (London: Cassell, 2003), p. 175.

Corps, however, explains in his account of the fighting on the Island that ‘It has been suggested by people who should have known better that 43rd Division were slow and ‘sticky’; I have therefore described this operation in detail, in order to remove the slur on the reputation of this first-class West Country Division.’⁷⁹ The men of the 43rd, of course, had their own thoughts on the matter; Ken Storey, 112th FRR: ‘Had we let them down? Mark you, it was no picnic on our side of the river – the “Island”’.⁸⁰ Private Gould, 1st WORCS recalls the evacuation of the airborne troops: ‘They had been in a very severe battle but it had lasted a mere nine days. Whereas those of us who fought on – some of us at any rate – had already endured three months of continual action and were to endure another six months before there was any respite’.⁸¹

There is, however, a notion that by the time of the start of Operation Market Garden – especially in view of the apparent destruction of German forces in Normandy – that there existed ‘a “war is won” attitude of mind prevailed among all ranks’.⁸² It would be understandable, then, that some troops would perhaps not be so willing to expose themselves to immediate personal danger. This factor, magnified by the shortages in artillery ammunition, may account for the length of time in achieving objectives (at Oosterhout, Elst, for instance), and the apparent inability for the 7th HAMPS to evict the relatively small but fierce German force at the diversionary bridgehead in their sector. Nonetheless, the way of war of the division continued basically along the same lines as it had earlier in the campaign, but on this occasion, the planning process was clouded by the need to constantly revise plans in the early part of the operation. Thereafter, the

⁷⁹ Horrocks, p. 121.

⁸⁰ Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, p. 207.

⁸¹ Saunders, *The Island*, pp. 1-3.

⁸² North, p. 115.

pace of operations dictated that time for planning and reconnaissance were once again short.

One of the main problems for the 43rd during their time on 'The Island', like their airborne colleagues, was that of supply, particularly of ammunition. The 43rd was at the furthest point of Allied lines of supply at this point of the war. Furthermore, those lines of supply were at best fragile, due to their reliance on just one road (Hell's Highway) which was repeatedly cut by the Germans. This meant that the infantry had to deal with fighting without the customary mind-numbing bombardments and cloaking effects of smoke shells. The Administrative history of the 21st Army Group records: 'Artillery natures were in short supply in the forward areas and formations were restricted to drawing half 21 Army Group rates per day. It was necessary at one stage to despatch 112,000 rounds of 25-pr by air from UK but the situation was improved by the discovery of 80,000 25-pr HE shell (without cartridges) at Louvain which had been excellently maintained by the Germans since 1940.⁸³ Nonetheless, artillery ammunition generally remained scarce. Even during the 4th DORs' hazardous crossing of the Lower Rhine, for instance, the scale of the bombardment was 'limited to a total of 20 r[ounds] p[er] g[un] for the night.⁸⁴ The problem of supply was perhaps exacerbated by two other factors; the first was that of faulty British transport – just before this part of the campaign 1400 lorries were found to have defective pistons and had to be repaired. These lorries would have been capable of maintaining the equivalent of two more divisions.⁸⁵ Hell's Highway, of course, could not have taken any more vehicular traffic than it already had,

⁸³ Administrative History of 21 Army Group 6 June 1944-8 May 1945. Staff, 21 Army Group 1945. <www.movcon.org.uk/History/Documents/DID/D-MCHS%200514.htm#Top> [Accessed 20 April 2012].

⁸⁴ TNA: WO 171/985, Appendix D5 to September 1944.

⁸⁵ Basil Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War*, (London: Book Club Associates, 1970), p. 564.

but the shortage of these lorries would have interfered with the customary stockpiling of ammunition before the operation began. Secondly, by this stage of the war, the Allies had started to become wasteful with their resources. For instance, by September 1944, only 2.5 million of the supplied 17.5 million jerricans - vital for refuelling - that had been supplied could still be accounted for.⁸⁶

Of equal and perhaps more immediate importance to the Infantry was the scarcity of small arms ammunition. The 8th MDDX War Diary records: 'Difficulties of supply – the ever growing length of the supply line and the occasional cutting of the road behind us – was now making the ammunition question difficult'.⁸⁷ And during the German counter attack: 'A shortage of ammunition was a limiting factor'.⁸⁸ The issue of interrupted or problematic supply had contributed directly to the conduct of battle for the battalions of the 43rd, for instance at Oosterhout, where objectives would have been achieved earlier if the usual artillery support had been used from the start, instead of being cancelled to conserve ammunition, and also perhaps at Elst, where the impetus of an already late attack was dulled, in part, by a shortage of ammunition.

This chapter, then, stands as a clear illustration of the British way of war in the infantry battalions. One recurring theme is that of the rapid pace of operations that were imposed upon them and the consequent constraints on time allowed for reconnaissance and planning/replanning. As noted above, on 'The Island' this problem was exacerbated by erratic resupply; particularly of ammunition. This had resulted in some hard fighting for the 43rd and some battalions had sustained very heavy casualties. There is little in this chapter

⁸⁶ Liddell Hart, p. 564.

⁸⁷ TNA: WO 171/1347, 25 September 1944.

⁸⁸ TNA: WO 171/1347, 29 September 1944.

that indicates or suggests a cautious approach to operations or a conscious effort to reduce infantry casualties. Although the whole Market Garden operation has been held up as an example of Montgomery's least 'cautious' battle, this type of war in the battalions, with its rapid pace of operations, unrelenting command drive and limited preparation time, seems to have become routine.

CHAPTER 6

COLOSSAL Cracks II: The 53rd Division in Operation MARKET GARDEN and the Ardennes

This chapter will explore the salient points of the 53rd's supporting role in Market Garden before examining in detail the attack on the city of 'S-Hergotenbosch, operations around the River Maas, and then go on to consider the operations in the Ardennes which were designed to contain and then push back the major German counteroffensive there. This will examine the 53rd's approach to war at this stage of the campaign in view of their recent combat experience, and consider the factors of planning and preparation. It will also provide a useful comparison with the 43rd's experiences. Again, aside from Operation Alan at 'S-Hergotenbosch where the 53rd fought as a whole division for the first time, both divisions were deployed in differing ways. The basic ways of war of the divisions, however, appears to be essentially very similar, suggesting that this may be typical of the experiences of the infantry divisions of whole of the 21st Army Group.

Market Garden

The 53rd was allotted a supporting role in Operation Market Garden.¹ As part of XII Corps the 53rd was to defend the left flank of the main attack and broaden the resulting salient. The 53rd was to advance to the right of 15 (Scottish) Division and force a bridgehead over a canal just north of the town of Lommel (Operation Beecher).² Ample planning time, including daylight reconnaissance opportunities, was allowed and several postponements for the start time of the operation permitted further planning. The crossing of the canal was achieved by a two-battalion night assault by 158 Brigade which went mainly according to plan, but some confusion was caused by very low visibility and heavy rain. The bridgehead was quickly consolidated, and carriers and artillery were moved into the area as soon as conditions allowed, the vehicles of 81st FRRR 'making all possible t[ranspor]t available from 1st gun area to lift 1 Ox & Bucks (This plan greatly appreciated by Battalio[n], B[riga]de and later Division, when they heard via B[rigad]e).'³ Over the next two weeks, the division achieved the enlargement of the bridgehead, but had to do so by fighting a series of small but vicious and bitterly-fought battles, often against groups of stubborn paratroops, who 'fought hard and with great skill'⁴. It would be repetitious to describe all of these actions in detail, but the salient points of interest that are revealed are as follows.

Most of the engagements were planned at short notice or were a direct result of local enemy counterattacks and raids. Plans that were made at short notice were also often

¹ 'Colossal Cracks' is a generic term describing Montgomery's approach to operations; an approach characterised by methodical, cautious set-piece battles coupled with massive materiel superiority – designed with casualty conservation and maintenance of morale in mind. Market Garden, however, is regarded as 'uncharacteristically bold' in its approach. See Stephen Hart's *Colossal Cracks*, chapters 4 and 5.

² A diagram of the 53rd's axes of attack can be seen at Appendix 'A', Figure 6.

³ TNA: WO 171/979, 18 September 1944.

⁴ TNA: WO 171/1330, 18 September 1944.

abandoned or revised as confusing situations changed.⁵ This does not seem to have led to a serious collapse of British defence, but it appears to have hindered the broadening of the bridgehead. It would appear that some battalions were moved around unnecessarily and without explanation to their respective Commanding Officers.⁶ This was probably because 71 Brigade's Commander was wounded and evacuated, but firmer control by the division might have avoided this. Furthermore, such movement of troops, if detected by the enemy, was often likely to attract mortar or artillery fire and so incur casualties.

Armoured support, for either side, seems to have been non-existent or patchy. British armour was only mentioned in the War Diaries of 1st HLI and 81st FRRRA on 22 September and 1/5th WEL on the 30th. This may have been because of the difficulties in getting tanks over the bridges, or because of the state of the ground: 'bad going making it impossible for carriers to move without getting bogged.'⁷ The 53rd, however, did make 'very effective' use of flamethrowing Wasp vehicles.⁸ These engagements, then, were largely infantry *versus* infantry operations, supported by their respective artillery assets. The artillery, however were experiencing supply problems and during this period ammunition restrictions were being placed on the division's field regiments. For instance, 133rd FRRRA reported an ammunition restriction by Headquarters, Royal Artillery of 20 rounds per gun per day on 25th September, although they were allowed to exceed this for specific fire plans⁹, and the 83rd FRRRA records a 'Restriction in am[munitio]n expenditure' on 21 September and a

⁵ Fittingly, 133 FRRRA records 18 September as 'A day of orders and counter orders' TNA: WO 171/993, 18 September 1944.

⁶ Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 99.

⁷ TNA: WO 171/979, 26 September 1944.

⁸ TNA: WO 171/1386, 29 September 1944.

⁹ TNA: WO 171/883, Log for 25 September 1944.

restriction of 30 rounds per gun per day on the 30th.¹⁰ The 81st FRRRA records a restriction of 10 rounds per gun for regimental use on 27th September.¹¹

Exactly how these ammunition restrictions might have impacted on infantry operations is hinted at in a report written by the 133rd FRRRA Commanding Officer, regarding artillery support to an attack by 4th WEL, in which he records the following statements:

- ‘No fire before H hour to effect surprise and conserve ammunition.’
- ‘Two regiments of field artillery and 60 r[ounds] p[er] g[un] were available.’
- ‘a standard barrage was off owing to lack of ammunition’
- ‘The regiment was replenishing using its own transport at the rate of 50 rpg every three hours.’
- ‘compromise between concentrations and a barrage was therefore arranged.’
- ‘The fire plan phased to economise in ammunition and to give it flexibility.’

In the report the infantry’s attack was described as ‘initially successful’ but ended in ‘stalemate’ when the German counterattack coincided with 4th WEL’s attempt at exploitation.¹² It is clear from this report that at this time the infantry could not rely on lavish artillery bombardments to support their attacks. This is not to say that the artillery support for this attack was ineffective: calls for defensive fire were complied with within seven minutes, and the artillery log also records: ‘Fire done to encourage own troops, who are tired.’ This was in response to counterattacks which were ‘not organised.’¹³ This level of artillery support, however, was just not what the attacker or defenders had by now become accustomed to.

In addition to the battles of this period, the division had also pursued a vigorous patrolling policy. It is fair to say that due to this and the confused situation, lack of a definite front line,

¹⁰ TNA: WO 171/980, 21 and 30 September 1944.

¹¹ TNA: WO 171/979, 27 September 1944.

¹² TNA: WO 171/883, Appendix 37.

¹³ TNA: WO 171/883, Log for 27 September 1944.

bad weather, difficult terrain, and an enemy that continued to fight aggressively despite its apparent recent collapse, that the infantry formations had had a hard time. Casualties for this short period are difficult to accurately calculate, but the 2nd MONS, for instance, sustained around 25 dead and 35 wounded; 1E.Lancs suffered around 50 casualties and lost a whole platoon to capture. 4th RWF lost around 80 men. As usual, platoon and company commanders were well represented amongst the casualties. Overall, by 1 October 1944, the division had sustained a total of 4984 casualties (compared to 7605 sustained by 43rd (Wessex)).¹⁴ From the 28th September to 19th October the division took over defensive positions on 'The Island' between Arnhem and Nijmegen. Again aggressive patrolling activity was maintained, but opportunities for rest were also provided.

The standout themes for this period are by now familiar reading. Once again, sufficient planning time was allowed for the initial part of the operation, but from then onwards planning time was very limited and this problem was compounded by frequent re-planning as the situation changed. This appears to have been problematic for an army that relies heavily on 'the plan'. Throughout these actions, artillery could not provide its usual level of support and this appears to have had a blunting effect of the British attacks. All of these factors along with the policy of aggressive patrolling and unnecessary movement of troops seems to have produced, on aggregate, significant casualties among the infantry. Once again, this period of fighting seems not to have been conducted in a cautious manner, or in a way designed to limit casualties.

¹⁴ Montgomery, *Memoirs*, pp. 299-300.

'S-Hertogenbosch - Operation Alan

The next major battle of the campaign; Operation 'Alan', which involved the capture of the city of 'S-Hertogenbosch, was one of the very few occasions that the 53rd fought as a whole division.¹⁵ This operation was one of a series of offensives which were designed to clear the Scheldt and enable the port of Antwerp to receive Allied shipping, and also to protect the northern flank of the Allied route to Nijmegen. 'S-Hertogenbosch (hereafter referred to by the colloquial Dutch term 'Den Bosch') was important to the Germans as it protected the supply route to their formations still operating in the Scheldt and was also in their line of withdrawal.

Allied intelligence suggested that the area of the 53rd's front was defended in total by around four battalions of the 712th Division. The garrison of the city itself was estimated at around nine companies with an unidentified battalion nearby. This intelligence proved to be accurate as the enemy layout map trace which was issued as part of the operation order was later 'found [to be] substantially correct. All the coys of 712 Fus Bn were identified in order given. The only bn which was not identified was I Bn 745 GR.¹⁶

The 53rd's plan was to attack with two parallel brigade-strength thrusts from the east of the city. 160 Brigade were on the right, supported by Cromwell tanks of 5th Dragoon Guards as well as Crocodiles and Crabs. 71 Brigade (with 158 Brigade's 7th RWF) were to advance on the left, also with armoured support. 158 Brigade (with the division's reconnaissance regiment and one squadron of 5th Dragoon Guards' Cromwells) were to remain in reserve to quickly advance into the town and seize its many bridges if the opportunity was presented.

1st E.Lancs were to be ready, mounted in Kangaroos to meet this task. Additionally, the 79th

¹⁵ A sketch map of 'S-Hertogenbosch can be seen at Appendix 'A', Figure 7.

¹⁶ TNA: WO 171/689, Appendix D2.

Armoured Division also supplied part of 222 Assault Squadron in AVsRE. Artillery support consisted of just over 200 guns, around 75% being 25prs while the rest were medium or heavy types.

Time allocated for planning the operation seems adequate. There was a divisional 'O' group at 1030 on 20th October and a planning conference at 1700 same day. Most units received the Operation Order at different times on 21st, and started disseminating information shortly afterwards. It is clear from the war diaries, however, that battalion officers would have been aware of an outline plan for the attack at least a day or two earlier; 1st HLI, for instance, records 19 and 20 October as 'Time spent in preparing and planning for Op Alan'.¹⁷ 158 Brigade held their 'final co-ordinating conference Op Alan' at 1700 on the 21st.¹⁸ 'H' hour for this operation was to be at 0630 on the 22nd. It is fair to assume that platoon and section leaders would have had detailed knowledge of what was required of their men, and perhaps opportunities for reconnaissance, from varying times on the 21st. The OC of 'C' Squadron RAC (Crocodiles) recorded that: 'Planning was satisfactory in every way, the troop leaders being able to make a recce and see the ground.'¹⁹

Once the plan was put into action 71st Brigade's advance was slow; 4th RWF encountered determined resistance and although their supporting armour gave 'great assistance', the tanks' movement was restricted by ditches. They only reached their objectives that evening having lost all of 'A' Company's officers. 1st HLI also met with stiff resistance; attempts to use WASP carriers were negated by minefields. Objectives were achieved later in the evening but the battalion had sustained 10 ORs killed and two officers and 28 ORs wounded.

¹⁷ TNA: WO 171/1296, 19-20 October 1944.

¹⁸ TNA: WO 171/689, 20-21 October 1944.

¹⁹ TNA: WO 171/877, Appendix 'A' to October 1944.

Four others were missing. The reserve battalion, 1st Ox & Bucks, were committed at or shortly after 0900 to bolster the brigade and clear the area advanced over. Conversely, 160 Brigade's advance went well; 2nd MONS achieved their objectives and took 255 prisoners; their casualties were one OR killed and six wounded.²⁰ 4th WEL also attacked aggressively and achieved their objectives; Major Lewis, OC of 'A' Company:

Down came their DF shells, but we were so quick that we were under their shell range before they could adjust. We pressed on a top speed, trying to keep under our own barrage. Lt. Wilson's 141RAC Crocs sped past us belching flame and we went in on top of the flame with fixed bayonets. Into the trenches went the men, grenades first, then bayonets.²¹

This was corroborated by 141 RAC: 'The infantry followed the tanks very closely and were able to move onto their objective before the flame died down.'²² Evidently, liaison between infantry, artillery and specialist armour was effective here.

The original plan had called for 158 Brigade to advance along 71 Brigade's axis but, in view of 160 Brigade's success, 1st E.Lancs and the 53rd Reconnaissance regiment were ordered to make their advance through 160th's positions at 1400. Some of the impetus of their 'rush', however, was lost when the reconnaissance regiment were held up by road obstructions and 1st E.Lancs' tank support only 'married up' by around 1500. When the advance finally got under way, it lost its cohesion when the leading tanks were either mined or suffered mechanical failure. As a counterattack was threatened, 1st E.Lancs 'depouched' from their Kangaroos, formed defensive positions just ahead of 2nd MONS. The valuable Kangaroos, always in demand, left the scene as they were required by another unit the following day. At 2000, 1st E.Lancs were ordered to commence with a further attack at 2145 on the nearby

²⁰ TNA: WO 171/1348, 22 October 1944.

²¹ Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 113.

²² TNA: WO 171/877, Appendix 'A' to October 1944.

village of Bruggen, which was taken unopposed. The chance of taking Den Bosch in one day was lost, and among the battalions, another series of 'O' groups were convened to plan the next day's fighting. For their part, the Germans were now fully alert and now expected 'strong attacks supported by tanks north of Antwerp and on both sides of Hertogenbosch'.²³

The following day, 71 Brigade continued with its slow advance while the other brigades were to advance to the outskirts of Den Bosch from where a subsequent assault could be made. 2nd MONS advanced with Crocodiles. Major Deane, OC of 'A' Company:

It worked like a charm. The boys went in like demons and went straight through. It was great fun. The boys were really wild and I saw the most harmless lads bayoneting Bosch and shooting them as they ran away. The really close infantry and tank co-operation and the whole party became a mass of fighting. Result: we killed many and captured 42, losing 15 wounded and 1 killed.²⁴

The view of 141 RAC was a little more reserved: 'An attack was planned whereby the Crocs should flame the enemy out of their slit trenches. The enemy were caught in their trenches and burned. The action was a complete success. The infantry followed well and the planning left nothing to be desired. All trailers were emptied.'²⁵ This stands as another example of good cooperation between infantry and specialist armour.

Battalions that were not advancing continued with planning: 'conferences, practically continuously, took up the whole time as one plan after another was mooted and company commanders were in fact warned to be ready to do almost anything and everything. The final plan only came out late in the evening.'²⁶

²³ TNA: HW 1/3285.

²⁴ Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 115.

²⁵ TNA: WO 171/877, Appendix 'A' to October 1944.

²⁶ TNA: WO 171/1330, Appendix 'A' to October 1944.

This plan was a night assault on Den Bosch, which went basically according to plan. Once the battalions reached the town, however, the fighting became a succession of confusing street-fighting actions which centred on seizing a series of bridges within the town. Some of these had been completely demolished; others were only partially demolished, and some were intact. This meant that while some bridges had to be repaired or re-bridged by sappers, others were passable for men on foot, but not their supporting vehicles. Bridges still standing were hotly contested and counter attacks supported by tanks and SP guns were driven off. By the evening of the 26th, most of Den Bosch was in the hands of the 53rd but it was not until nightfall the following day that almost all resistance was extinguished. This had been a tough battle for the 53rd. The enemy had generally provided spirited opposition, even when subjected to devastating artillery bombardments²⁷ and had proved difficult to dislodge. Reliable figures for the division's casualties are difficult to assess, but one estimate is:²⁸

Killed	Wounded	Missing
144	270	75

It is highly likely that majority of these casualties were sustained in the actions at Den Bosch. In terms of casualties, then, this battle had been an expensive one. Around 13700 prisoners, however, had been taken in the same period. The amount of enemy killed or wounded is unknown.

²⁷ One estimate of 90000 shells being expended on Den Bosch is realistic. Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 122.

²⁸ Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 121.

In the surviving accounts in the division's war diaries it is interesting to note which 'lessons learned' were recorded. One list of such lessons contains 14 points or 'lessons', the first of which (and presumably the most important) is:

1. For an operation of this nature it is essential to have sufficient time for planning and the study of air photos. Air photos should be issued down to platoon commanders.²⁹

This would indicate - despite the remarks in 141 RAC's war diary - that at battalion, company and platoon level there was an opinion that not enough time had been allowed for planning and reconnaissance. The second 'lesson' also relates to time being a factor in planning:

2. The issue of a fire plan to a large number of Arty Regts scattered over a wide area takes considerable time, both in producing the plan, putting it on paper, and issuing it. As the details of the inf plan, and therefore the arty plan, are often produced rather late any saving of time beforehand is of great help. In this case, being able to choose tgts from a list already in the hands of all concerned, considerably eased all the above factors of production, and this system is recommended when time is likely to be short between the decision on the final plan and zero hr. If the pre-selected tgts are well defined and known by coy cmnds, they not only quicken the latter's calls for fire on to those same localities, but also act as reference pts for other tgts in their vicinity.³⁰

This paragraph highlights two issues. First, this new system of listing known targets for rapid artillery assistance represents a continuation of developing liaison between artillery and infantry units to improve on the existing model. Second, the point is clearly made that this new method saved time in the planning process. If it is accepted that necessity is the mother of invention, this is a symptom of an army finding ways to cope with limited planning time. The next eleven points relate to a miscellany of practical considerations, such as the importance of control of sub-units; importance of speed in the attack; use of

²⁹ TNA: WO 171/689, Appendix D2 to October 1944.

³⁰ TNA: WO 171/689, Appendix D2 to October 1944.

weapons such as PIAT in street fighting; use of tanks to tow anti-tank guns when carriers were unable to advance, and other factors. The final 'Lesson':

14. Preparations for exploiting success must be carefully planned and above all be at immediate call.³¹

This would appear to indicate that the preparations for attempts at exploitation had not been planned in enough detail and opportunities for exploitation had been wasted; another indicator of limited time for preparation.

The war diary for HQ of 158 Brigade also contains other written reports from which it appears the above 'lessons' were based. These reports, however, give a little more detail and offer other 'Lessons':

H Hr did not give sufficient time to overcome any unexpected delays due to either activities of enemy or to difficulties of ground and obstacles.

Again, this gives the impression of units struggling with time allowed for preparation. The next two 'Lessons', however, appears to point to shortcomings in command and control:

The importance of seizing the br[idge]s was not appreciated and undoubtedly the Bn plan [would have] been different if the higher Comd's intention had been clearly understood. [The] seizure of br[idges] appeared only to be a secondary task and the clearing of the built-up [area] the primary one.³²

'It is suggested that if the resources of any unit or sub-unit are fully [deployed] in the initial task, no advantage can be taken to exploit unexpected [progress], ie the seizure of the br[idge] intact.³³

These points tend to indicate flawed communication of command priorities and also that units at Den Bosch were fighting their actions at 'full stretch'. This may be the result of

³¹ TNA: WO 171/689, Appendix D2 to October 1944.

³² TNA: WO 171/689, Unlettered Appendix to October 1944.

³³ TNA: WO 171/689, Unlettered Appendix to October 1944.

orders being passed hurriedly or without time for proper reflection; all indicators that the units involved in this battle were not being used in a cautious 'way of war' which was likely to lead to conservation of casualties.

Overall then, the battle for Den Bosch is rightfully hailed as a success for the 53rd, but this was a battle that could possibly have been a much shorter one and less costly if more time had been allowed for preparation. This is not to say that the planning and preparation that did take place was low-quality, but it does suggest that at least from divisional command downwards, unit commanders were struggling to plan and reconnoitre to their satisfaction. Once again, the pace of operations did not allow for caution as a way of war here, and the planning process was specifically identified as a weakness by those involved in prosecuting the assault. There is little doubt here that the men of the 53rd had fought aggressively and with purpose. They were unfortunate in this case, that the usual heavy artillery bombardment (not a single house escaped the bombardment undamaged)³⁴ had not subdued the defenders or persuaded them to surrender early. This operation had the potential of being successfully achieved as a one or two-day set-piece battle. Instead, it turned into nearly a week of very hard fighting which produced significant casualties.

The Maas

Following the capture of 's-Hertogenbosch the division was moved to positions along the Wessem canal to strengthen that part of the front. By the 30th October units were in position and a period of active patrolling, both by the 53rd and the Germans, followed. The next task for the 21st Army Group, in preparation for the forthcoming battle of the Rhineland, was to clear the enemy to the west of the River Maas. This was planned as a

³⁴ Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 122.

two-corps operation, with VIII Corps taking the northern sector and XII Corps (containing the 53rd) the southern. The 53rd's task was to force a bridgehead over the canal to their front and then wheel right towards the Maas, forcing the enemy over the river or otherwise destroying them (Operation Mallard). The operation was concluded with few problems and very light opposition as the enemy appeared to have already withdrawn; the main delaying factor in this operation were mines. Nonetheless, time allowed for planning appears to have been ample, with the operation order for Mallard being issued at 2100 on 12th November³⁵ with H-hour being 2200 on the 15th. Support for the operation was provided by divisional artillery and also by a range of 79th Armoured Division 'Funnies', including Crabs, AVsRE, Crocodiles, Kangaroos, and Buffaloes. By the 17th, all phases of the operation were complete. The division remained in their positions for the next month until they were relieved for rest, maintenance and training. The main factors for success here seem to be the ones mentioned above: ample planning time; very strong support and, although never a 'walkover', the enemy appears to have been, in many cases, weakened, and prepared to retire across the Maas in any case.

On 2 January 1945, the division's anti-tank regiment, the 71st, implemented a change to its weapon establishment. Weapon Establishment EU/173/1 had stipulated that each of the regiment's four batteries was to reorganise into three differently-equipped troops. One troop with three of the new 17pr Valentine SP guns; another with three towed 17pr guns, and another with four 6pr towed guns. The war diary of 71 Regiment RA, however, records that: 'It is considered that the chief role for SP equipment is to form a tactical reserve, and that this reserve would be best conserved and control[l]ed if all SP troops were in one

³⁵ TNA: WO 171/689, 12 November 1944.

Battery, thus making the fourth Battery a permanent reserve of 12 SP equipments.³⁶

Accordingly, all the regiment's SP guns were placed in one SP battery (which was split into a 'left' and 'right' half) and the remaining three batteries reorganised on a two-troop basis (one troop of four 17-pounder guns and one troop of five 6-pounder guns). The resulting one surplus 6-pounder gun was returned to ordnance. 336 battery was nominated as the SP battery and personnel from the other batteries were shuffled to meet the new manning requirement. Adoption of the new SP guns also required an increase to the manning in the regiment's LAD. Members of 336 Battery were released to reorganisation centres on a troop-by-troop basis later in the month.³⁷ The rationale of placing these new SP guns into a role of tactical reserve is puzzling, especially when it is considered that the 17-pounder gun was in high demand as an effective antidote to enemy armour, and the towed variant was a heavy and unwieldy weapon to use in assault roles. At any rate, 336 Battery appear not to have been used as a tactical reserve, but instead in a similar way to the other batteries of the regiment in the forthcoming battles of the Reichswald.

Operations in the Ardennes

The United States' formations were to take almost the entire brunt of the surprise German counter-offensive in the Ardennes in December 1944, but some British units were allocated to provide an in-depth defence. British XXX Corps, which included the 53rd, was hurriedly moved into positions forming a 'stop line' behind the US VII Corps, from where 'the British could have halted any advance towards Brussels.'³⁸ Once the German attack had been contained and forced into retreat, two divisions from XXX Corps – the 53rd and the 6th

³⁶ TNA: WO 171/4775, 2 January 1945.

³⁷ TNA: WO 171/4775, 2 January 1945.

³⁸ Horrocks, p. 168.

Airborne - were used to attack the Germans to the right of the US 1st Army on the 4th January.³⁹ As far as the 53rd was concerned, the attack was to consist of a two brigade attack: the 158th with 2nd MONS supported by Northamptonshire Yeomanry, and 71st supported by 144 RAC and 53 Recce Regiment. The remainder of the 160 brigade was to be held in reserve. Artillery support was to be provided by the division's three field regiments augmented by another field regiment; one Heavy and six Medium regiments, and two extra batteries of 17-pounder anti-tank guns. Most of the area to be attacked was defended by remnants of the 116th Panzer Division.

At 1040 on 3 January, the Headquarters of 185 Brigade were told that they would be relieved by 160 Brigade and sent to reserve. At 1500, however, the brigade commander was summoned to divisional HQ where, at 1800, this order was cancelled and orders for an attack early the following morning were given.⁴⁰ The Brigade's task was to take the ground adjacent to the village of Waharday. The attack would consist of a two-battalion advance with a third battalion waiting to pass through the assaulting formations. The 1/5th WEL and 2nd MONS held their battalion 'O' Groups at 2115 (with all supporting arms attending)^{41, 42}, and 1st E.Lancs and 7th RWF at 2300.^{43, 44} H-hour was at 0800 the next day. This would have allowed 12¾ and 9 hours respectively for the battalions to plan their operations, but little opportunity for those in the initial assault for vital daylight reconnaissance (given the restricted amount of daylight hours at that time of year).

³⁹ Two sketch maps of the 53rd's actions in the Ardennes can be seen at Appendix 'A', Figure 8.

⁴⁰ TNA: WO 171/4423, 3 January 1945.

⁴¹ TNA: WO 171/5287, 3 January 1945.

⁴² TNA: WO 171/5245, 3 January 1945.

⁴³ TNA: WO 171/5224, 3 January 1945.

⁴⁴ TNA: WO 171/5284, 3 January 1945.

Both of the assaulting battalions formed up and crossed their start line on time, albeit through a heavy blizzard which had commenced only 15 minutes previously. The 1/5th WEL achieved their objectives with little trouble but two officers, the CO and Intelligence Officer became casualties due to 'American mines'. 1st E.Lancs had encountered several machine gun positions and a self-propelled gun, but swiftly dealt with the machine guns with one platoon, and the self-propelled gun with a PIAT. It was discovered fairly early on that it would be virtually impossible for the supporting tanks and anti-tank guns to follow up the infantry advance, due to the heavy going of the ground or the iciness of the roads.

At 1015, 2nd MONS were ordered into the attack but by 1300 their advance was halted by a road block. This road block was particularly well-sited as it was positioned in an area that could not be properly reached by the British artillery due to 'crest clearing' issues and it was found to be impossible to skirt the position and attack it from behind. Other than the 'spirited' defending troops⁴⁵ it was protected by mines and a single dug-in tank. Unusually, the Divisional Commander directly ordered the battalion Commander to repeat the assault in darkness the following morning with even greater artillery support, but again this failed to dislodge the defenders. The Headquarters of 158 Brigade records that the 'enemy stand in this pos[itio]n had a profound effect on the course of the battle as it was impossible for the Div[isional] Com[man]d to pass 160 B[riga]de thro' on to PERCH until it was cleared.'⁴⁶ The road block remained in situ when 2nd MONS were relieved on 6th January, and was eventually captured by 1st Ox Bucks on the 7th January in an attack which relied on a heavy (1000 bombs in 30 minutes) battalion mortar bombardment.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Not content with merely defending, they mounted their own small counterattack. Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 139.

⁴⁶ TNA: WO 171/4423, 3 January 1945.

⁴⁷ TNA: WO 171/5253, 8 January 1945.

Meanwhile, 1st E.Lancs had continued their advance and had encountered 'SP guns', one of which had knocked out at least one of the supporting Shermans but 'withdrew immediately it was threatened by inf[antry].'⁴⁸ (It is not clear what type the 'SP gun' was here, or if it was especially vulnerable to infantry, but it is interesting to note that German armoured vehicles, when not supported by their own infantry would in many cases often withdraw when attacked with PIAT⁴⁹ or, as here, stalked by British infantry). The battalion achieved its objectives, but found enemy troops infiltrating their areas, and at one point were 'completely cut off'. Just to the left of the 1st E.Lancs, 1/5th WEL had entered the village objective but were driven out by a counterattack featuring two tanks and an armoured car. They then regrouped to the south west and reconsidered the operation. The remaining battalion, 7th RWF, advanced through 1st E.Lancs, but could not capture its objective by nightfall.

Meanwhile, to the left of 158 Brigade, 71 Brigade were tasked with attacking the high ground to their front. Orders for the attack were received at 1900 on 3 January, the Brigade Commander holding 'O' groups at 1900 and 2300. 1st Ox & Bucks' Commanding Officer issued his orders at 2130 and 0200.⁵⁰ 'H' hour was to be at 1130 the following morning but was dependant on the progress of 158 Brigade. This allowed company and platoon commanders at least 9½ hours of preparation with some daylight for reconnaissance. Supporting formations were as noted above; in addition 1st HLI reported that: 'Usual supporting weapons allotted to leading coys'⁵¹ indicating that divisional artillery augmented by a selection of medium and heavy regiments was the norm for an attack of this scale. In

⁴⁸ TNA: WO 171/5224, 4 January 1945.

⁴⁹ TNA: WO 171/5224, Appendix to January 1945, 'Notes on Wood Fighting Under Snow Conditions 3 – 8 Jan 45'.

⁵⁰ TNA: WO 171/5253, 3 January 1945.

⁵¹ TNA: WO 171/5191, 3 January 1945.

view of 158 Brigade's slow progress, 'H' hour was postponed until 1330. 1st Ox & Bucks achieved their objectives with little opposition and beat off a 25-man counterattack at around 1530. Supporting tanks and anti-tank guns were also moved forward and into consolidating positions. Similarly, the 1st HLI advanced to their objectives, dealing with several pockets of resistance and experiencing heavy mortar fire. Progress was hindered by mines and the condition of the ground, which meant that supporting anti-tank guns could only be moved up of anti-tank with 'great difficulty'.

By the end of the first day of this divisional attack, only partial success had been achieved, and what objectives had been taken could not be fully consolidated due to difficulties in moving equipment, although 'Weasel' carriers – American specialist vehicles designed to operate in snow and soft conditions - had been requested from XXX Corps later in the day. Some of the troops were tired by exposure to the adverse weather conditions (particularly the 71st which had been moved several times before they were committed to the attack); there was no special clothing, such as boots or winter-camouflaged smocks.⁵² These shortcomings were remembered by Lieutenant Pender of the 1st HLI: 'I rejoined the battalion at Marche. The cold was frightful, we were not clothed for such wintry conditions. The only good thing was the Dan Bonars rum ration. My platoon and I were subjected to hours of heavy shelling by one's own guns'.⁵³ Captain Llywelyn-Williams of 'D' Company 7th RWF recalled that: 'we went into the forest battle from Bourdon and the following three days were not likely to be forgotten by anyone who experienced them. Conditions were appalling – intense cold, deep snow and the eerie darkness of the forest. Any woodland

⁵² Barclay, p. 108.

⁵³ Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, pp. 138-9.

tracks were rigidly glazed with ice, impossible to maintain supplies of food and ammo'.⁵⁴ The attack had, so far, achieved partial success (despite Dempsey's rule of thumb that at least four hours planning would guarantee success) but, in view of the lack of support weapons for consolidation and shortage of ammunition and food, the battalions' hold on what they had taken was not as firm as originally envisaged. Furthermore, a plan to send 160 Brigade forward and exploit what had been taken was abandoned until the following day.

The following day, 1st E.Lancs and 7th RWF continued with their advance, the former meeting no opposition, the latter's progress was slower due to encounters with enemy machine guns. By 1500, however, troops were in their allotted positions and an 'O' Group at 158 Brigade tactical Headquarters took place and orders for the following day's attack were issued. Meanwhile, the platoons of 7th RWF had managed to dig defensive positions in the frozen earth to a depth of around only nine inches when they were subjected to a strong counterattack, estimated at around 200 infantry supported by tanks, which was accompanied by a 'heavy stonk' on all the company areas.⁵⁵ The war diary of 58 Brigade's headquarters takes up the narrative:

This counter attack came in on the left f[or]w[ar]d co[mpan]y which was completely over run. The centre co[mpan]y ran out of am[munitio]n and withdrew in good order. The r[igh]t f[or]w[ar]d co[mpan]y withdrew to conform with the others. The three coys went back to area behind the res[erve] co[mpan]y and, after reforming, took up position they had occupied the night before. Enemy made no attempt to follow up his initial success.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 139.

⁵⁵ TNA: WO 171/5284, 5 January 1945.

⁵⁶ TNA: WO 171/4423, 5 January 1945.

This counterattack was halted and broken up when the commander of 'D' company called for a heavy artillery concentration on his original forward positions which was 'brought down promptly and accurately and proved extremely effective in stabilising the situation'. Casualties among 7th RWF were heavy; seven killed, 17 missing, and 94 other casualties,⁵⁷ a great many of who must have been taken prisoner. The other companies had also sustained heavy casualties, particularly among their leaders: at one point, 'B' Company was under the command of a sergeant.⁵⁸ In view of this, the Divisional Commander postponed the divisional plan and placed 4RWF under command of 158 Brigade in case of further counter attack.⁵⁹ The following morning, the strengths of 7th RWF and 1st E.Lancs were returned to the divisional commander and stood at:

	'A' Company		'B' Company		'C' Company		'D' Company	
	Officers	Men	Officers	Men	Officers	Men	Officers	Men
7 th RWF	3	74	1	60	1	31	2	14
1st E.LANCS	3	113	3	101	4	103	6	87

This data sourced at:⁶⁰ (Standard establishment of a typical Rifle Company in 1945 was normally 5 officers and 122 men)

The obvious inference from this data is that 7th RWF at this point were seriously under strength, but it also reveals that 1st E.Lancs were operating with a reduced complement. As this battalion had not recently suffered particularly heavy casualties, it is perhaps likely that the numbers in the above table might represent a fairly accurate 'snapshot' of a typical infantry company in early 1945. In any case, 158 Brigade's Commander informed divisional

⁵⁷ Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 140.

⁵⁸ Rifle Companies at this time were normally commanded by an officer of the rank of Major, with a Captain as second-in-command.

⁵⁹ TNA: WO 171/4423, 5 January 1945.

⁶⁰ TNA: WO 171/4423, 5 January 1945.

command that 7th RWF were in no condition to regain ground lost in the counterattack, and that 4th WEL were to make an attack on the following day instead. This attack succeeded against slight opposition but 'A' Company sustained heavy casualties from shelling and small arms fire. A small counterattack was beaten back.⁶¹ For their part in the attack, 1st E.Lancs sustained 18 dead and 71 wounded, but were firmly on their objective. Some of these casualties were due to exhaustion and frostbite.⁶² 158 Brigade was relieved by 154 Infantry Brigade (51st (Highland) Infantry Division) the following day.

Conclusion

This small episode in the 53rd's history reveals some informative points. The divisional, brigade and battalion commanders were committed to going ahead with the initial attack, despite weather conditions which precluded proper reinforcement of ground which had been attacked, as anti-tank guns and tanks could not, in most cases, be brought to the limit of advance. The same factor made proper resupply of ammunition and food to those troops furthest forward and in contact with the enemy extremely difficult. Weasel vehicles were hastily procured but were not part of the initial plan, and many of these subsequently broke down due to being handled by untrained troops.⁶³ Both of these factors left 7th RWF vulnerable to the counterattack which they experienced, and in which they lost both men and ground, and which necessitated a further attack by 4th WEL, which incurred still more casualties. As previously mentioned, several hours planning time was allowed to battalions, but this allowed, in most cases, no time for daylight reconnaissance of the ground over which the initial attack would take place. Once more, artillery support proved its value,

⁶¹ TNA: WO 171/5286, 7 January 1945.

⁶² TNA: WO 171/5224, 7 January 1945.

⁶³ TNA: WO 171/5224, 7 January 1945.

particularly in breaking up the counterattack experienced by 7th RWF – ‘It was subsequently learned from P[risoners of] W[ar], that the whole attacking force withdrew almost to their old positions in some disorder’.⁶⁴ The inability of the artillery to intervene in the case of the difficult road block encountered by 2nd MONS also reveals the reliance of the infantry on artillery support. Lastly, the attacking troops were not issued with winter clothing or appropriately-camouflaged clothing, which made them susceptible to the cold weather and also made them conspicuous to the enemy.⁶⁵

The above factors, when the original purpose of these attacks is taken into account – to keep abreast of the American advance⁶⁶ - seems to negate any notion that there was a policy of casualty conservation being observed. In this supporting operation, troops were ordered to attack and hold ground without the means to properly consolidate what they had achieved. This does not appear to be a meticulously-planned and considered operation. There was certainly no rehearsal, and reconnaissance was very limited. There is no evidence here that the British way of war was in any way over-cautious or that infantry were being handled particularly with a view to conserving casualties. The emerging British way of war – in both the infantry divisions considered in this study – is one characterised by command drive, a rapid pace of operations, and limited time for planning and preparation.

⁶⁴ TNA: WO 171/5284, 5 January 1945.

⁶⁵ White camouflage smocks were issued after the Ardennes battles. Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*. p. 137.

⁶⁶ Barclay, p.106.

CHAPTER 7

The 43rd Division Post MARKET GARDEN: Rest, Recuperation and Onwards to the Rhine

This chapter will address the activities of the 43rd division post-Market Garden up to the crossing of the River Rhine in March 1945 and includes an examination of the major actions in which it was involved. This is the last chapter that will consider the 43rd's part in the campaign, so will provide an illustration of the division's way of war at what was arguably its most experienced and competent level. At this stage of the campaign, the way in which the division's brigades and battalions approach to fighting would have been firmly established through combat experience. This chapter will consider, through examination of the operations that the 43rd took part in, how these battles were conducted, what the pace of operations was, and what this established 'way of war' was. It will also consider what measures, if any, were taken with casualty conservation in mind.

The period following Operation Market Garden, from around 7 October to 10 November, saw the 43rd remain in the area around Nijmegen occupied with static defence of the

territory that had been won. In order to equally share periods of front-line experience the division's brigades were 'interchanged approximately every seven days'.¹

The division's artillery and support regiments were kept busy with fire plans designed to support the division's extensive patrolling commitments, or general harassing fire operations which, according to prisoner of war interrogation reports, ensured that the enemy troops 'complained that all their meals arrived cold and that the five [British] shells delivered [in response to] every German one made life unbearable'.²

Whilst in their defensive positions, each of the Division's brigades adopted a policy of 'very active patrolling' in their areas. The battalions of 214 Brigade, for instance, carried out a total of 127 separate reconnaissance, contact, or fighting patrols from the 10th to the end of October alone.³ These patrols were in addition to standing patrols of battalion areas of responsibility. These patrols, no doubt, provided useful information on the disposition and identity of enemy formations for forthcoming operations, but their risky nature – especially of the 'fighting' patrols - ensured a slow but steady attrition in officers and NCOs that were required to command them. Lieutenant Jary, a platoon commander with considerable experience of leading these patrols, doubts that the losses incurred justified the reasoning behind them.⁴ This is yet another indicator that the British way of war was not a cautious one. As in the First World War, the British army appears to have been the only one to mount such vigorous patrolling activity in situations which were otherwise defensive and static in nature. Furthermore, given the situation that existed at this particular time, namely that infantry replacements were becoming increasingly difficult to find, and that it was now

¹ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 152.

² Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 153.

³ TNA: WO 171/709, October 1944.

⁴ Jary, p. 72.

obvious that the German Army could not be defeated before 1945, Infantry units continued in operations that were likely to produce casualties for little gain.

This is another indicator that 'casualty conservation' appears not to be an enforced policy at battalion level. On the contrary, a vigorously offensive posture appears to have been both expected and executed. Brigadier Essame comments: 'The Division thoroughly dominated the forward areas and did its utmost to make life unbearable for the enemy. At no time was there any doubt as to our mastery of no-man's-land. Harried by our patrols and be-devilled by our snipers, the enemy wisely kept well to the ground'.⁵

Formations of the Division were rotated in their time actually at the front line; for instance, Colonel Taylor of the 5th DCLI recalled that his battalion adopted a policy of 'active defence, patrol raids and harassing fire on a four days on, four days off routine'.⁶ The Divisional Commander saw to it that troops that had been stood down from the front line were actively engaged in a programme of training. To this end, he reinstated the Divisional battle school in the suburbs of Nijmegen and staffed it with officers who had 'fighting records which commanded respect'.⁷ This battle school delivered 3.5-day courses for the platoon commanders and NCOs, and remained in operation until after VE Day. The school not only trained its personnel, it also developed and instigated new fighting techniques and drills.

Within the division's battalions, training and assimilation of battle experience were also vigorously promoted. The divisional commanders training directive demanded: 'We must get back to the alert, proud stride of the British soldier who realizes and shows he is a

⁵ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 154.

⁶ Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, p. 217.

⁷ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 157.

conqueror – knows it and knows he has proved it.’⁸ And saw to it that ‘every daylight hour away from fighting should be devoted to military work’.⁹

Individual battalions appear to have been keen to disseminate useful information on fighting. For instance, the 5th DCLI’s war diary contains a memorandum which had been compiled from US sources on how to deal with enemy pillboxes and was distributed to all section commanders.¹⁰ The same war diary also contains a list of eleven ‘Hints on Recent Fighting for Newly Arrived Officers’.¹¹ Some of these ‘hints’ are revealing in as much as they illustrate the way in which the battalion saw as the most efficient way of managing its fighting force. The main points of this document can be paraphrased thus:

- The current training and battle drills are sound and proven, but must be applied with common sense and kept simple.
- The enemy should not be underestimated: it acknowledges the German strength in use of machine guns, and implies that heavy weapon support is the accepted antidote.
- Aggression is the key to operational success and conservation of casualties. Whether in practice this actually was or was not the case is perhaps irrelevant; the message is that the battalion was actively fostering an aggressive spirit.
- A battalion should be allowed 1 ½ hours from brigade commander’s orders to operation start time.
- Troop morale is the most important factor and alarmist rumours should be disregarded. A sub-section to the ‘morale’ paragraph points out that in critical

⁸ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 157.

⁹ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 156.

¹⁰ TNA: WO 171/1282, October 1944.

¹¹ TNA: WO 171/1282, October 1944.

situations, and when communications fail, the commander should never report back to HQ, and that a runner should be used instead.

- With regard to positioning of company commanders, the advice is that he should stay with the major part of his force and should be 'at the centre of danger', but is also explicit advising against reckless activity: 'I will not have officers becoming casualties through bravado'.¹²

It is possible to draw some conclusions from this document. First, the Brigade commander validates the training that officers had received prior to arrival at the unit. This surely is an endorsement from the 'sharp end' that the content of the army's training regime was broadly correct and appropriate to current operations. Second, it advocated the routine use of artillery intervention to deal with enemy machine guns if at all possible (rather than a costly infantry assault). Third, it is revealing that the brigade commander feels that he needs to tell his company commanders not to leave their sphere of position to report back to command personally – something that must have happened in the past. Similarly, he also explicitly advised against 'act of bravado', which must previously have produced officer/NCO casualties. Evidently, the brigade commander was advising against platoon commanders 'being too brave' or 'not brave enough'. Also, importantly, a minimum time for planning battalion operations was given (1 ½ hours); it is highly likely that this particular time must have been arrived at through battle experience during the campaign. At any rate, this time was what the by-now experienced, brigade commander deemed to be sufficient to plan a Battalion operation.

¹² TNA: WO 171/1282, October 1944.

Liaison between the infantry and supporting arms seems to have been cultivated. For instance, training with Churchill Crocodile flamethrower tanks of the 79th Armoured Division was arranged.¹³ Although the 43rd had had limited experience with these weapons some time ago, the use of specialist armour had evolved considerably since its early use in Normandy, and it was realised that close cooperation between infantry and tank was the key to their success: 'Infantry must be very close up, ready to take immediate advantage of the effect of the flame. The crocodile commander must make the plan for attack with the infantry commander. A liaison officer with an R[adio]/T[ransmitter] set must always accompany the headquarters of the co-operating infantry during the attack.'¹⁴ In addition to operational commitments and training programmes, there were also efforts to maintain the morale of the troops. ENSA entertainment was laid on, as were bathing facilities and limited opportunities for leave.

Geilenkirchen - Operation Clipper

The next operation for the 43rd was the attack on Geilenkirchen.¹⁵ British XXX Corps, which contained the 43rd, had been sent to the far right of the British sector to replace the 9th US Army in a front-holding capacity; this move would allow more US troops to take part in an offence by the US XIX and XIII Corps immediately to the right of the 43rd's new positions. In the path of this offensive lay the fortified town of Geilenkirchen. Geilenkirchen was a problem for the Americans: it could not be bypassed, as its garrison posed a threat to the US left flank. Conversely, neutralising the town would involve a time consuming and costly operation that would blunt the momentum of their offensive. Furthermore, the town was

¹³ TNA: WO 171/709, Appendix 'J' to October 1944.

¹⁴ 79th Armoured Division Final Report, Germany, July 1945, p. 28.

¹⁵ A sketch map of the disposition of the 43rd's Infantry Brigades and their axes of advance can be found at Annex 'A', Figure 9.

also a tactically important road hub. General Horrocks, commander of XXX Corps, had previously been asked by the Americans to assist in the taking of the town, but Horrocks declined as he had only the 43rd available for such an operation (which would require at least two infantry divisions to complete the task). He was, however, subsequently persuaded to commit to the operation: 'Soon afterwards, however, I had dinner at Simpson's HQ with Eisenhower, who was visiting the area. The question of Geilenkirchen came up again, and I explained my difficulties to Eisenhower. His immediate response was to offer me the newly-arrived American 84th Division.'¹⁶ Horrocks had some misgivings about having to break through the Siegfried Line to complete the task, and the issues of a British officer commanding a novice US division, but 'these objections were simply brushed aside by Eisenhower and Simpson, and I soon found myself agreeing to attack Geilenkirchen with my two divisions.'¹⁷

Operation Clipper consisted of four phases. First, one regiment of the 84th would attack from the east and take the high ground overlooking the town and the village of Prummern. Five hours later the second phase would take place; the 43rd would attack from the west, taking several villages on their route, and also cut one of the main roads leading into Geilenkirchen. These two phases would almost encircle the town. The third phase involved a second regiment from the 84th attacking frontally from the south. In the final phase, the two formations would advance past the town to the north east along the valley of the river Wurm, clearing villages as they went until they reached the town of Wurm. The whole operation was timed to take place two days after the main US advance; Saturday 18

¹⁶ Horrocks, p.152.

¹⁷ Horrocks, p.152.

November. It is beyond the scope of this study to examine the US involvement in this operation; the main activities of the 43rd will remain the focus of this part of the chapter.

General Thomas' plan for the 43rd was this: the third phase – the main British attack – would consist of the whole of 214 Brigade augmented by 5th DOR while 129 Brigade held the defensive line. The remaining two battalions of 130 Brigade would initially be held in reserve and then used to take further objectives. Armoured support would be provided by two regiments of 8th Armoured Brigade (the remaining regiment would support the American advance) and a range of 'funnies' from 79th Armoured Division. Artillery support consisted of all of XXX Corp's guns plus all American guns that were available at the time.

There was plenty of time for planning and reconnaissance for this operation. General Thomas briefed his brigade commanders at 0900 on 11th November and confirmed those orders at an 'O' group at 1200 the following day.¹⁸ Brigade 'O' groups followed soon afterwards. A series of battalion and brigade 'O' groups ensued in the remaining days before the attack began and the battalions made their own preparations. For example, 5th DOR's CO gave a lecture to all officers and NCOs down to the rank of Corporal on the 15th and a series of platoon and section level training activities were also undertaken.¹⁹ 5th DCLI in conjunction with 1st WOR used a cloth model for training. Sketch maps were prepared for section leaders: 'all details were taken from the most up to date aerial photographs as the

¹⁸ TNA: WO 171/481, 12 November 1944.

¹⁹ TNA: WO 171/1287, 13-17 November 1944.

1/25,000 maps were out of date.²⁰ Platoon training and reconnaissance sorties were also carried out. The battalions were well-prepared for this attack.

On the day of the attack, November 18th, the US 334th Regiment's attack went well. They had penetrated the Siegfried Wall defences and the 1st Battalion had captured the prepared defensive system to the south of the village of Prummern, while the 2nd Battalion had made good progress towards its final objective; all this with relatively few casualties. Meanwhile, in view of the American progress, the 43rd prepared to make their attack on the left. At 1217 the artillery barrage commenced; the first part of the barrage lasted only 12 minutes but was conducted by over 250 guns. Once the artillery lifted from its initial targets the bombardment was continued for another three hours and augmented with an extensive mortar barrage and also tank guns, anti tank and anti aircraft guns. The tiny village of Bauchem was exposed to what was probably the most intense bombardment of the campaign. 'Bauchem must now be able to claim to be the most mortared village ever, as it received 10,000 bombs (75 tons) during these 3 ½ hours.'²¹

Although, like their US counterparts, most of their armoured support quickly became bogged down,²² the battalion attacks were a complete success; they had taken all their objectives with little trouble and casualties had been relatively light, but 1st WORC's carrier platoon had been virtually wiped out by two SP guns, and 'A' and 'D' Companies suffered casualties from their own 5.5" artillery fire. Most of the division's 210²³ prisoners had been stunned by the artillery bombardment. Feldwebel Peter Brauweiler remembers:

²⁰ TNA: WO 171/1293, 15 November 1944.

²¹ TNA: WO 171/1347, 18 November 1944.

²² Of the supporting armour provided by 4/7 Royal Dragoon Guards, at least 23 Shermans had been 'bogged' and two mined by 1700. TNA: WO 171/838, 18 November 1944.

²³ TNA: WO 171/709, 18 November 1944.

For over three hours we were subjected to continual artillery fire. All of the buildings around us were reduced to piles of smoking rubble. We just crouched in our trenches and suffered. Then, through the smoke, I saw the British coming at us. They came not from the front as we had expected, but from the side and rear of our positions. Even after this long barrage, we were still taken by surprise. I had only time to shout a warning when I was hit by a bullet and passed out.²⁴

The Worcester's historian recorded that: '[The enemy] in fact behaved in a most extraordinary manner. He was sincerely pleased to see the British troops upon whom he pressed his watch and other trinkets in demonstration of his gratitude.'²⁵ Evidently, the artillery bombardment quickly followed up by a confident infantry assault had seriously degraded many of the defender's will or ability to resist. Nonetheless, some of the defenders had still fought hard. 5th DCLI's War Diary attributed the success of their attack to: 'good leadership by Pl[atoon] and Sec[tion] Com[mand]ers, and the determination of the Coy to capture their objectives, no matter what the odds.'²⁶ 5th DOR war diary commented that 'the attack had been a model one and every detail went according to plan. The B[attalion] suffered 4 casualties. Much of the credit for this success was due to the detailed and careful planning on all levels.'²⁷ The generous time allowed for planning for the initial part of the assault had paid good dividends.

By evening, the joint Anglo/US attack had achieved all its objectives. The town of Geilenkirchen was virtually encircled and all the main roads to the town were in possession of the Allies. The positions now held by the attacking troops were, however, not as secure as they would have liked; there were large gaps between areas of consolidation through

²⁴ Ford, *Assault on Germany*, p. 76.

²⁵ Ford, *Assault on Germany*, p. 69.

²⁶ TNA: WO 171/1283, 18 November 1944.

²⁷ TNA: WO 171/1287, 18 November 1944.

which even active patrolling could not prevent infiltration; and some of the defenders had not been properly evicted by the initial attack and remained in situ.

Starting at around 0230 the first of a series of German counterattacks commenced when elements of the 9th Panzer Division advanced on US-held Prummern. 1st WORC repulsed a 'heavy' counterattack at first light and also inflicted heavy casualties on infantry on the flank of an adjacent attack later in the day, but could not engage the enemy tanks for lack of anti-tank guns; it had been too difficult to bring them forward through the mud. In the event, this attack was also repulsed when they it reached positions that had managed to get their anti tank guns forward. The Germans returned to a nearby wood to shelter and reform.

General Thomas had decided that this and another forested area would need to be cleared of the enemy to protect the flanks of developing operations. To this end he ordered 5th DOR to clear one (and also to relieve pressure on 1st WORC), and 7th SOMLI to clear the other. At that point 5th DOR were expecting to be relieved to go to reserve that day but at 1130 received their orders from the brigade commander to clear the woods and establish themselves on the northernmost edge "H' hour was to be as soon as possible but not later than 1400hrs.'²⁸ Available support allotted to this operation was one squadron of tanks and one field regiment of artillery. 'The CO called an immediate 'O' group and very quickly a plan was formulated.'²⁹ The plan was for an advance with two companies leading with two companies following. Each flank would have two squadrons of tanks in support. While preparations for the attack were taking place, the battalion also had to be relieved by a company of 4th SOMLI. 'After much hurried preparation the Bn was able to cross the S[tart]

²⁸ TNA: WO 171/1287, 19 November 1944.

²⁹ TNA: WO 171/1287, 19 November 1944.

L[ine] by 1345hrs.’³⁰ The attack went as planned until the leading companies reached a piece of open ground where they were at first subjected to very heavy machine gun fire, and then heavy artillery and mortar fire. A plan was made to outflank the defenders but the whole operation was postponed due to the approach of nightfall and the troops dug in. Most of the vehicles detailed to support the assault had by this point become bogged.

The CO of 5th DOR was called to brigade HQ to receive plans for continuing the attack at first light, and planning went on ‘until after 2200hrs’. Due to the disposition of the companies, it was impossible for the CO to hold a conventional ‘O’ group, and commanders were briefed in pairs: ‘this was a lengthy process and it was not until 0730 that they were completed.’³¹

As a result of casualties sustained in the previous days fighting ‘A’ and ‘C’ companies were amalgamated and a company of 4DOR were attached. This attack was supported by the whole of the divisional artillery and the infantry crossed their start line at 0830. Two troops of tanks were detailed to the attack, but only one troop, which had been fitted with track extensions to deal with the muddy conditions actually managed to get forwards. By midday the woods had been cleared with infantry opposition increasing in intensity as the advance continued. Once 5DOR were in their newly-won positions, however, their position was precarious as they had no infantry in reserve and no tanks or anti tank guns had made it to the forward positions to consolidate. Furthermore, they were also under observation by Germans on higher ground and were quickly subjected to very heavy and accurate shelling; two German counter attacks were prevented from forming up by the divisional artillery. 5th DOR managed to hang on to their positions but three days fighting had cost them around 80

³⁰ TNA: WO 171/1287, 19 November 1944.

³¹ TNA: WO 171/1287, 19 November 1944.

casualties³² and the battalion was quickly replaced by 4th DOR who then took the brunt of the artillery duels that followed.

Meanwhile, 7th SOMLI had experienced little trouble clearing their wood. With a two-company assault supported by four field regiments they crossed their start line at 1530 and were digging in on their objectives less than an hour later.³³ Meanwhile, as the Americans progressed towards their objectives along the Wurm valley, it was imperative that their left flank was protected against infiltration. To this end, the divisional commander ordered 214 Brigade to advance to the villages of Hoven and Kraudorf and capture them. Of the three battalions of that brigade, only one was left uncommitted in areas crucial to defence – 5th DCLI. This battalion, however, had been in action since the beginning of the operation and were in a state of fatigue. Their CO, Colonel Taylor:

All my training and instincts warned me that this operation was unsound. The reasons were clear to me: a tired and under strength battalion, after a period of sustained action, was not in fit state to launch another attack. The rifle companies, except for C Coy, were down to about 60 men, instead of 100 – the arrival of reinforcement was not working smoothly.³⁴

Colonel Taylor made his reservations known to the brigade commander, but was told that the US would be attacking simultaneously, and so felt that he 'could object no longer.'³⁵

The series of brigade and battalion 'O' groups for 5th DCLI's attack is not recorded, but some of the preparations are: 'The intelligence section prepared the usual sketch maps for all Offrs and NCOs down to Sec Comds. Working all night these were finished just in time for

³² TNA: WO 171/660, 20 November 1944.

³³ TNA: WO 171/1373, 19 November 1944.

³⁴ Brigadier George Taylor, *Infantry Colonel* (Upton upon Severn: Self Publishing Association 1990), p. 138.

³⁵ Taylor, p. 139.

distribution at O gp at 0900hrs [on 22nd November].³⁶ Colonel Taylor had put considerable thought into this attack; he decided against a night-long bombardment in an effort to allow his troops some sleep before the attack, and the bombardment immediately prior to the assault was to start slightly further forwards than usual to avoid shells 'clipping' the trees under which his men were sheltering, and so avoid premature detonations which might cause casualties to the leading platoons. He also decided that the initial attack would be commanded by company second-in-commands, as he wanted the first-in-commands to be fresh and ready to meet German counterattacks.³⁷ The plan was for 'C' Company (the freshest) to make the initial assault. 'B' Company would then pass through and take Hoven. 'D' Company would also pass through and take Kraudorf. The reserve was 'D' Company of 7th SOMLI (5th DCLI's 'A' Company was already committed to a position holding a road). In addition to the artillery bombardment, there was a squadron of tanks and the medium machine guns of 8th MIDDX.

The attack ran into trouble even before it started; troops were subjected to heavy shelling as they formed up at the start line and when the attack commenced at 1200 it met with stiff resistance as the initial bombardment and the 'shooting in' of 7th SOM had missed the enemy. The forward platoons of 'C' Company advanced into a hail of machine gun fire, and in a few seconds the reserve platoon was destroyed by shellfire. Major Kitchener, one of those who had been left out of the initial assault arrived to join his company: 'The situation did not look healthy; 15 Platoon had ceased to exist. Moving with difficulty through bursting shells and small arms fire, I reached 14 Platoon, they had also suffered considerably. The

³⁶ TNA: WO 171/1283, 22 November 1944.

³⁷ Taylor, pp. 139-140.

shelling and mortar fire was very heavy. In fact, neither before, including Hill 112, nor since, have I ever experienced such an intensity of fire.³⁸

The Commanding Officer of 5th DCLI could see that this attack had failed, so directed 'D' Company to perform a 'right hook' and move into the wood to clear it and attack Hoven (instead of attacking its original objective) while what remained of the other companies poured small arms fire into the enemy. 'D' Company reached their objectives aided by divisional artillery 'at their request' but then became involved in a savage fight with the defenders. The Germans were never completely evicted from Hoven, and 'D' Company's situation became increasingly perilous as troops of 7th SOMLI, which had been detailed to provide support had become lost in the woods, leaving Hoven isolated. At around 2200 Major Lonsdale arrived with a platoon of 'A' Company and rearranged the troops into a company HQ with two platoons, each of around 15 men. The CO ordered further reinforcement with two more platoons but this was 'found impossible.' A platoon of 5th DOR, however, managed to supply some supplies and ammunition at around 0200. Now concerned about 'D' Company, Colonel Taylor sent a message to Brigade HQ asking that 5th DCLI be either reinforced or withdrawn. When the message was given, General Horrocks, the Corps Commander, was present and told Brigadier Essame that he could withdraw 5th DCLI if he thought fit. Brigadier Essame:

The Brigadier was sufficiently of his Commander's mind never to contemplate the abandonment of Hoven. In spite of the truly appalling conditions in the wood, he knew the DCLI would fight on. So long as the US troops on his right flank continued the struggle, he refused to quit. Major-General Thomas therefore placed 4th WILTS under his command so that he could impart a fresh impetus to the battle on the morrow. The Brigadier could not expect to be able to launch them into the attack

³⁸ Ford, *Assault on Germany*, p. 161.

until several hours after daylight. The DCLI would therefore have to withstand counter-attacks at dawn alone.³⁹

General Horrocks, however, recalls that:

I gave him permission to withdraw his leading battalion, the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. He declined, however, on the grounds that they had suffered heavy casualties in capturing the village and it would be bad for morale to withdraw them now. He was confident that they could beat off the counter-attacks which were now being launched by the battle-experienced 15th Panzer and 10th SS Divisions.⁴⁰

The 5th DCLI, then, remained in their positions and waited. At first light, the Germans started forming up for a series of counterattacks. Twice their formations were broken up by Bren gun fire, but on the third occasion assaults came from three directions and were supported by SP guns (probably StuG IIIs), one of which was knocked out with a PIAT, a third approached slightly later. This fighting expended nearly all the remaining ammunition of 'D' Company, and Major Lonsdale ordered a retreat: 'I told them that we had done well, but we were now, unfortunately, going to make a cut for it. We had to get out of Hoven. We had only half a magazine of Bren ammunition between the lot of us.'⁴¹ Major Lonsdale and ten other men were the only survivors to make it back to their HQ⁴². The war diary for 5th DCLI is careful to emphasise that, due to communication problems, nothing could have been done to help 'D' Company: 'Comms with Bn HQ had been broken before the counter-attack began. The line communication and W[ireless] T[ransmitter] were both broken. One important factor in the whole of the subsequent enemy counter-attack which recaptured Hoven, was that B[attalion] HQ knew nothing of the action until it was all over. No sounds

³⁹ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, pp. 178-9.

⁴⁰ Horrocks, p. 155.

⁴¹ Ford, *Assault on Germany*, p. 167.

⁴² TNA: WO 171/1283, 23 November 1944.

of firing reached the f[or]w[ar]d Com[man]d Post in the wood, so that with no inf[ormatio]n about the counter-attack ever reaching the CO, no counter-measures could be taken to relieve D Co[mpan]y.⁴³ Over six days of fighting, 5th DCLI alone had sustained one officer killed, six officers wounded, and two more officers missing. 23 ORs killed, 128 wounded, and 71 missing (a total of 231 casualties).

From this point onwards, the divisional commander put all British troops on a defensive footing. Further American attacks had also failed in the face of German reinforcement, and at 1800 on the 23rd November the operation was called to a halt. The Anglo-American operation had, however, resulted in the Geilenkirchen salient being taken relatively quickly in the battle.

This battle had opened well for the 43rd, ample planning and preparation had paid off, and rapid gains were made at little cost. As the battle progressed, however, several factors were to hinder further progress. The weather; torrential rain meant that armour could not provide support to its full potential; neither could anti-tank guns be brought up to consolidate objectives that had been taken. Advancing troops had to rely on divisional artillery and the mortars and machine guns of the support regiment to provide assistance where conditions allowed. Furthermore, vehicles could not be used to supply hot food and other supplies, including ammunition. Second, the enemy; once the battle had begun, the *Volksgrenadier* formations were quickly bolstered by much more capable troops from 9th *Panzer* and 15th *Panzer* *Grenadier* Divisions. Another factor is planning time. Once the battle had started, commanders had to react to situations as they developed; this left little time for planning at Geilenkirchen; this was entirely normal for any attacking army, but it does

⁴³ TNA: WO 171/1283, 23 November 1944.

reveal the weakness of the British tendency to have to stick to 'the plan'. Major Taylor seems to have been able to change his plan of attack at Hoven, but it also seems that he needed permission to withdraw his troops from what was becoming a dangerous situation and which was becoming costly in casualties. Were Taylor or Essame worried that a decision to withdraw might be seen by those higher up the chain of command as 'stickyness', or failing to drive their troops hard enough? It will probably never be known, but it is abundantly clear from the actions at Geilenkirchen that the style of war being waged by the battalions of the 43rd were in no way overcautious, or were executed specifically with casualty conservation in mind.

The 43rd remained in their positions in the Geilenkirchen sector in a defensive role until December, with the brigades rotating their time in the front line. Between the 18th and 25th December the division was placed in reserve as a precaution during the German Ardennes offensive.

Operation Blackcock

Operation Blackcock was a resurrection of a previously planned, but shelved, 'Operation Shears' which was designed to expel the Germans from the 'Roer Triangle'. Defence consisted of the badly-mauled 183rd *Volksgranadier* Division, defending 12,000 yards of front, and the 176th (nicknamed by the Germans the '*Kranken*', or 'sick') Infantry Division, defending over twice that distance. This force was primarily arranged to meet an attack from the direction of the 43rd and they were supported by 'about 90 field guns and 36 medium and 187.5mm guns'⁴⁴ The British plan called for a three-division attack, with the 7th Armoured Division taking the left flank, the 52nd (Lowland) Infantry Division the centre,

⁴⁴ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, pp. 195-196.

and the 43rd, the right flank. The 43rd had three main objectives ('Hart', 'Jug' and 'Kettle'); 129 Brigade was allocated the first part of 'Jug', 130 Brigade, the second half of 'Jug' and 'Hart'; 214 Brigade 'Kettle'. Artillery support included 'five to eight field regiments, three to six medium regiments and a varying number of heavy and super heavy regiments. In fact [the Germans] were to be blasted off the face of the earth bit by bit'.⁴⁵ There was also further specialist support from the 79th Armoured Division in the shape of 'Crab', 'Crocodile' and 'Kangaroo' armoured vehicles. The 43rd's involvement in the overall plan could only go ahead once the other two divisions had achieved their initial objectives. Ample time, at least five days, were allowed for Brigades to plan their attack.⁴⁶

On the day of the assault, 129 Brigade achieved all its objectives with little or no opposition, and even occupied at least one of the objectives of 130 Brigade. A counterattack by tanks and infantry on 4th SOMLI's 'A' Company was repulsed with the aid of tanks and artillery. In four days of operations, the brigade captured around 800 prisoners; seven artillery pieces, and a quantity of machine guns and mortars, for a cost of around 30 casualties. Similarly, 130 Brigade's objectives were also taken with relative ease. Over 500 prisoners were taken and around 30 casualties sustained. 214 Brigade, more or less in a reserve capacity, achieved its designated objectives against minimal opposition using a programme of aggressive patrolling.

On the face of it, Operation Blackcock seems to have been an easy victory for the 43rd. Analysis, however, reveals the reasons why this may appear so. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, the units involved were given ample time – five days or more – to plan and practice their part in the operation. Second, the operation was supported by the by now

⁴⁵ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 196.

⁴⁶ TNA: WO 171/4392, January 1945.

usual very heavy artillery presence, which gave confidence to the attacker and sapped the morale of the defender in equal measure. Heavy weapon support was almost at the limits of what ammunition could be provided; 8th MDDX reported on the 23rd January that: 'Immediate supplies of ammunition lasted although we were getting a little 'thin' during the last half hour'. On the 24th, 1200 [mortar] bombs [were fired] in 4½ hours and 45000 r[oun]ds [of] MG [ammunition]. On 26th January they noted that they had 'fired 13000 bombs during the five days'⁴⁷ Furthermore, some of the attacking troops were taking no chances when ensuring that the artillery support had achieved its aim before completing their assault; 'D' Company of the 5th Wiltshires asked for a '½ hour repetition of fire plan on company objective'.⁴⁸ Even the division's light anti-aircraft regiment was heavily committed to the fire plan, expending nearly 17,000 rounds of 40mm ammunition against ground targets (resulting in fifteen 'bulged' barrels); three captured Flak 38 guns were also used to fire around 3000 rounds against their former masters.⁴⁹

Thirdly, during Operation Blackcock, there was a significant presence of specialist vehicles. The crocodiles were particularly effective; the 4th WILTS recording: 'crocodiles very demoralising to the enemy, who surrendered in most cases without fighting'.⁵⁰ The Kangaroo armoured personnel carriers, flail tanks, and Churchill AsVRE were also much in demand. Brigadier Essame singled out the Kangaroo crews for particular praise and also made the point that infantry experience with units of the 79th Armoured Division was to 'prove invaluable' in the coming weeks.⁵¹ Lastly, the condition of the defenders must be

⁴⁷ TNA: WO 171/5422, 23-26 January 1945.

⁴⁸ TNA: WO 171/5291, 24 January 1945.

⁴⁹ TNA: WO 171/4955, 21-24 January 1945.

⁵⁰ TNA: WO 171/5290, 23 January 1945.

⁵¹ Essame. *Wessex Division at War*, pp. 199-200.

taken into account; there is little evidence that the 183 and 176 German Infantry Divisions fought with any real tenacity.

'Blackcock', then, has all the hallmarks of what has come to be the standard way of war for the British in late war Europe. The conditions allowed for properly prepared troops to assault under comprehensive artillery and heavy weapons support, and to be assisted by a range of specialist armoured vehicles, against an enemy who, in this case, sometimes defended with questionable resolve, all under an umbrella of Allied air superiority, resulting in relatively few casualties. This is the ideal which has been ascribed as the norm in North West Europe, but it is clear that these conditions, for the 43rd at least, only appear late in the campaign.

Operation Veritable

The object of Operation Veritable was to clear the Germans from the west bank of the Rhine in preparation for the crossing of that river.⁵² This was an enormous undertaking which involved XXX Corps and II Canadian Corps, under the command of the First Canadian Army, although, at one point, thirteen divisions (nine of them British) were actually committed to the operation.⁵³ Available to the commander were over 1000 guns; perhaps one of the greatest volumes of fire to be used during the whole campaign. In addition, the entire Second Tactical Air Force (around 1000 fighters and fighter-bombers) and 1000 aircraft of Bomber Command were earmarked for the offensive.⁵⁴ Intelligence reports suggested that in defence were 84 Division, augmented by III Battalion 2 Parachute Regiment. It was also estimated that there were three infantry and two panzer divisions available for rapid

⁵² The planning for the Rhine crossing, Operation 'Plunder', was to take place while 'Veritable' was being conducted.

⁵³ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 202.

⁵⁴ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 203.

reaction to the offensive.⁵⁵ The 43rd, along with the Guards Armoured Division, were kept in reserve to exploit a break in the German front line.

The progress of the battles, such as the movement of each of the nine battalions of the 43rd, over a period of around four weeks would be confusing to narrate, and would therefore detract from the main historical enquiry of this study. Only the salient points of the way the men of the 43rd and their supporting elements actually handled the battle need be considered here.⁵⁶

The overall plan for 'Veritable' had been in existence for some time before it was executed. This was mainly due to its postponement while the Allies dealt with the unexpected German Ardennes offensive. Time for planning for the initial wave of attacks was plentiful, and elaborate measures, including a 'reconnaissance report centre' was established to allow 'literally thousands of officers and NCOs to be given a chance to study the ground over which they were to attack'⁵⁷ without alerting the Germans, which would otherwise have given an indication of impending attack. Those carrying out reconnaissance were even required to wear the darker khaki uniforms of the Canadian troops who were stationed in the area. The officers and NCOs of the 43rd, however, as they were effectively in reserve and unsure of their eventual deployment, could not make such detailed plans. Nonetheless, the War Diary of the HQ of 129 Infantry Brigade records that the first six days of February were 'spent in planning for Op Veritable'.⁵⁸ The war diary of 7th SOMLI, on the other hand, records how the battalion received its information from 214 Brigade Headquarters on 3rd February: '0930 – CO left to attend 'O' Group at 43rd Divisional Headquarters where the plan

⁵⁵ Horrocks, p. 176.

⁵⁶ A sketch map of the general area of the Operation, showing axes of advance for many units can be found at Appendix 'A', Figure 10.

⁵⁷ Horrocks, pp. 177-178.

⁵⁸ TNA: WO 171/4389, February 1945.

for Operation Veritable was disclosed.’ A further ‘O’ group was held on the 6th and another on the 8th after which the battalion commander disclosed the plans to his battalion. On the 9th, the battalion commander attended two brigade ‘O’ Groups; after the second one, at 1700, he was able to hold his own battalion ‘O’ group when he could give his company commanders plans for the brigade.⁵⁹ By 2030 the same day, the battalion was in transit to the front line. This battalion was due to be in action the following day with the other brigade battalions. This shows that the planning time for this particular unit, and possibly other units within the division, was limited. This was, due to the nature of the 43rds deployment, as they were to be committed to the battle as the situation developed and unfolded, but it dispels the notion that the British Army at this time universally had ample time for planning and rehearsal of operations. The platoon and section leaders would necessarily have to ‘think on their feet’ if they were to achieve their objectives.

The infantry conduct of battle was not as it was initially envisaged. It had been hoped that the wintery conditions would have made the ground hard or frozen, and so would allow the supporting armour and vehicles to move across country (soft going and a lack of metalled roads had been a major problem during the autumn fighting, leading to extreme traffic congestion and inability to use tanks to their best advantage). In the event, this planning was again negated by adverse weather conditions – it rained continually for at least a week at a time. Furthermore, the Germans had deliberately destroyed the Rhine dykes, causing widespread flooding of the area – a tactic which bought them enough time to send badly-needed reinforcements to the area. Once more, as in Operation Market Garden, a major problem for the 43rd was actually getting the infantry to the front line. The 43rd had, it seems, been ordered forward prematurely by the corps commander: ‘All too often during

⁵⁹ TNA: WO 171/5272, 3-9 February 1945.

the war I had witnessed a pause in the battle when one division was ordered to pass through another, which allowed the enemy time to recover. In this case speed was absolutely vital, and I was determined that our attack should flow on.⁶⁰ As a result, the division had to share one axis of advance with the 15th (Scottish) Infantry Division. This: 'made coherent troop movement almost impossible. In fact it had been proved – it is hoped for all time – that two divisions cannot operate satisfactorily on one axis – especially when the axis itself leads through a bog and is itself in places underwater'.⁶¹ The already bad state of the roads and countryside were aggravated by the devastation by aerial bombardment.⁶² The Commanding Officer of 214 Brigade placed considerable responsibility on the RAF for the difficulty experienced in one attack and wasted opportunity to exploit: 'What will always rankle in the minds of those that fought at Cleve is the oafish stupidity of the attack by Bomber Command, which, with its deep cratering, completely blocked the roads within the town.'⁶³

Where the infantry advanced to contact, they almost always encountered stiff resistance and some form of counterattack, sometimes repeated several times. 5th WILTS found themselves operating against 'En[emy] t[an]ks and SP operating singly, with g[r]oups of inf[antry] up to PI strength.'⁶⁴ Their Battalion HQ found itself under attack from one such group and the rest of the battalion were forced back to their original positions by a series of counter attacks featuring three Tiger tanks and around 30 infantry.⁶⁵ Conversely, and especially where supporting armour could be used, attacks were very successful: 'Our attack went like clockwork. Covered by artillery fire and supported by tanks of 4/7 Dragoon

⁶⁰ Horrocks, p. 187.

⁶¹ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 210.

⁶² TNA: WO 171/5271, 10 February 1945.

⁶³ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 213.

⁶⁴ TNA: WO 171/5291, 10 February 1945.

⁶⁵ TNA: WO 171/5291, 10 February 1945.

Guards, we went forward in style. Such was the precision of the attack that the enemy were unable to put up much of a fight. Our own casualties were light'.⁶⁶ The supporting fire from 4/7 Dragoon Guards' tanks alone amounted to over 150 rounds per gun and were used to engage indirect targets.⁶⁷

Operation Veritable for the infantryman was generally a gruelling experience involving a hard fight against both the enemy and the elements continuously for almost an entire month. Casualties for the whole month are difficult to ascertain from the battalion war diaries, but losses had been heavy, particularly among section, platoon and company leaders.

In common with almost all of the North West European campaign battles, sufficient armour had been allocated to support the operation, but in some cases during Operation Veritable the armour often experienced significant difficulty in actually reaching their planned objectives to support the infantry due to the state of the ground or mines. The factor of traffic congestion and bad going similarly affected the use of specialist armoured support vehicles from the 79th Armoured Division. The infantry, then, could not always reap the full benefit from the supporting armour. Artillery support was, as usual, in plentiful supply, but artillery could only provide limited support to an assault which had already made contact with the enemy for fear of shelling their own troops. Counter-battery fire, of course, remained unaffected by this factor. Air support could not be provided on the same scale as previous operations due to the weather. There were just three days during which medium and heavy bombers could operate; but only one day (5 March) when close support aircraft could make their ground attack sorties, and even these (there were 234 of them) were

⁶⁶ Taylor, p. 168

⁶⁷ TNA: WO 171/4685, 8 February 1945.

adversely affected by bad visibility.⁶⁸ Barely two weeks after this long and exhausting battle in the Reichswald, the division was to take part in the crossing of the River Rhine. This was effectively to be their last period of rest, recreation and training before the end of the war in Europe.

Operation Plunder

For the crossing of the Rhine, the 43rd's was part of XXX Corps effort. 51st (Highland) Division, assisted by 9 Canadian Brigade were to form the initial bridgehead; then one brigade of the 43rd and the divisional HQ was to pass through the bridgehead, pick up 9 Canadian Brigade (from 3 Canadian Division) and protect the left flank of the bridgehead. The remainder of the 43rd would then cross the Rhine followed by the remainder of the Canadian division. The divisions would then position themselves and prepare to advance on a three-division front, with the 43rd in the centre. 130 Brigade was chosen to cross first followed by 129 and then 214 Brigades. The crossing time for the division was, of course, dependant on the success of the Highland Division in establishing their bridgehead.

Artillery support amounted to twenty field regiments, ten medium regiments, two heavy regiments, and two super-heavy batteries; another very dense concentrations of artillery. In addition, devastating aerial bombardments of selected targets were carried out immediately prior to the initial assault. Corporal Les Hart recalled: 'On reaching the other side we found only shell holes for ½ mile. The first humans, about fifty women and children were all shell shocked.'⁶⁹

⁶⁸ TNA: WO 205/1133.

⁶⁹ Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, p. 268.

Planning for this operation was comprehensive and challenging. Brigadier Essame, Commanding Officer of 214 Brigade: 'Conference with the GSO1 succeeded conference as the terms of reference changed. Many junior staff officers worked through the night only to be told at dawn that the basic assumptions on which their calculations had been based were no longer valid.'⁷⁰ Brigadier Vandeleur, CO of 129 Brigade: 'We brigadiers had to work very hard. Our commander was in the habit of making outline plans to meet every contingency. We had not only to plan the battles we were fighting but in between engagements we had to study in detail alternative lines of action.'⁷¹ Lt. Col. Taylor, CO 5th DCLI: 'Briefings were carried out meticulously, with fine attention to detail and training was rigorous. There was no way anything was going to go wrong at this late stage.'⁷² Knowledge of the requirements of operation was known in the Brigades since the 12th March; 'We are to take part in the assault across the Rhine at a date unknown. Preparations for this go on and much entertainment was got out of the making of Staff Tables etc, practicing driving into Buffaloes and loading onto rafts.'⁷³ By the 23rd March 'planning had been completed.'⁷⁴ It is clear, then, that this operation was well-planned and troops had received training specific to the task in hand. As for the crossing itself, the Commanding Officer of the division's anti-tank regiment was detailed to chair a divisional landing organisation and plan the operation. A full rehearsal using the Maas as a 'dummy Rhine' took place on the 21st March.⁷⁵

At battalion level, the battalion selected to lead the advance, 7th HAMPS, received their orders for the crossing on the 19th, battalion officers were briefed on the 22nd, and all NCO

⁷⁰ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 233.

⁷¹ Delaforce, *Wessex Wyverns*, p. 266.

⁷² Taylor, p. 185.

⁷³ TNA: WO 171/4391, 12 March 1945.

⁷⁴ TNA: WO 171/4391, 23 March 1945.

⁷⁵ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 234.

were 'put in the picture by the CO' on the 23rd.⁷⁶ There is no doubt that, as for Operation Veritable, the division was as prepared as it could be for this battle.

On the first day of the crossing the 51st (Highland) Division met with unexpected resistance and the crossing of 130 Brigade was delayed, but 4th DOR crossed in Buffaloes and storm boats 'in brilliant sunshine, and much more in keeping with Henley'. The battalion was reformed by 1800; 15 minutes later they received their orders to attack at 2400. A series of briefings and 'O' groups followed, but the attack was postponed to 0130 to allow the artillery support to complete a previous task. No opposition was encountered in their attack. The rest of 130 Brigade followed in the early hours of 26 March. 4th DOR established their battalion HQ at 0200 and received their orders at the same time for the first attack which was to be 'not before 1000'.⁷⁷ In view of the developing situation, however, plans had to be abandoned and replanned. 4th DOR war diary records their experience⁷⁸:

0730 – CO and IO attend Bde 'O' group.

1000 – CO's 'O' group. Attack intentions given.

1300 - CO's 'O' group. Now possible that a different plan will be put into action.

1415 – Orders from Bde that original plan will be carried out. H hour to be at 1630 hrs.

1515 – Leading Coy passed S.P.

Similarly, the war diary for the 129 Brigade's HQ remarked: 'The rest of the day was spent in planning for the future which appeared unlikely to take place exactly as planned.'⁷⁹ The

⁷⁶ TNA: WO 171/5200, 19-23 March 1945.

⁷⁷ TNA: WO 171/5174, 26 March 1945.

⁷⁸ TNA: WO 171/5174, 26 March 1945.

⁷⁹ TNA: WO 171/4389, 26 March 1945.

irritation in this remark is almost palpable. There is a possibility by now that at brigade and battalion level, the planning process had become a burdensome chore rather than an opportunity to disseminate a less rigid but well-reconnoitred general plan.

In the event, once the rest of the battalions had crossed the Rhine and had begun to execute their advances, most of them met with mediocre or almost no opposition. The main exception to this was an advance on a partially-constructed autobahn which proved to be heavily defended. In this action, the ground leading to the autobahn was cleared by one battalion (129) while another (214) was given the task of capturing the feature (130 Brigade continued their advance to the south east). Of the two battalions of 129 Brigade, 4th WILTS met 'negligible' resistance while 5th WILTS encountered small arms fire which intensified as they made their approach; this was dealt with by artillery fire; they then withdrew to allow the supporting barrage for 214 Brigade's attack to take place. Brigadier Essame of 214 Brigade recalls: 'To pass one brigade through another in circumstance such as these is an operation calculated to try the patience of even the most placid commanders. On this occasion the presence in the immediate neighbourhood of several parties of the enemy added to the uncertainties. In the circumstances it is remarkable that Major Reinhold of 1 Worcestershire and Lieutenant-Colonel Rees of Somerset 7 Light Infantry were able to carry out their reconnaissance and launch their attack on time.'⁸⁰ Both brigade commanders held their 'O' Group at 1015, but Lieutenant Peter Hall remembered his battalion 'O' Group being held at around 1100 for an initial start time of 1145.⁸¹ When 7th SOMLI and 1st WORC advanced across their start line at around 1400-1415 they met with determined resistance from infantry with 'Spandaus' and SP guns and a vicious battle ensued, but the battalions

⁸⁰ Essame, *Wessex Division at War*, p. 237.

⁸¹ Duncan Rogers and Sarah Williams (eds.), *On the Bloody Road to Berlin* (Solihull: Helion, 2005). p. 214.

were on their objectives at or just after nightfall. The armour detailed to support the attack could give little help due to the 'bad going' of the terrain.

In the late afternoon, 5th DCLI attempted pass through the battle in Kangaroos in a planned exploitation of the attack. Their advance was premature and they were forced to disembark when they reached the autobahn feature when their armour was attacked by infantry with bazookas or Panzerfausts. 5th DCLI pressed on to their objective on foot, on their arrival they were met by their armoured support accompanied by Crocodiles and the village was taken with relative ease, but took it some time to completely clear the enemy from the area.

Like many others of the 43rd, this action seems to have been planned and executed in very short time which led to some confusion during its execution (5th DCLI's premature attempt at exploitation). The strength of the defence here, however, may be due to confusion further up the command chain. This assault was planned to have coincided with a similar, mutually supporting, attack on the division's right flank: 'It was not until approx 1700hrs that it was learned that 51 Div whose attack should have started at the same time as ours was only just about to begin.'⁸² The remainder of the division's objectives for the rest of the operation, including a river crossing assault, went more or less according to plan. At 1000 on the 30th March Battalions started to receive their orders for Operation 'Forrard On.'

This is where we leave the 43rd Infantry Division. Their war from now on was one of overwhelming superiority in assets and, by now, extensive combat experience against an enemy who grew weaker and more disorganised by the day. Lieutenant Sydney Jary gives a good idea of the way of war for the British infantry from this point onwards:

⁸² TNA: WO 171/5292, 27 March 1945.

The Battalion crossed the Rhine on the morning of 26th March. From that day a new war started, the kind of war envisaged fifteen years before by General Fuller and Captain Liddell Hart: a war of rapid advances by armoured columns supported by motorised infantry. These were mainly platoon and company encounters. This pattern continued until we reached Bremen. Our day usually started before first light when orders for the next day's advance were given, including the planned route, objectives and details about the armoured regiment we were to support. After tying up details with the tank squadron and troop commanders, off we went. A bank holiday spirit prevailed until the leading tank troop encountered the first enemy roadblock. These roadblocks consisted of an 88 or self-propelled gun protected by two or three Spandaus. Usually our leading tank would be knocked out. In open country more than one tank might be hit. The armour then halted and the leading infantry company would deploy in order to remove the enemy's blocking force. Sometimes this proved enough and before we closed the opposition melted away and lived to fight another day. At other times nasty little battles developed.⁸³

Despite the limitations of the German army, these roadblocks and 'nasty little battles' would continue to inflict losses on British infantry battalions and their supporting armour until the end of the campaign.

Conclusion

The 43rd was, by this stage of the war, a different division to the one that landed in France in June 1944. Although it had spent most of the war in training, it had been a 'green' formation when it arrived in France. Its first real baptism of fire had been at Hill 112; one of the most hard-fought of the Normandy battles. From then on the men of the division had had to build on their experience and also train the men that replaced the casualties. In doing so, the battalions of the division had become battle hardened and came to know their enemy and his way of war. As we have seen in the war diaries of the infantry, battle experiences were reflected upon and mechanisms put in place to absorb them. As the campaign progressed, liaison between the infantry and its supporting arms of service improved. Infantry/artillery cooperation was already at a high standard at the beginning of

⁸³ Jary, pp. 113-114.

the campaign; by the time the division crossed the Rhine it had achieved a high level of sophistication. Cooperation between infantry and armour, including specialist armour, also improved. This improved cooperation between the infantry and supporting arms – particularly the artillery – has shown that, by this stage of the campaign, the division was fighting as a system in a similar way to the British army of 1918 and can be seen as a valuable achievement. All this, however, had been gained at a high price in infantry casualties. As we have seen, aside from the major set-piece battles, the infantry experience had been one characterised by limited time for planning and routine reliance on artillery to get them out of trouble. Time and again, throughout the descriptions of their battles, it can be seen that the 43rd was not pursuing a cautious way of war. The pace of operations, especially once initial assaults had taken place, simply did not allow for a methodical approach or the lengthy planning that British doctrine demanded, and the infantry paid the price for this in casualties.

CHAPTER 8

The 53rd Division Post-Ardennes: Operation VERITABLE and beyond

This chapter will examine the 53rd in actions from the preparations for Operation Veritable in February 1945 to the crossing of the Rhine in March of that year. Like the 43rd, this period of the campaign saw the division arguably at its most experienced and capable, and before German resistance began to collapse, so is highly relevant to determining what their way of war was at this time. The main areas of consideration in this period include the two phases of Operation Veritable, located in the Reichswald Forest, and Operation Plunder, the crossing of the River Rhine.¹

Before Operation Veritable itself is examined, the preparations for this battle should be considered first. Between around the 9 January to the start of Operation Veritable on 8 February, the division was taken out of the front line for rest and refitting. This allowed for a certain amount of recreational activities, including entertainment, local leave, and the policy of allowing leave to the UK was also continued.² Although in a rest period, the division was required to be prepared to respond to any German counterattacks towards the Aachen area. This necessitated a comprehensive reconnaissance of the areas concerned. A full training programme was implemented on a divisional, brigade and battalion basis and,

¹ A sketch map of the general area of the Operation, showing axes of advance for many units can be found at Appendix 'A', Figure 10.

² Once introduced, leave to the UK was not curtailed, even during the Ardennes fighting. Barclay, p. 104.

for most of the battalions intensified later in January, once the danger of counterattack had passed. Thus, even though the division was out of the front line it could not be relaxed completely.

The various battalion war diaries record moving to the Eindhoven area on the 20th January and then commenced a period of exercises which included training of section commanders, zeroing of weapons, range firing and small field firing exercises, dealing with mines and training men to drive Weasel and Carrier vehicles. On 28 January, the Corps Commander visited 1st HLI, and discussed training and operations, with 'particular stress laid on training of NCOs and the shortage of officers'.³ Most of the training seems to have focussed in two distinct areas: developing cadres of NCOs^{4,5} and preparing for the imminent operation in the Reichswald, particularly with regard to dealing with pillboxes and other prepared defences, cooperation with tanks, and fighting in wooded areas.⁶ This is evidence of the division balancing the problem of assimilating fresh replacement troops and newly-promoted, inexperienced, NCOs (an indicator of casualties among this group) and preparing for immediate future operations.⁷ There was also training with supporting tanks and frequent demonstrations of unfamiliar vehicles, such as those from the 79th Armoured Division, and the new self propelled 17-pounders from the division's own anti-tank regiment.⁸ There were also more traditional infantryman's training activities, such as 8 and 15 mile

³ TNA: WO 171/5191, 28 January 1945.

⁴ TNA: WO 171/5281, 25 January 1945

⁵ TNA: WO 171/5287, 23 January 1945.

⁶ TNA: WO 171/5191, 24-31 January 1945.

⁷ 1E.Lancs alone received 284 new replacements together with 35 who had recovered from their wounds and were returned to front line duties. By 17 January Battalion strength was 32 officers and 876 ORs. On the day after the initial assault, their strength was under establishment for officers (31 instead of 35) but ORs were significantly *over* establishment at 914(Est: 809). (Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*. pp. 145-154). There is a possibility here of units being over-supplied with replacement in expectation of heavy casualties.

⁸ The 'Archer' 17-pdr SP gun, at first glance, resembled similar German vehicles.

regimental route marches⁹ and the 1st E.Lancs had their RSM 'address all NCOs on discipline'.¹⁰ From the last week of January and into the first week of February 1945 this training was intensified and was integrated into preparations for Operation Veritable. It is this type of comprehensive preparation that has been taken as representative for operations during the whole of the campaign but, as has been evidenced in the previous chapters, this was not always the case.

Operation Veritable

Planning and preparations for Operation Veritable were thorough and all-inclusive. In examining the factor of planning time, it is worth consulting the timeline of a sample brigade and one of its battalions, in this case the 71st Infantry Brigade Headquarters and 1st HLI. These particular units have been chosen as they recorded these events carefully in their war diaries. Brigade Headquarters entries are in standard typeface, while 1st HLI appear in italics.

Timeline for HQ 71st Infantry Brigade/1st HLI planning for Op. Veritable, 1945¹¹

January

23rd Brigade Commanders briefed for Ex Veritable

24th 1430 - *Commanding Officer attended conference at Brigade for future Ops.* (this date has been amended, and the 23rd is probably intended).

25th Brigade Commander attends briefing conference at HQ 30 Corps. Brigade Major briefed.

26th Brigade Intelligence Officer briefed for VERITABLE. Planning room opened at Brigade HQ.

⁹ TNA: WO171/5253, 21-31 January 1945.

¹⁰ TNA: WO 171/5224, 20 January 1945.

¹¹ Compiled from: TNA: WO 171/4384, 23 January – 4 February 1945 and TNA: WO 171/5191, 24 January – 8 February 1945.

- 28th 1030 - Visit of Commander 30 Corps.
- 29th 1000 – Brigade Command held an ‘O’ Group (subject Veritable) for battalion commanders and tank commanders.
1000 – Commanding Officer attended preliminary conference on Op Veritable.
- 30th Preliminary recce for Veritable by Brigade Command and battalion commanders. Brigade plan for Veritable published.
1200 - Commanding Officer carried out preliminary recce of ground for Op Veritable.
- 31st 71 Brigade Veritable Intelligence summary published.

February

- 1st 1715 - Brigade commanders ‘O’ Group – subject Veritable – attended by battalion commanders, commander 147 RAC, OC 81 Field Regiment, OC 147 Field Ambulance, OC 244 Field Company RE, and 279 Ant-tank battery.
1715 – Commanding Officer attended brigade co-ordinating conference to fix details of fire plan for Op Veritable.
- 2nd 1000 – Company commanders briefed for Op Veritable.
- 3rd 1430 - Divisional ‘O’ Group for brigade commanders.
1000 - Company commander’s conference with APIS (Photographic Intelligence Section)
- 4th 1100 - Divisional Commanders address to all officers.
1100 – All officers attended lecture by Divisional Commander on Op. Veritable
1630 – Battalion moved to harbour area to complete plans for Veritable.
- 5th 0930 – Battalion Commanders attended Brigade ‘O’ Group.
1900 – Preliminary Battalion ‘O’ Group.
- 6th AM - Company commanders and platoon commanders carried out detailed ground recces. 1830 - 53 reinforcements received. Mostly young soldiers.
- 7th 1000 – Final recces of forward assembly area.
1400 – Final ‘O’ Group.
- 8th 0630 – Battalion moves to Forward Assembly Area.
1030 – ‘B’ and ‘D’ Companies move to start line.

While it is accepted that the above example was probably not identical to the planning process of every unit of the division, it is reasonable assume that the other two infantry

brigades would have gone through a similar process. From the above data, it can be clearly seen that this brigade commander had at least two weeks before the attack start time to plan his brigade's part in the operation and cascade that information down through his battalions, and for those battalions to complete their plans and pass them down to company, platoon and section leaders. In this case, the battalion plan was published within around six days. Battalion commanders and tank support commanders were briefed the day before that plan was published and therefore had a week to complete their planning and dissemination of orders. Company commanders had five days (with the aid of photographic reconnaissance images) to do the same. The company and platoon commanders carried out their own reconnaissance on the sixth, allowing two full days to adjust plans as necessary.

Sergeant Machin, intelligence NCO of 1/5th WEL remembers:

The Bn Command studied in detail the Reichswald Forest, its tracks, density of trees, position of enemy trenches, topography. Each Coy commander learned by heart the way to his Coy objective. Characteristic of Monty the prelude to the offensive was to be a huge artillery barrage. When our CO, Lt. Col. Morrison Jones saw the artillery programme he said "it's nice to know that they are on our side!".¹²

It can be seen from the descriptions of previous operations that the time allowed for the planning and reconnaissance for Operation Veritable is unusual in its length. This would have allowed for very careful planning and detailed knowledge of enemy positions, the ground over which the advance was to take place, and what was required of each sub-unit. In addition to this, as noted above, the division had taken care to ensure that troops were trained specifically for the task in hand – assaulting prepared defensive positions in wooded areas - and that this training had occurred, in terms of timing, as close to the actual assault as possible (although 1st HLI's 53 new replacements that arrived on the 6th February would

¹² Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 147.

not have benefited from it). At company and battalion level, TEWTs and cloth model exercises¹³ had also been used for training purposes. This, in effect, amounted to a rehearsal of the attack. It is arguable that the men of the 53rd and their supporting arms could not reasonably have been better prepared for this attack. As mentioned in the previous chapter, artillery support for Veritable was to be over 1000 guns – one of the heaviest artillery bombardments of the campaign.

Facing the 53rd was the 84th Infantry Division, which was an old adversary from the Falaise battles (some of its captured transport was still in use by 71 Brigade).¹⁴ Within this formation were 1051 and 1052 Grenadier Regiments (depleted to around 500 men each); 84 Fusilier Battalion; Battle Group 'Katzmann' (a composite force of around two battalions), and the 2nd Parachute Regiment, which had 'a good fighting reputation'.¹⁵ These troops were positioned in defensive positions which had been prepared over some time and which had also been recently improved. Defensive artillery amounted to around 84 guns of various calibres.¹⁶ It was estimated that the Germans could rush a reserve infantry division to the area within a day, a Panzer division within four, and another two infantry divisions within a week.¹⁷

The first phase of the attack was for 71 Brigade (with 1st E.Lancs) to make an initial assault to their objective (the 'Brandenberg feature').¹⁸ The other two Brigades would then pass through the 71st and assault their own objectives; in the case of 160 Brigade this was to break through the Siegfried line and then seize the 'Stoppeberg Feature'; the 158th was to

¹³ TNA: WO 171/5224, 28 January 1945.

¹⁴ TNA: WO 171/4384, Appendix Z2.

¹⁵ TNA: WO 171/4384, Appendix Z2.

¹⁶ TNA: WO 171/4384, Appendix Z2.

¹⁷ TNA: WO 171/4384, Appendix Z2.

¹⁸ A Sketch map showing objectives and axes of advance for Infantry Battalions of the 53rd in the Reichswald Forest can be found at Annex 'A', Figure 11.

collect 1E.Lancs as they passed through and 'mop up' remaining resistance between the two other battalions. The attack went very well; 71 Brigade reported that:

Enemy resistance was practically non-existent and once into the Reichswald it ceased altogether and the two battalions advanced to their final objectives strictly according to the time table. By 1530 hrs our battle was over, and the only change in plan had been to push 1HLI on to the objective which was to have been taken by 4th RWF. Casualties to own troops during the action were described by brigade headquarters as 'extremely light',¹⁹

The war diary of 1st HLI, however, records 20 other ranks killed, and one officer and 17 other ranks wounded.²⁰ The 71st Brigade headquarters war diary also remarked that 'There was no military reason why the enemy should not have fought. His positions were beautifully dug and well sited and in some depth. Most of the PW were delighted to be led away'. In all, the 71st had killed around 30 of the defenders, wounded another 50, and taken a further 320 of them prisoner.²¹ In addition to the success of this part of the operation, the accuracy of preparatory intelligence was confirmed as the 'Estimate of enemy holding Western edge of Reichswald proved to be substantially correct'.²² The progress of the advance from now on, however, was greatly impeded by the conditions of the ground over which the troops and their supporting vehicles and tanks had to attack. In many cases, infantry continued their advance without the support of their tanks, which had become bogged down. Battalions from the two other brigades, therefore, reached their objectives some six hours later than planned. Resistance, however, was generally weak. The 53rd continued fighting this initial part of the operation in the Reichswald Forest area for another three or four days. The fighting was characterised by smaller battalion and company actions with the usual

¹⁹ TNA: WO 171/4384, 8 February 1945.

²⁰ TNA: WO 171/5191, 8 February 1945.

²¹ TNA: WO 171/4384, 8 February 1945.

²² TNA WO 171/4423, 8 February 1945.

artillery support, but limited armoured support. Resistance from the Germans was, generally speaking, moderate but could on occasion be fierce. Enemy artillery, mortar and machine gun fire remained troublesome for most units throughout this period. Most of the operations that took place were conceived as events unfolded and were therefore hastily planned and executed.

Space does not permit an exhaustive account of all of these operations, but as an example the Commanding Officer of 1st E.Lancs was called to a brigade 'O' group at 1615 hours on 10 February to be briefed for an operation which was to start at 0700 the following day. He held his battalion 'O' group at 1930, therefore allowing just under 12 hours (of darkness) for reconnaissance, company, platoon and section planning. The attack went ahead as planned and was successful although held up by '4 Spandaus' and 'some casualties' were inflicted by 'heavy and accurate stonking'. At 1145 the same morning the battalion Commanding Officer was again called to brigade HQ and briefed to force a bridgehead across a road by nightfall. He held the battalion 'O' group at 1300 with 'H' hour for this operation being at 1345, just 45 minutes to an hour later (Headquarters 158 Brigade records a start time of 1400). This allowed very limited time for planning, reconnaissance and liaison with supporting armour. The attack was, however, 'entirely successful'²³ in its attack against 'moderate opposition from Inf and SP guns.' although the supporting tanks 'suffered heavy casualties from bazookas'²⁴

Unsurprisingly, given the amount of preparation, the 53rd's initial attack of Operation Veritable had been a success, and progress of the remainder of the battle was only really hampered by the weather conditions, which reduced forest tracks and other roads to

²³ TNA: WO 171/5224, 10-11 February 1945.

²⁴ TNA: WO 171/4423, 11 February 1945.

muddy quagmires. Had the weather been more favourable to the Allies (admittedly unlikely in this location in any given February) the operation would undoubtedly have produced better results, faster. What is of interest to this study, however, is that the level of preparation allowed for the 53rd (and other participating formations) - ample time for planning, operation-specific training opportunities, reconnaissance, replenishment of manpower, allocation of supporting units, and rest periods – was generally unusual for this division. The type of preparations that have been described for this operation have been held up as typical for the British way of war during the campaign, such as Russel Hart's 'mechanistic and ponderous' and 'caution and careful husbanding'²⁵ but, as we have seen, this is not the case. Obviously, all the preparations put in place point to an orchestrated effort for military success, but do not necessarily indicate casualty conservation as a motive for them, especially if it is accepted that the 'overstocking' of battalions is an indicator that high casualties were expected anyway.

The notion that the British way of war was cautious and slow is not borne out by the events recalled in the war diaries – we have seen how units in the initial advance were quick to take advantage of the situation and press on their attack if the opportunity presented itself even if it meant a break with the original plan. Furthermore, once the first phase of the battle was over, the battalions were quick to respond to orders from brigade headquarters to formulate and execute swiftly-arranged plans which were successful. This would seem to indicate that the 53rd had, by this point, matured as a fighting force and was able to liaise quickly and effectively with supporting artillery and armoured units. There is, however, a possibility that the 53rd had met with less resilient opposition than other British Infantry

²⁵ Russell Hart, *Clash of Arms: How the Allies Won in Normandy* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), p. 148.

divisions engaged in Operation Veritable; the 43rd and 51st, for example, had encountered some very stiff resistance.

Operation Veritable – Phase II

On 16th February the Divisional Commander proceeded on sick leave; he was temporarily replaced by the brigade commander of 71 Brigade, Brigadier Elrington. During this temporary appointment, command of 71 Brigade passed to Lieutenant Colonel McLeod, remembered by one of his men as ‘indeed a front line soldier, and at no time showed any love for the Germans. He did enjoy his whiskey. He always carried his own Tommy Gun, the times he was with us’.²⁶ The 53rd Division had been ordered to conform to the northern flank of an attack by 51st Division on the town of Asperden. This in effect meant that the small village of Asperberg, just north of Asperden, with its intersecting road bridge over the river Niers, was the divisional objective.²⁷ These orders were discussed at around 2000 on 15th February when a divisional staff officer called on the commanding officer of 71 Brigade who discussed the operation with the other two brigade commanders shortly afterwards. At 0630 the following morning, Brigadier Elrington assumed command of the division; at 1230 he held his first conference, and at 1345, his first ‘O’ Group. A battalion each from 71 and 158 Brigades, 7th RWF and 1st Ox & Bucks respectively, were nominated for this task. ‘H’ hour was to be at 2100.

The commanding officer of 7th RWF attended a brigade ‘O’ group at 1400, and held his own battalion ‘O’ group at 1600, when he briefed his company commanders and gave them their objectives; this was to be a three-company assault.²⁸ The CO of 1st Ox & Bucks committed

²⁶ Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 165.

²⁷ A sketch map showing the axes of advance on Asperberg can be found at Appendix ‘A’, Figure 12.

²⁸ TNA: WO 171/5284, 16 February 1945.

two companies. The war diaries for both battalions do not specifically mention reconnaissance missions, but 7th RWF had been mounting regular contact patrols of the objective since arriving in the area on the 13th. This attack was supported by three field and three medium artillery regiments and the division's heavy mortars and medium machine guns.

The 1st Ox & Bucks had reached their objectives by 2200 after encountering 'fierce and determined' resistance, and duly made their success signals. The companies of 7th RWF took several casualties from 'shorts' as they waited at the start line and more from mines as they advanced, but were on their objective by 2300. Although the objectives for both battalions had been achieved, not all the enemy had been evicted from the objectives and their approaches, and troops following up the initial wave were fired on and sustained heavy casualties. In and around the buildings on the objectives themselves, confused fighting carried on for some time. 1st Ox & Bucks war diary records 'Seven of the enemy showed great determination and resisted fiercely from the main building throughout the night, fighting from room to room and shooting Panzerfaust and automatic weapons through the walls. In addition, a counter-attack was launched by eight men, all of them armed with Spandaus which they fired from the hip as they advanced.'²⁹ Resistance was finally extinguished by 0700 the following day. Further to the south, 7th RWF used WASP flamethrowing carriers to subdue enemy resistance, and by around 0230 were in a position to consolidate their newly-won positions.

²⁹ TNA: WO 171/5253, 16 February 1945.

Although eventually a success, this operation had been a costly one. 7th RWF had sustained 33 casualties³⁰, and 1st Ox & Bucks had suffered 17 killed, 22 wounded and one missing.³¹ These 77 Infantry casualties do not include the casualties that were inflicted on the anti-tank gunners, signallers, stretcher bearers, and ammunition carriers that were caught out by the Germans that had been missed in the initial assault. It is difficult to assign the reasons for the shortcomings of this failure to any one specific factor. The initial 'O' group timings allowed around five hours for planning and reconnaissance,³² and most of this would have been done in darkness. It is of note that groups of resistance had been bypassed unnoticed; this tends to indicate flawed intelligence, despite the contact patrols that had previously been mounted. Nonetheless, there remains no record of reconnaissance carried out specific to this operation, but if it did take place, it was likely to have been in darkness and so of limited value. It is also possible that, despite the usual heavy artillery bombardment, the mettle of the defenders in these two actions was unexpected; the Germans here fought with determination, which was in stark contrast to some of the opposition that had recently been encountered by the division.

To give this some perspective, the following day, 17th February, two battalions of 160 Brigade cleared the entire area between the Reichswald and Cleve forests with no opposition being offered. The operation commenced at 0800, companies were on their objectives by 0930, and the advance was concluded by 1200. Incidentally, the Brigade 'O' group for this operation was held 17 hours before 'H' hour, and the battalion 'O' group 14 hours. Reconnaissance patrols were active between 1900 and 2200 and it was decided to commence the advance without artillery support as the patrols had discovered no

³⁰ Barclay, p. 129.

³¹ TNA: WO 171/5253, 17 February 1945.

³² One hour more than Dempsey's four hours planning to 'guarantee' success.

defenders.³³ Certainly, by this period, the variance in determined opposition being encountered was symptomatic of the deterioration of German defensive ability. An intelligence report of 20 February noted that: 'The enemy def[ence] system lacks co-ordination and t[roo]ps are being put piece-meal into the battle as they arrive regardless of what f[or]m[at]io[n] they belong to. A b[attalio]n of 7 Para is fighting under c[o]m[man]d of a reg[imen]t of 6 Para Div[ision] in area Moyland although its own div[ision] needs it urgently in area Asperden. Individual units will resist fiercely and fight for every inch of ground, but the e[nem]y def[ence] system as a whole is a muddle'³⁴ Clearly, although some troops on the ground were still generally fighting hard, the German command and control system was now beginning to collapse.

There were two other clearing operations for the division in this period, each of which were carried out by two companies of different battalions. These advances met with some stiff opposition, but were successful and yielded around 322 prisoners between them.

Unfortunately, the war diaries of the units concerned do not record the time allowed for planning and reconnaissance. The battalions of the division now enjoyed around two days out of the front line. Although resting, the brigades were on standby to repel counterattacks and react to enemy movement: 'No tracks to be removed from carriers and all veh[icle]s to be kept sufficiently loaded to enable move to take place within three hours'.³⁵ The troops had, for the most part, been living in the open in cold and wet conditions for around two weeks, so this was a much-needed opportunity to dry out, repair and replace equipment.

³³ TNA: WO171/5245, 16-17 February 1945.

³⁴ TNA: WO 171/5253, Appendix 'F' to February 1945.

³⁵ TNA: WO171/5283, 20 February 1945.

At least two of the areas that the brigades were given to rest in, however, were problematic. For instance, 160 Brigade found itself concentrated in a field gun area which was firing throughout the period in support of other operations. Their 'T[roop]s [were] obtaining as much rest as possible in most difficult and uncomfortable surroundings'.³⁶ Also, being in the gun area, the brigade found itself being subjected to enemy retaliatory action; 'ME262s dropped small bombs without causing cas. Target was no doubt the field gun area of which the Bn was in the centre.'³⁷ Similarly, 158 Brigade experienced disruption to their rest time; on assembling at their allotted concentration area, 1st E.Lancs found themselves 'in the centre of a Bty of SP 25prs supporting the attack on Goch'.³⁸ Furthermore, for this brigade, accommodation was a problem as the area was occupied other formations and some of its battalion had to move again to new locations. In this short period the division also had to assimilate its replacements – over 2200 of them. The breakdown of replacements per brigade and battalion is given below:³⁹

71 Brigade	158 Brigade	160 Brigade
4 th RWF – 365	7 th RWF – 359	6 th RWF – 276
1 st Ox & Bucks – 203	1 st E.Lancs – 148	4 th WEL – 281
1 st HLI – 239	1/5 th WEL – 137	2 nd MONS – 243
Total – 807	Total – 644	Total – 800

As can be seen from this data, even what are regarded as 'light' casualties quickly mount up to a significant amount over a period of almost continuous operations, especially when it is

³⁶ TNA: WO171/5245, 20 February 1945.

³⁷ TNA: WO 171/5283, 21 February 1945.

³⁸ TNA: WO171/5224, 18 February 1945.

³⁹ Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 167.

considered that at least some of these battalions were above establishment strength at the start of Operation Veritable. It would appear from examination of the actions in this part of Veritable that the initial phase of the operation – which was comprehensively planned and trained for – produced fewer casualties than the resulting smaller subsidiary actions which were given much less time for planning. This is not a criticism of the command, which must react quickly to events as they occur if it is to provide support to neighbouring formations, as the 53rd were doing in Veritable, but it does tend to dispel the notion that the British way of war – at least at brigade and battalion level – was characterised by ponderous planning and caution. The battalions of the 53rd were, like their brothers in the other British infantry divisions, frequently being committed to operations with only a few hours allowed for planning and reconnaissance.

For the 53rd, however, Operation Veritable was not yet complete; it was to be involved in a XXX Corps offensive to clear the enemy of the fortified towns of Weeze, Kavelaer and Geldern. The 53rd's objective was to be Weeze.⁴⁰ This operation was assigned the codenamed 'Operation Leek'. The basic plan for this operation was for 160 Brigade to attack Weeze from the north and form a bridgehead over an anti-tank ditch. 71 Brigade would then pass through and capture Weeze while 158 Brigade would again pass through 160 Brigade and move south west to advance on the villages of Hees and Wemb. Artillery support for this operation was the division's own three field artillery regiments augmented by another nine field regiments from the 15th, 51st and 52nd Infantry Divisions, and 64 medium (5.5"), and six heavy (7.2") guns.⁴¹ Armoured support was provided by the 8th Armoured Brigade, and the 79th Armoured Division provided a squadron each of Crocodiles

⁴⁰ A sketch map showing the attack on Weeze can be found at Appendix 'A', Figure 13.

⁴¹ Barclay, p. 132.

('C' Squadron 141 RAC) and Crabs ('B' Squadron Lothians) and a number of AVsRE (including tanks equipped for bridging operations). A number of Crusader tanks converted to towing vehicles were also made available. Facing the 53rd in Weeze and the two villages were approximately six battalions from the combined remains of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division and 7th Parachute Division.

160 Brigade held its 'O' Group for the operation at 1000 on the 22nd February. The 2nd MONS held their battalion 'O' group at 1430 the same day while 6th RWF held theirs at 0900 the following morning. 4th WEL held theirs as late as 1900 on the 23rd. Even so, battalion plans had to be changed due to slow progress of flanking units and also when Kangaroo vehicles were unexpectedly reallocated to other infantry units. 4th WEL held an 'O' group for a change of plan after it had crossed its start line and were waiting for orders.

71 Brigade gave out orders for the attack on Weeze on 22nd February but the brigade commander attended Divisional Headquarters for a further 'O' group at 1300 on the 24th. He subsequently held the 'O' group for his battalions at 1430 (although 1st Ox & Bucks records this as 1330) to 'form [an] immediate new plan'.⁴² 'H' hour was fixed for 1700 but was later postponed to 1745. Meanwhile, although the war diary of Headquarter, 158 Brigade does not record its planning 'O' groups, it notes: '1130 - Message from Div – change of plan' at 1100 on the 24th; there was a further 'new plan' at 1040 on the 26th. Units from this division eventually went into action at 2200 on the 28th. For their part, 1/5th WEL had originally formulated two different plans for their part in the operation⁴³ and would eventually have to adjust these plans further. As can be seen from these situations, the

⁴² TNA: WO171/5191, 24 February 1945.

⁴³ TNA: WO 171/5287, 23 February 1945.

planning process for the battalions were severely disrupted and orders were being adjusted to suit the situation as it unfolded.

The initial assault by 160 Brigade commenced at 0600 after a 5 hour bombardment; they met very determined resistance. The 2nd MONS reported that all their companies were on their initial objectives, but further attempts at advancing were only partially successful, even after the reserve company was committed to the attack. At the end of the first day, their war diary recorded: 'Enemy shelling and mortar activity during the day was heaviest ever experienced by the Bn.'⁴⁴ By 0910 all of 6th RWF's 'D' Company's supporting tanks were out of action and the reserve troop were committed, but their assault fell short of its objective. 4WEL achieved their objective by 1800 but at one point found their 'B' Company under attack by 1st Ox & Bucks supported by Crocodiles with 'cas[ualties] to B Coy fairly heavy'.⁴⁵ The assaulting battalions of 71 Brigade also met with very strong resistance and not all of their objectives were taken by the end of the day. 158 Brigade remained in reserve, waiting for the objectives of the other brigades to be taken to allow them to continue with their part in the plan.

The 24th February had been a day of hard fighting for the division's two attacking brigades. Captain Pender of 'B' Company 1st HLI remembers that: 'Enemy resistance was extremely well coordinated. There was very heavy Spandau, mortar and DF fire with, in addition, dive bombers and an enemy tank [which] caused casualties and confusion until it was chased off by some Jock with a PIAT.'⁴⁶ The 4/7 Dragoon Guards war diary recalled: 'The Operation had been a very sticky one carried out under extremely difficult topographical conditions and

⁴⁴ TNA: WO 171/5245, 24 February 1945.

⁴⁵ TNA: WO 171/5286, 24 February 1945.

⁴⁶ Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 169.

the enemy who were very determined really seemed to hold on to Weeze just so long as they wished'.⁴⁷ Although the division had not taken all its objectives, it had taken around 550⁴⁸ prisoners and had virtually destroyed two battalions of infantry and a company of parachutists. They held their positions overnight and the following day, where they were again heavily shelled. A number of counter attacks were broken up by artillery fire.

On the 26th February the divisional commander rearranged his brigades in preparation for a new attack on Weeze; 71 Brigade, augmented by 12th King's Royal Rifle Corps and a squadron of the division's reconnaissance regiment, was give responsibility for the divisional front while 160 Brigade were withdrawn. A number of reconnaissance patrols were sent out (which included members of attached AVRE crews) in the early hours to examine anti-tank defences and the state of bridges. The new plan to attack Weeze was given a new codename – Operation Daffodil – and was a complicated undertaking. This time 160 Brigade would enlarge a small bridgehead to the north east of Weeze that had previously been made by the 8th Infantry Brigade. One battalion of the 160th (with a battalion from the 158th) would then attack Weeze directly from this bridgehead while the rest of the 158th would form a bridgehead south of Weeze and then turn north and attack Weeze. Their flank would be protected by a squadron of the 53rd's recce regiment and a squadron of the South Riding Yeomanry. 71 Brigade would attack from the north on the axis of the original plan. This, basically, would result in a three-pronged attack with the usual level of artillery and armoured support (including the 'funnies' of 79th Armoured Division).

⁴⁷ TNA: WO 171/4685, 25 February 1945

⁴⁸ Barclay, p. 134.

The 'new plan' was received by 158 Brigade at 1040 on the 26th with a 'probable date for 158 Bde Op – 1 March'; zero hour for their 7th RWF was actually 2200 on the 28th.⁴⁹ The commanding officer of 1/5th WEL discussed the possibilities of attacking Weeze with his company commanders; the model of the town that he used was then made available for the company commanders to discuss the attack with their platoon commanders.⁵⁰ The commander of 71 Brigade held an 'O' group for his brigade's part of the plan at 0930 on the 28th for a start time of 0100 the following morning. 160 Brigade held their 'O' group to move to the bridgehead at 1000 on the 27th and another at 1400 on the 28th for a start time of 1900 that evening. The planning times allowed for each of the individual brigade's tasks, then, varied considerably but all planning times exceeded Dempsey's 'four hours planning to guarantee success' rule of thumb.

160 Brigade enlarged their bridgehead as planned, but their movement was observed and attracted heavy shelling. 158 Brigade concentrated in their allotted positions in anticipation of their attack, but this daylight operation was changed to a night attack and postponed until 2200. It would be lengthy and time consuming to describe the accounts of each of the nine battalions engaged in this battle, but the operation was ultimately a success after encountering many setbacks. Indeed, some units did not achieve their objectives: Weeze was eventually only taken after the defenders had endured heavy artillery bombardments (including the 1000 phosphorous bombs that Lt. Col. Crozier of 1st MAN remembers pouring into the town),⁵¹ the flamethrowers of the Crocodiles, the anti-tank defences being breached by AVsRE, and infantry attacks coming from the rear. Once the Germans realised that their position was no longer tenable, they simply withdrew to fight from their next line

⁴⁹ TNA: WO 171/4423, 26-28 February 1945.

⁵⁰ TNA: WO 171/5287, 27 February 1945.

⁵¹ Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 172.

of defences; a series of events that was by now very familiar to the Allies. Casualties had again been heavy; the war diary of the 4/7 Royal Dragoon Guards recalls that: 'Three forward Coys of RWF extremely weak when they reached objective, only numbering about 12, 15 and 12 men.'⁵² As for the 53rd, Lt. Col. Crozier thought that the Division was 'just about dead beat'.⁵³

It had been planned that the 53rd was to be relieved on 2 March, but it was decided to abandon this as the relief would have stalled the momentum of the attacks against what was evidently crumbling defence. Units from the division, often in company with elements of the division's own reconnaissance regiment or the 8th Armoured Brigade, were then engaged in clearing operations in an around a series of small villages to the east of Weeze, meeting opposition which ranged from non-existent to fanatical. On 4th March, in view of the paucity of resistance, the postponed relief was once more postponed and the division continued with its advance. The division was later taken out of the front line (except for 83 FRRR which was still supporting the 52nd Division) after a two-day relief operation which was completed by the 8th March. By the end of Veritable the division as a whole had sustained around 1229 battle casualties but captured approximately 3200 prisoners. In excess of 180000 rounds of 25pr. ammunition had been expended.⁵⁴

One of the main factors to consider from this phase of Operation Veritable is that of planning – it is evident from the simplified version given above that units had to plan and replan their operations; sometimes many times over. Furthermore, these new plans often necessitated the movements of units which would have been wearisome for infantrymen

⁵² TNA: WO 171/4685, 1 March 1945.

⁵³ Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 172.

⁵⁴ Barclay, p. 145.

who were in any case fatigued. Troop movements, of course, often attracted shelling or mortar fire if they were detected. Moreover, once Weeze had fallen, the decision was taken to continue with the advance and 'strike while the iron was hot'. This fluid approach to planning and operations is, like in previous confusing actions, brigade and battalion commanders reacting to the demands of the immediate or near immediate (within 24 hours) requirements despite the attrition to their troops and some key officer and NCOs. These are clearly not the symptoms of a slow methodical way of war. On the contrary, for the 53rd, some of the actions fought during Operation Veritable represent an infantry division operating at or very near its optimum, both in terms of available planning time, manpower and endurance.⁵⁵

The 53rd now spent around ten days in rest in the Brussels area and 'apart from the usual smartening up programmes, cadre courses and drill parades',⁵⁶ took advantage of the usual facilities, such as bathing and entertainment. Night leave to Brussels was also arranged. Preparations also took place for the forthcoming operation to force a bridgehead across the river Rhine. The 1st E.Lancs carried out a training programme which included bayonet fighting, sniper field firings, cloth model discussions on street fighting, and training for their signallers on No.s 19 and 22 radio sets.⁵⁷ On 15th March, the Headquarters of 71 Brigade (as, presumably, must the HQs of the other two infantry brigades) received the first maps and air photos in preparation for Op Plunder and 'a Planning Room was set up at Bde HQ and the preliminaries of our next action began to be worked out'.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ The 53rd was the only British Infantry division to fight continuously throughout the Rhineland battles without relief. Delaforce, *Red Crown and Dragon*, p. 180.

⁵⁶ TNA: WO 171/4384, 12 March 1945.

⁵⁷ TNA: WO 171/5287, 19-21 February 1945.

⁵⁸ TNA: WO 171/4384, 15 March 1945.

Operation Plunder

The 53rd's role in Operation Plunder was really a continuation of the type of fighting that it had been engaged in during Operation Veritable in the Reichswald area. The division was not selected for the assault crossing of the Rhine; the assaulting troops in the Second British Army's sector⁵⁹ had been entrusted to the 9th Canadian Brigade, 51st (Highland) Division and 15th (Scottish) Division, both of which had been extracted early from the Reichswald battles to train for this operation.

The 53rd's part in Operation Plunder was to advance through the bridgehead created by the assaulting troops and break out across the River Issel, and then continue on to capture the towns of Bocholt and Borken.⁶⁰ The actions involved in this advance, and indeed for the division's involvement in actions for the remainder of the Overlord campaign, were typified by brigade and battalion commanders being given objectives with relatively little planning and preparation time, examples of which are evident throughout the smaller actions the divisions units are engaged in. The planning time available to unit commanders, although still important to success of any given operation, was less crucial than it had been earlier in the campaign as the ability of the Germans to mount coordinated and well-supported defensive operations was by now badly degraded; even when well-motivated or even fanatical defenders were encountered, they were generally relatively isolated and could normally be quickly dealt with by supporting tanks or artillery; crews in these arms of service were by now very experienced and adept in dealing with this sort of obstacle. Where German infantry were found supported by armoured vehicles (often assault guns),

⁵⁹ The 21st Army Group also oversaw assaults by the 9th US Army and 1st Canadian Army.

⁶⁰ A sketch map of the advance into Germany can be found at Appendix 'A', Figure 14.

these were quickly dealt with by confident use of PIAT, artillery or – increasingly – by Archer 17pr SP anti-tank guns.

Conclusion

The examination of the above actions has illustrated beyond question that, aside from the comprehensive initial preparations for the major operations, the pace of war for the 53rd left little time for detailed planning and preparations. Once again the notion that caution and a methodical approach was a feature of the British way of war amongst the infantry battalions can be dispelled. Furthermore, the reliance on artillery support is evident in almost every action, however small, and is often of utmost importance when armoured support is weak or not present. These have been recurring themes from the outset of this study of the 53rd. It is at this point, however, that we must leave the 53rd, as the remainder of their war was to be fought in generally the same way as we have recently seen until cessation of hostilities in May 1945. The infantryman of this division was not going to further develop or change the ‘way of war’ that he had come to know, to any real extent. He was by now aware that victory in the west was assured and that the supporting arms of armour (including specialist armoured vehicles) and artillery were available to him to defeat troublesome defenders if required. He was also aware from the prisoners that they were taking, that those defending Germany were often from the bottom of the Reich’s manpower barrel. From this point onwards, the British infantryman’s way of war was to remain as it stood until the end of the war. As far as the 53rd (Welsh) were concerned, this was the zenith of its combat development.

Conclusion

The preceding seven chapters have examined, in some detail, the activities of two British infantry divisions from their appearance in North West Europe from June/July 1944 to March 1945, while the first chapter considered how political, military doctrine and other factors had shaped the training and outlook of these divisions and their senior commanders. This final chapter will pull together the salient points of the previous ones to give an explanation of the British 'way of war' at brigade and battalion level during the last 11 or so months of the Second World War in a campaign which, it could be argued, the British Army was better prepared for than any other during the whole war.

Casualty conservation

Stephen Hart's *Colossal Cracks* gives four main reasons why Montgomery might seek to conserve casualties on the battlefield: First, avoidance of high casualties would help to maintain morale among forward troops. Secondly, in 1944, Britain was suffering from a manpower shortage, particularly amongst the infantry, which would impede the British effort in North West Europe and, indeed, in other theatres. Third, memories of high casualties in the Great War had influenced Montgomery and his senior commanders, who wanted to avoid a repetition of this. Lastly, if Britain was to maintain influence in post-war Europe, simply being on the winning side was not enough – Britain would have to maintain the greatest possible military profile in Europe to 'win the peace'. Such a profile, in terms of

divisions in the field, could not be maintained if very high casualties were sustained.¹ This is a convincing and well-argued thesis, but how did these considerations translate to the battlefield practice of the 43rd and 53rd Divisions?

There is little evidence in the war diaries that conservation of casualties was a policy imposed or suggested by higher authority to be observed at brigade or battalion level, although there are several instances of pragmatic decisions made by unit commanders at sub-divisional levels which were made with casualty conservation in mind, such as Colonel Taylor's (5DCLI) imaginative treatment of battle exhaustion casualties, or, during Operation Greenline, the surviving NCOs of 'D' Company, 6th Royal Welch Fusiliers ordering a withdrawal when their position became untenable. Both the 43rd and the 53rd sustained very heavy casualties at different times during the campaign and often had little to show for their efforts. So, in this respect, if casualty conservation was a crucial factor in the maintenance of morale, it was not apparent in these two infantry divisions. Nonetheless, when very heavy casualties were sustained by a division, they were often sustained by a single battalion or even one or two companies. As we have seen, in instances like this, the affected unit could, subject to operational commitments, be relieved by one of its brother companies or battalions by the relevant commander to be 'left out of battle' to recover. Alternatively, as we have also seen, the remnants of depleted units could quickly be amalgamated to form a stronger single unit, and this was sometimes necessary when platoon or company commanders became casualties and units became leaderless. The impact of heavy casualties, therefore, could be managed to some extent within the division until replacements could be absorbed.

¹ Hart, pp. 42-68.

The attitude of the divisional commanders towards casualty conservation is perhaps difficult to gauge accurately from the sources that have been examined, but it is clear that both of them were proactive in driving their formations into assaults, often with little planning or preparation time. Indeed, this seems to be an ethos instilled by Montgomery, as commanders that did not 'drive' their divisions hard in their operations were quickly sacked, as was the case with Bucknall and Erskine following Operation Bluecoat. This tendency for the divisional commanders to drive their men hard is not a reflection on their abilities, or a suggestion that they were insensitive to heavy casualties amongst their men, it is simply an observation that a concept or policy of a cautious approach to operations designed to conserve casualties does not appear as an official (or even an unofficial) policy, or in the day-to-day workings of these divisions. It is likely, however, that these men's attitudes to casualty conservation were shaped by their superiors. In his memoirs, Montgomery points to his doctrine of 'balance' in the conduct of operations: 'My military doctrine was based on unbalancing the enemy while keeping well-balanced myself. I had learnt it in battle fighting since 1940 and I knew from that experience how it helped to save men's lives.'² Later on in his memoirs, however, Montgomery gives four factors that he had learnt which contributed to the saving of life – but they all concern medical treatment for men who have already become casualties.³ Interestingly, there is also a possibility that some senior officers shared a notion that the number of casualties sustained by a unit was an indicator of its resolve in battle; the commander of 4th Armoured Brigade, Later Lord Carver, recalled a conversation with General Horrocks (commander of XXX Corps) in late April 1945: '[He] had asked me

² Montgomery, *Memoirs*, p. 262.

³ Montgomery, *Memoirs*, p. 348.

how many tank casualties the brigade had suffered since we crossed the Rhine. When I told him, he said: 'That's not much. Erroll Prior-Palmer's 8th Armoured Brigade has had many more. You can't be trying.'⁴ Clearly, although the idea and logic of casualty conservation is obvious from a moral and practical point of view, little seems to have been done to implement it. On the contrary, those commanders who failed to drive their men hard were sacked, and those whose formations suffered relatively few casualties were not considered to be fighting hard enough.

Part of the problem of casualty conservation was the management of men suffering from battle exhaustion. There is evidence that cases of 'exhaustion', whether genuine or otherwise, had been mismanaged earlier in the campaign, which led to units permanently losing those evacuated from their units, aggravating the already critical manpower problem. As a result of this problem, some units dealt with battle exhaustion casualties 'in house'. The 53rd approached the problem by ordering that cases of exhaustion were to be dealt with by platoon commanders, who would send those affected to unit transport lines for rest rather than risk losing them to medical evacuation.⁵ Other unit commanders took ownership of the issue in their own way. Lieutenant Colonel George Taylor (5th Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry): 'We had a system that exhausted men whatever the reason were not evacuated outside the battalion. They were sent to the transport lines and given sleeping pills and rested. They were normally back with their company commanders within 24 hours'.⁶ This approach, however, was by no means universal; the same officer recalled visiting a dressing station: 'I was surprised to see some twenty men of [another] battalion lying on stretchers, but with no signs of wounds. The medical officer told me they were

⁴ Carver, p. 216.

⁵ Carver, p. 165.

⁶ Taylor, p. 189.

‘bomb happy’. I was horrified that their CO and medical officer could allow such a situation to develop’.⁷ These appear to be locally-arranged efforts to cope with the problem of dealing with cases of exhaustion, as the 21st Army Group’s ‘official’ mechanism of dealing with the problem was found to be flawed and inefficient, for many different reasons.⁸ The driving factor behind these local arrangements would appear to be avoiding losing men to medical authority from which it was sometimes difficult to retrieve them.

Unsurprisingly, it seems from the pattern of fighting at company level, that casualty conservation was of most immediate interest to those actually at the point of combat. It is a general recurring theme that assaulting troops, following the usual artillery bombardment, advanced until they met resolute resistance – usually in the form of concentrated machine gun fire backed up with *Nebelwerfers*, and perhaps a tank or two or maybe some kind of anti-tank artillery. Rather than assault hidden machine guns and almost certainly suffer heavy casualties, the infantry were able to quickly call down accurate artillery on the suspected enemy positions before recommencing their attack. This was a perfectly rational approach to attacking enemy positions by men who, after the debacle at Falaise, knew that the defeat of Germany would be certain. Nonetheless, as we have seen, in cases like the attack on Hill 112 and later on in the attack on Hoven Wood, British infantry did advance as ordered against heavy machine gun fire, and paid a high price in casualties.

Colossal cracks

Stephen Hart comprehensively describes Montgomery’s policy of using set-piece ‘colossal crack’ battles as being based on a ‘master plan, concentration of forces, firepower-based

⁷ Taylor, p. 189.

⁸ French, *Tommy is no Soldier*, pp. 161-169.

attrition and caution',⁹ and this is the type of operation that preoccupies most of the historiography of the British battles in North West Europe. This is understandable, as it is these battles that shape history's view of the campaign. Furthermore, as we have seen in the preceding chapters, both the 43rd and the 53rd took part in major battles of this sort: Hill 112, Operations Garden, Clipper, Alan, Veritable and so on. In the battalion war diaries we see the kind of preparations that entirely concur with this view of British caution and concentration of force; every battalion was, as much as possible, properly rested before the battle, and comprehensive training was carried out which was designed specifically to meet the challenges of the forthcoming assault. Time for planning was normally ample, and featured 'cloth model' discussions for unit commanders and the distribution of recent aerial photographs of objectives. There were also opportunities for reconnaissance and liaison between infantry and armoured leaders. The research in this study, then, does support the view that 'colossal cracks' were a British way of war, but it also reveals that it was not the only way. Both of the divisions examined here were engaged in many other operations that were not of the 'colossal crack' type. These operations were not characterised by the same preparations that preceded the major battles. For instance, the 43rd's crossing of the river Seine, a major operation, was given only two days for preparation and in this case it was impossible to provide massive material superiority. As can be seen from the descriptions of actions within the previous chapters, many of the other, smaller, brigade and battalion operations were given only a few hours to plan and reconnoitre, often in darkness. In addition to these 'minor' operations, there were also nightly patrols of varying strength to be carried out. These may have been simple operations to probe the enemy's defences, or to maintain contact with him, but others were fighting patrols or more elaborate raids that

⁹ Hart, pp. 69-98.

were large enough to require their own artillery support. All of these types of operations would have contributed to steady attrition on units, interfered with sleep, and contributed to battle stress. To concentrate solely on the major battles, then, does not give a completely accurate view of the British infantry at war in North West Europe.

As we have seen, the pace of operations often meant that officers at divisional and battalion level were constantly in a state of planning for battle, or adjusting existing plans to accommodate changes in the situation or command objectives. This is often commented on in the war diaries and must have been a considerable burden. The whole cycle of planning, re-planning, writing and re-writing orders before disseminating them through the 'O' Group system was a cumbersome method of communicating command priorities and objectives, but it was this system that the British Army itself preferred and adopted. The army placed much emphasis on planning and adherence to written orders rather than brigade, battalion and company commanders being given a verbal briefing on what was required, and then being left to plan the details themselves. This was a weakness in the system because it meant that officers were unnecessarily employed in often wasted planning, when the situation in France and Germany, particularly in the latter stages of the campaign, actually demanded bold and confident handling of formations to exploit opportunities that assaults might present, or allowed rapid reactions to unforeseen circumstances.

Artillery

There is no doubt that the Royal Artillery's contribution to the battlefield was a defining factor in the British way of war during this campaign. Each division's complement of three field regiments of 25-pounders, often supplemented by Army Group medium and heavy guns, proved to be fundamental to the success of most operations. Time and time again,

the artillery was the deciding factor in a variety of engagements and situations. Much of the effectiveness of the artillery was due to the high level of sophistication that the gunners had achieved in their trade. Through the use of reconnaissance, air spotting and FOOs, the artillery could subdue suspected enemy strongpoints and silence most known enemy batteries before assaults began, and were able respond rapidly to interference by enemy counter-fire. Furthermore, the gunners were normally able to respond to requests by the infantry for fire support within a few minutes – subject to priorities of other tasking and the supply of ammunition. One of the downsides to having such a reliable service, however, is that it quickly became routinely relied upon. As we have seen, the infantrymen certainly became accustomed to and expected devastating barrages before they attacked. In this sense, the artillery acted as a force multiplier for the British. First, it boosted the morale of the attackers (who knew just what it was like to be on the receiving end of such a barrage), and secondly, although furious concentrated artillery fire did not necessarily destroy the defenders, it suppressed or would temporarily degrade their defensive capability. Naturally, infantrymen who had become used to the effect of their own artillery would perhaps be a little more circumspect when attacking either without it or when it was much reduced. Artillery alone, however, was not always sufficient to subdue defenders. Other than the nightly programme of patrols, relatively few of the attacks that have been recorded in the war diaries were ‘silent’ attacks, designed to take advantage of the element of surprise that an absence of a bombardment would provide. This tends to underline the British reliance on artillery bombardments as a standard approach to war.

Nonetheless, if artillery proved its worth in assaults, it was similarly often decisive in defence. Again, once the attacking troops had achieved their objectives it was almost a

standard procedure to consolidate their positions against the inevitable German counter-attack. This was done with either the battalion's own 6-pounders or the anti-tank regiment's 17-pounders. These attempts to consolidate were often unsuccessful or only partially successful because towed anti-tank guns were cumbersome to deploy quickly and were vulnerable to all kinds of enemy activity; or – particularly during the winter battles – it was found impossible to move them forward over ground that was saturated, or churned up by aerial or artillery bombardments. Consequently, British infantrymen frequently found themselves without effective anti-tank support (other than PIAT) when a German counterattack, often accompanied by at least a single or pair of tanks, was mounted. In situations such as this it was the divisional 25-pounders that were used to break up the counterattacks – if they were available. Furthermore, effective artillery spotting and infantry communication meant that the divisional guns could be used to prevent the counterattacking troops from forming up even before their attack began, but again - only if the guns were available.

This British reliance on artillery meant that supply of the requisite amount of ammunition was crucial to British operations. Ammunition was, on occasion, rationed to a certain number of rounds per gun per day. The impact this had on planning of infantry operations is uncertain from the information contained in the war diaries, but certainly merits further investigation.

The relationship between the Royal Artillery and the infantry battalions seems to have been close and productive. The practice of allotting, on a semi-permanent basis, a field regiment to a particular brigade appears to have engendered a high level of co-operation between them, as did the policy of each field regiment providing a number of FOOs to accompany the

infantry on their operations. The artillery war diaries illustrate that the gunners were well aware of what support was required of them in any given situation. The infantry war diaries, for their part, are almost universal in their praise of Royal Artillery support. The opinions of infantrymen subjected to artillery 'shorts', of course, is not so benign. The general picture of artillery/infantry liaison, however, seems generally to be a very successful one.

Armoured support

It would appear that in the early stages of the campaign, liaison and cooperation between supporting armoured formations and the infantry appears to have been a weak point in the British army's way of war. Nonetheless, from around August 1944, there are indications that the situation had improved; this is evidenced by the armoured involvement in the 43rd's assault on Mont Pinçon. Furthermore, as the campaign wore on, brigades or battalions found themselves with the support of armoured units which they had worked with before, and so had some kind of mutual understanding. Despite this developing cooperation, British armour was frequently unable to deliver the kind of support it was intended to provide. This was because British armour of the time was so often at a disadvantage to the superior firepower, particularly in range, of German tanks, tank killers and anti-tank guns.¹⁰ British tanks often became casualties before they could provide support. This situation was redressed somewhat as more Sherman 'Firefly' tanks, armed with the 17-pounder anti-tank gun, became more available, but even so, only one in four Shermans were equipped with these guns. Nonetheless, even when the German war effort began to deteriorate, anti-tank

¹⁰ 'While [Allied] 75mm shot has been failing to penetrate the front face of Tigers and Panthers at ranges down to 30 yards, they can knock Shermans and Cromwells out at ranges of up to 1500 yards with ease.' Buckley, p. 127.

weapons, including hand-held weapons and mines, continued to inflict casualties on armoured formations. It must also be remembered that during the time the 43rd and the 53rd were fighting during the winter in the Low Countries and into Operation Veritable, the use of any vehicles, tracked or otherwise, was highly problematic due to the saturated condition of the ground. It is also apparent, even quite late in the campaign, that Infantry and armoured leaders were still not getting sufficient time to liaise properly to prepare for forthcoming operations.

The picture that emerges of the British way of war for these two divisions is not totally at odds with the general existing historiography of the campaign. It has, however, provided a window on the activities of the British Army at Brigade and Battalion level and below which has not been extensively researched. The picture that is starting to take shape is one that is often characterised by – apart from rest periods and the major set-piece battles – a rapid pace of operations, where time to plan and prepare for the next advance were limited, and plans then often changed once more or even several times to accommodate the changes in immediate circumstances. Another characteristic is that of experiencing relatively heavy casualties. On several occasions, battalions suffered very heavy casualties – often in one or two companies – in a way that is reminiscent of the casualties that were sustained during the First World War. Although it has been argued that this campaign was fought with casualty conservation in mind, there is little evidence at the level that has been examined here to suggest that this was the case. There is, however, plenty of evidence that suggests that divisional commanders were expected to drive their troops hard in the attack.

Avenues for further research

The divisions that have been examined appear to have been employed in distinctly different ways; the 43rd fighting mainly either as a division or as brigades, while the 53rd rarely fought as a whole division and also seemed to be employed, especially earlier in the campaign, on large-scale night raids. How was the decision made to deploy divisions arrived at? There is a possibility that the 43rd and the 53rd were deployed on the basis of their reputations, or the reputations of their commanders (both divisions were thought of as reliable and their commanders not 'sticky'). It is difficult to find evidence to support this in the war diaries and is, in any case, beyond the scope of this enquiry, but the question is still relevant as it would explain the apparent difference in deployment. Was Montgomery simply putting his strongest formations in the most crucial points in any given advance? Military logic would suggest that this is probable, but this would have had a fundamental impact on the way of war (and casualties) experienced in a particular division, brigade, battalion or company. At the time it would probably have been unthinkable to make such a rationale public knowledge as it would undoubtedly have had an impact on unit morale, but the question remains.

One surprising and interesting factor that keeps cropping up in the war diaries is the presence of the *Luftwaffe* over the battlefield. Although the historiography of the campaign is generally dismissive of the relevance of the role played by the German air force, their aircraft are seen (or heard) by the battalions, often on a daily basis and frequently in conjunction with small bombing missions. Although the *Luftwaffe* were not inflicting grievous casualties on the two divisions examined here, it would be interesting to

investigate the aggregate impact of such activity over the whole of the campaign, despite undisputed Allied air superiority. The question of *Luftwaffe* activity also calls into question the disbanding of anti-aircraft units within the divisions – what was the equation used to calculate the worth of these regiments? A simple analysis might suggest that some of these anti-aircraft formations were disbanded simply because there were too few targets for them. On the other hand, it is possible that Allied anti-aircraft units were mistakenly causing more losses to the Allied aircraft than German (although the war diaries record no blue-on-blue engagements), and the pressing need for replacement infantrymen made the reallocation of anti-aircraft gunners to infantry units a more urgent requirement. Again, although this is beyond the scope of this thesis, an investigation into the thinking behind these decisions would go some way to discovering the thought processes behind the command at this time. Was there a calculated risk run in reducing anti-aircraft assets and perhaps exposing troops to enemy air activity because more men were needed for the infantry battalions? An answer to this question would provide an insight into the command priorities of the time and other issues, such as the scarcity of suitable infantry replacements and ‘friendly fire’ encounters.

Examination of the war diaries has produced many references to the use of captured enemy weapons and equipment. From information contained within the war diaries of the 43rd and 53rd, this appears to have ranged from personal small arms up to 2cm FLAK guns and vehicles, but the practice is likely to have been much wider. Although it is frequently mentioned in regimental orders, which have survived in some war diaries, that looting was strictly forbidden, and enemy weapons remained the property of the crown; local orders sometimes permitted men to retain small arms subject to the permission of their platoon

commander. It is likely that certain weapons, such as pistols, were regarded as desirable trophies, but other weapons, such as the MP40, seem to have been used by NCOs in place of their normal-issue (but inferior) STEN guns. This is a logical and pragmatic thing; fighting men have sought war trophies for centuries, but there are also questions which may be more revealing about the British war effort. Why would a battalion go to the trouble of salvaging and using a 2cm FLAK gun? Does this point to shortcomings or deficiencies in their own equipment, or was the ammunition for such a weapon more readily available on the battlefield than their own, perhaps revealing a logistics problem? Or was this simply for the satisfaction of turning a weapon against its former master? The answer probably lies somewhere between all of these factors, but if it is possible to determine the reasons behind this taking-up of enemy equipment, it may reveal something about the opinion of troops on their own equipment, or the supply of their own ammunition.

Aggressive attitude of British troops

The historiography of the campaign usually portrays the British Army as being composed of a vast majority of reluctant conscript citizen soldiers, anxious to 'do their bit' to win the war and get home as soon as possible. Such a view does not explore the aggressive fighting spirit of the ordinary infantryman, or his attitude to the enemy. The troops in the two divisions in question came into contact with a wide spectrum of enemy soldiers, ranging from so-called elite troops, through to regular *Heer* units; *Luftwaffe* troops; *Volksgranadier* regiments and other *Ersatz* formations, down to Slav '*Hiwi*' volunteers. Generally speaking, the war diaries and personal accounts seem to give a grudging respect to the *SS*, *Fallschirmjager*, and troops from the *Hitler Jugend* units, who fought the hardest, but there are also references to regular *Heer* and other non-elite units which 'fought to the end'.

Conversely, there are also many instances in the war diaries of units receiving (usually small – in ones or twos) numbers of deserting enemy soldiers. It appears that once prisoner, the enemy was generally well cared for, and this is confirmed by Niall Ferguson, who estimates that only 0.03 percent of German prisoners died in British hands.¹¹ There is evidence, however, that some enemy surrenders were not accepted, for a number of possible reasons. There are witness accounts, like Second Lieutenant Stroud's (101 US Airborne Division) recollection of an incident near Nijmegen: 'We, at one time, had a few Germans trying to surrender, waving a flag. We were holding fire, when a British Bren gun carrier came up and deliberately fired into them killing most – the rest went back.'¹² There were possibly many more such incidents that have gone unrecorded. The war diaries are an unlikely place to discover such occurrences, but even so, as we have seen, 4th Royal Welch Fusiliers reported 'accidental' killing of prisoners, and 1/5 WELCH ordered troops to shoot enemy troops carrying white flags, after reports of surrendering Germans who then continued fighting came to light.¹³ Instances such as these reveal an aggressive and vengeful side of the British soldier which is not often mentioned in the existing historiography of the campaign.

These areas of research are related to the subject of this study but are precluded by space from being subjected to more thorough examination here. They do, however, serve as an illustration that many gaps remain in the existing historiography of the campaign. This thesis has gone some way to redressing this situation as it has revealed a side to the British way of war in North West Europe that has, until relatively recently, not been subjected to

¹¹ Ferguson, N., 'Prisoner Taking and Prisoner Killing in the Age of Total War: Towards a Political Economy of Military Defeat', *War in History*, 11; 148 (2004), p. 186.

¹² Saunders, *The Island*, p. 170.

¹³ 'The Hubner Regiment have been proffering surrender with white flags, but at the same time concealing automatic weapons. Troops are to be ordered to shoot on sight enemy carrying white flags.' TNA: WO 171/5287, 27 February 1945.

critical analysis. Most studies which deal with this campaign are concerned with the history of the conduct of the war at corps or higher level, concentrate on specific battles in isolation, or are general histories. This study has provided a window on the conduct of the war at brigade level and below, and in doing so has revealed some fundamental differences to the general concept that the British were engaged in a cautious war. The war in the battalions, as we have seen, was often conducted, by necessity, in a far from cautious way which frequently resulted in heavy casualties.

Appendix 'A'

Sketch Maps

Figure 1.

The Lodgment Area. This map shows the general area around the Odon battles. Hill 112 is located to the south west of Caen. Mont Pinçon is almost directly beneath Villers-Bocage (Essame, *Wessex Division at War*).

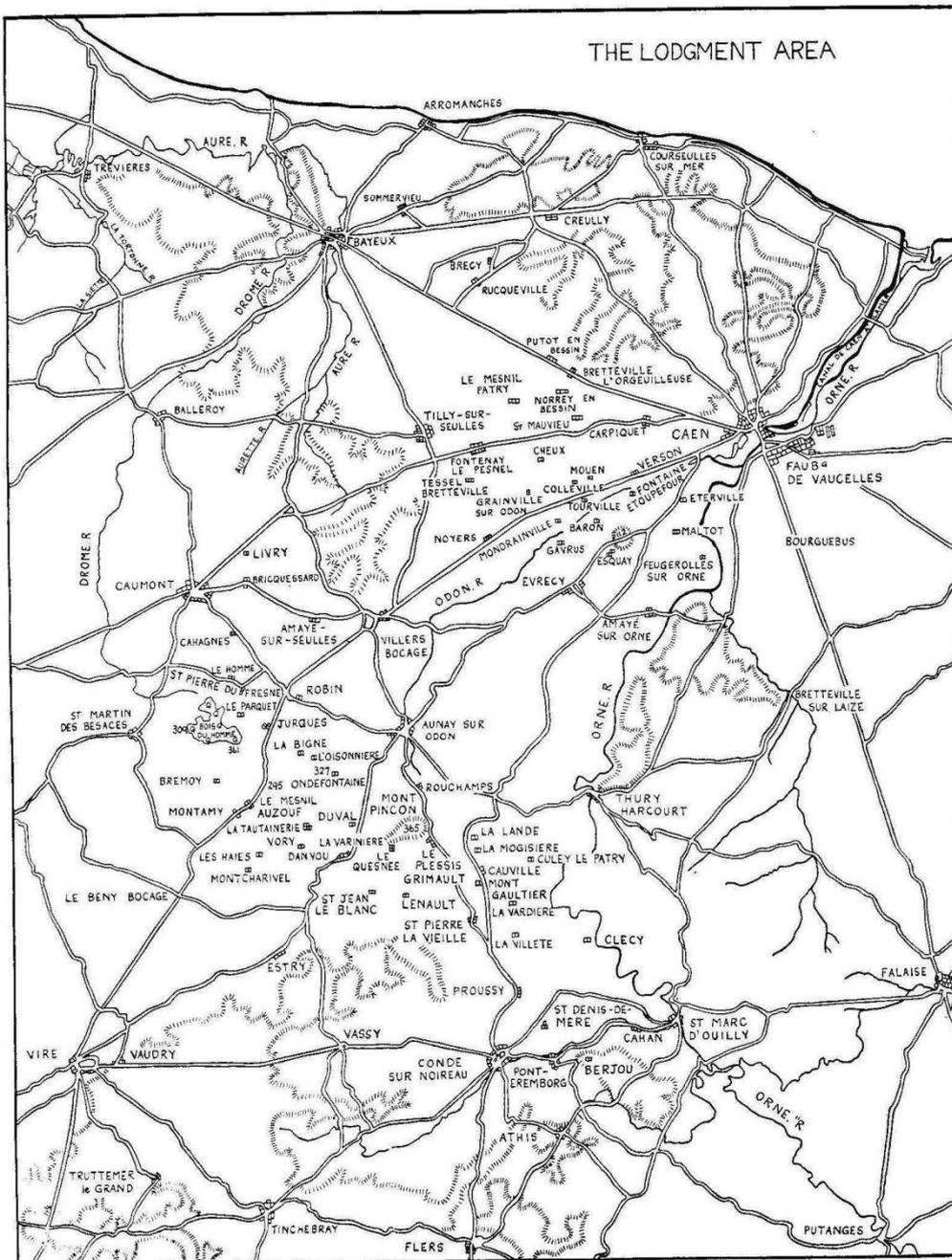


Figure 3.

Operation Greenline. Sketch map showing the 53rd's disposition and axes of attack (Barclay, 53rd Welsh, p. 64.).

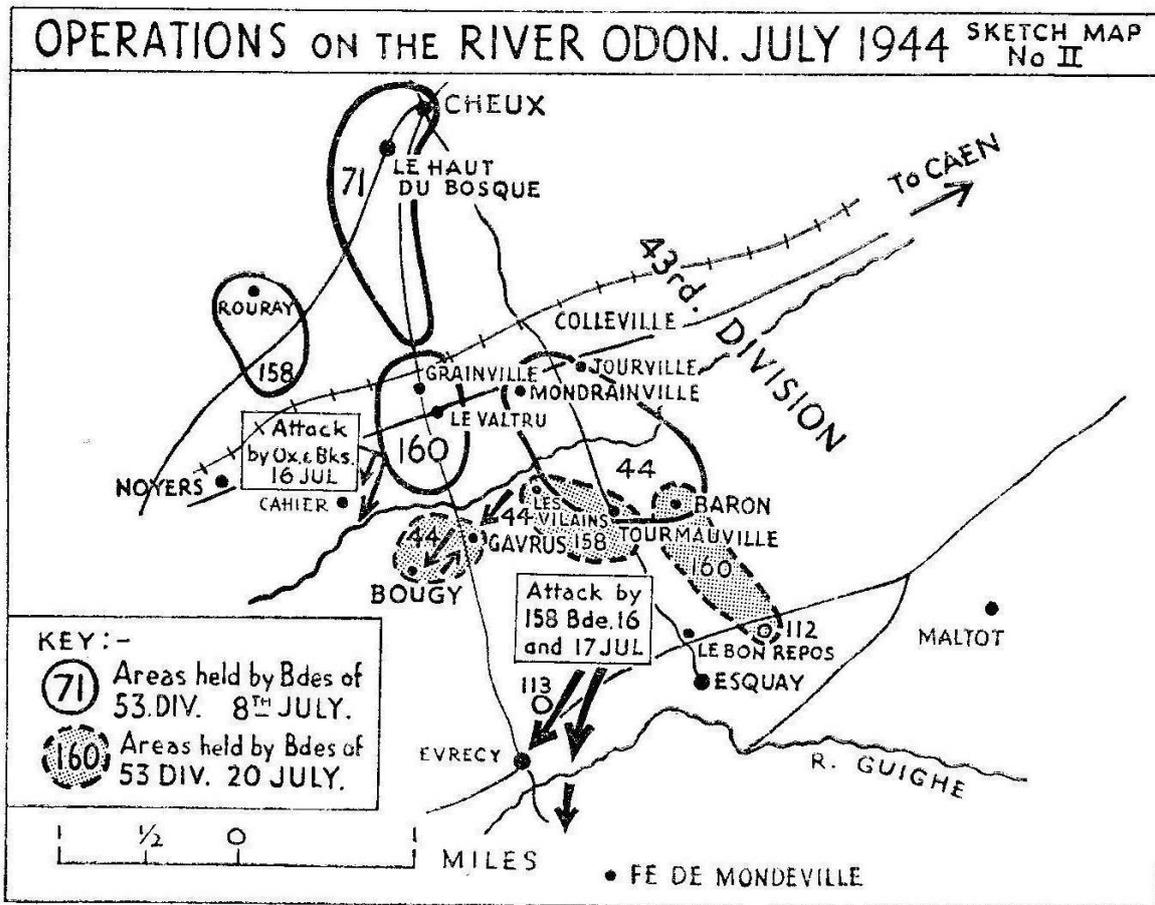


Figure 4.

Raid Triangle diagram (TNA: WO, 171/1389, August 1944).

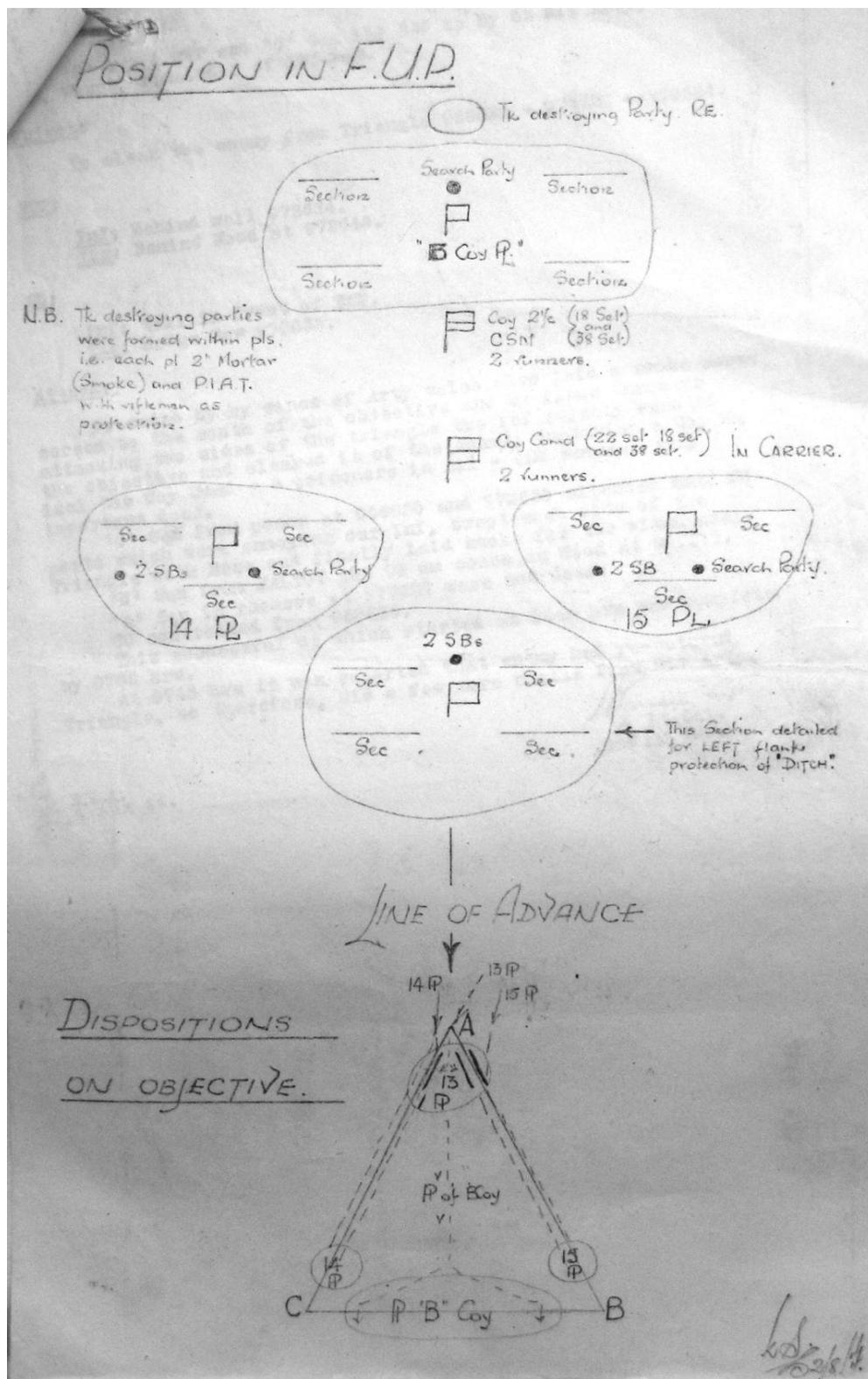


Figure 5.

'The Island', showing locations of various Market Garden battles (Essame, *Wessex Division at War*).

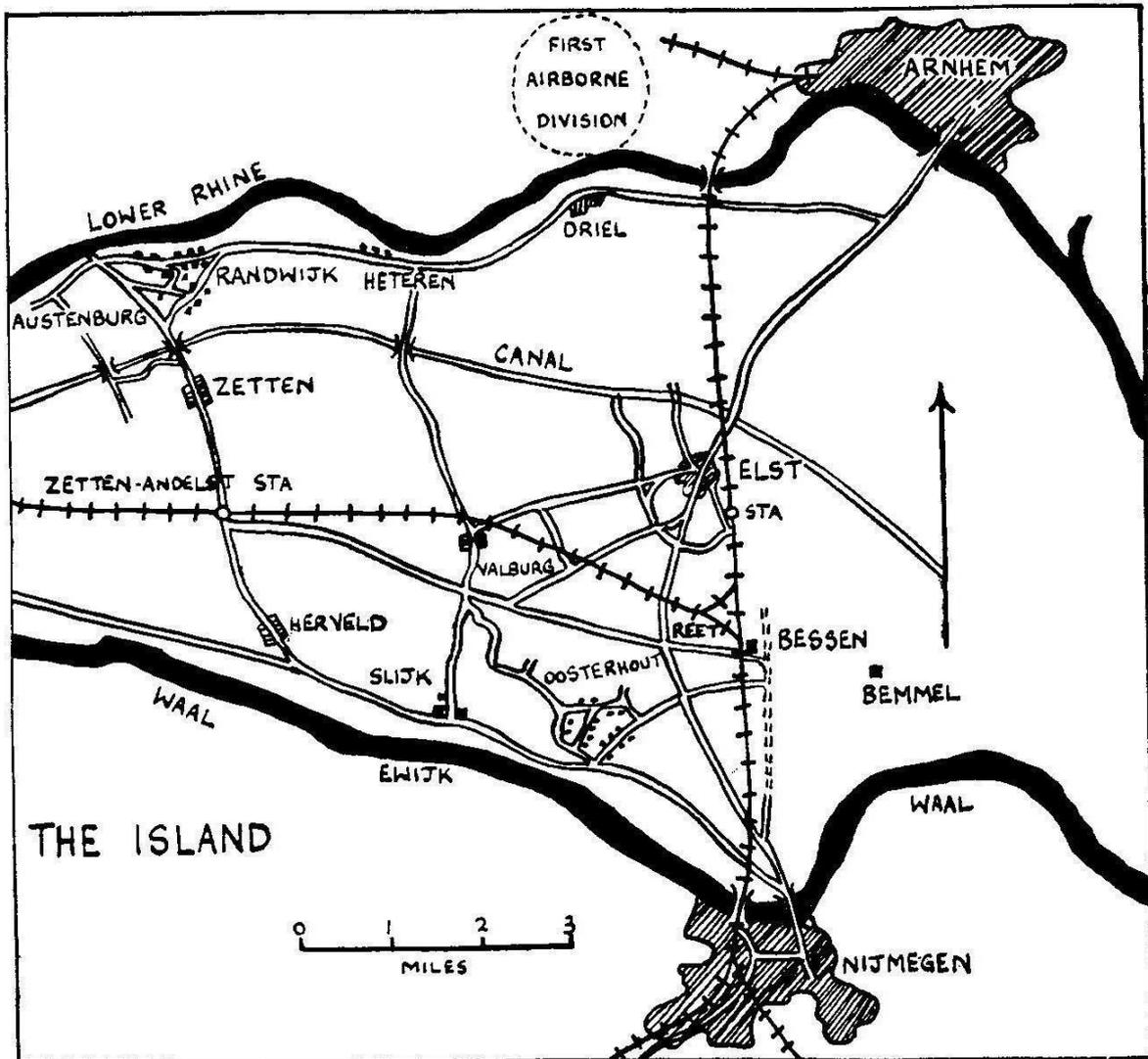


Figure 6.

Diagram showing axes of advance of the 53rd's battalions during Operation Market Garden (Barclay, 53rd Welsh, p. 76.).

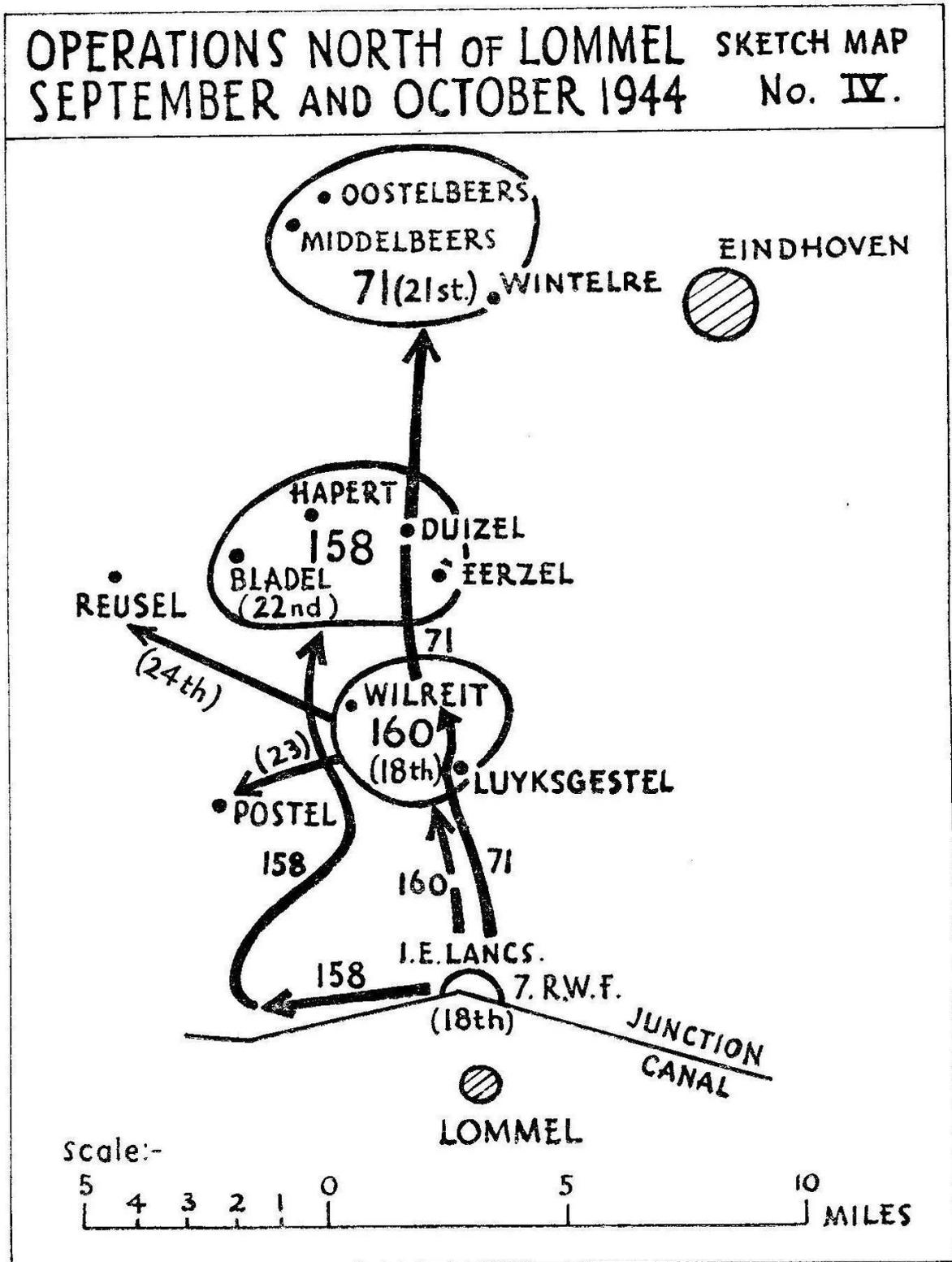


Figure 7.

Sketch map of S'Hertogenbosch showing axes of attack (Barclay, 53rd Welsh, p. 82.).

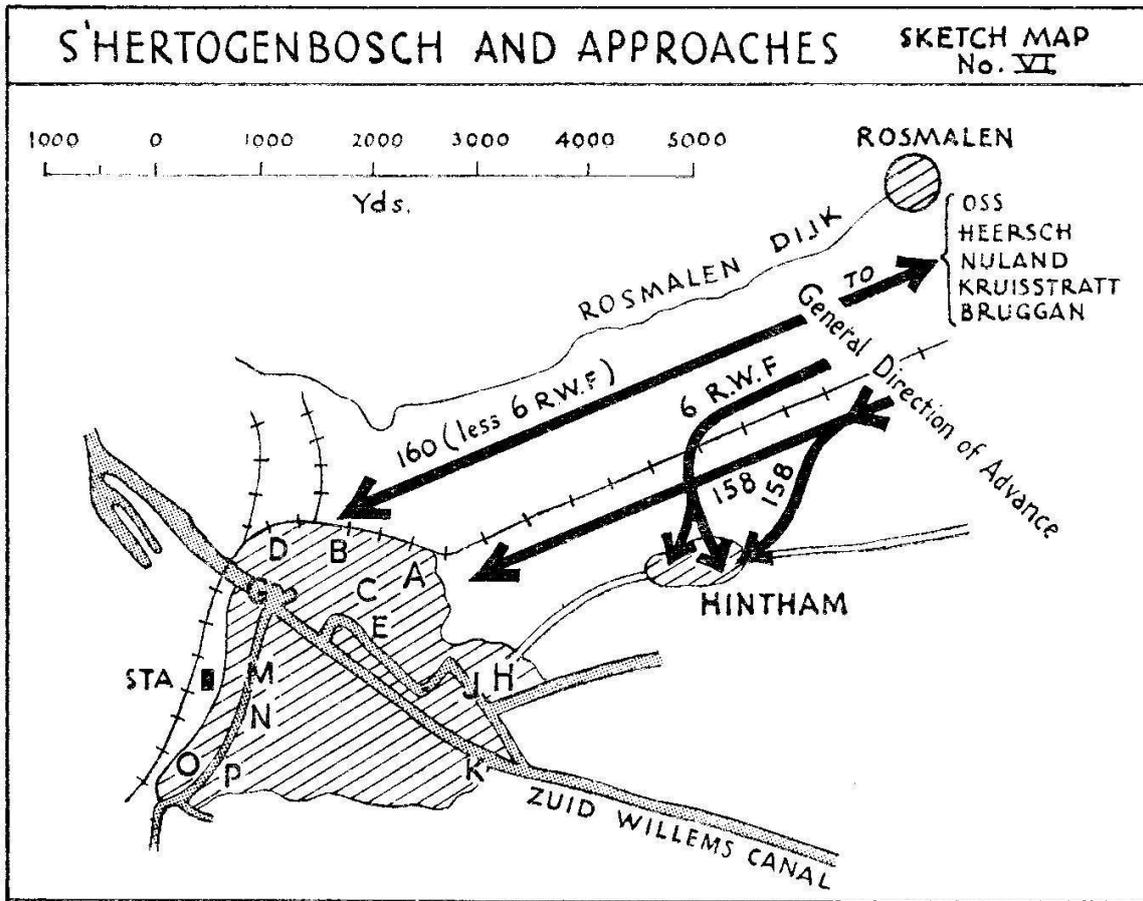


Figure 8.

Two sketch maps showing details of the 53rd's battles in the Ardennes (Barclay, *53rd Welsh*, p. 105.).

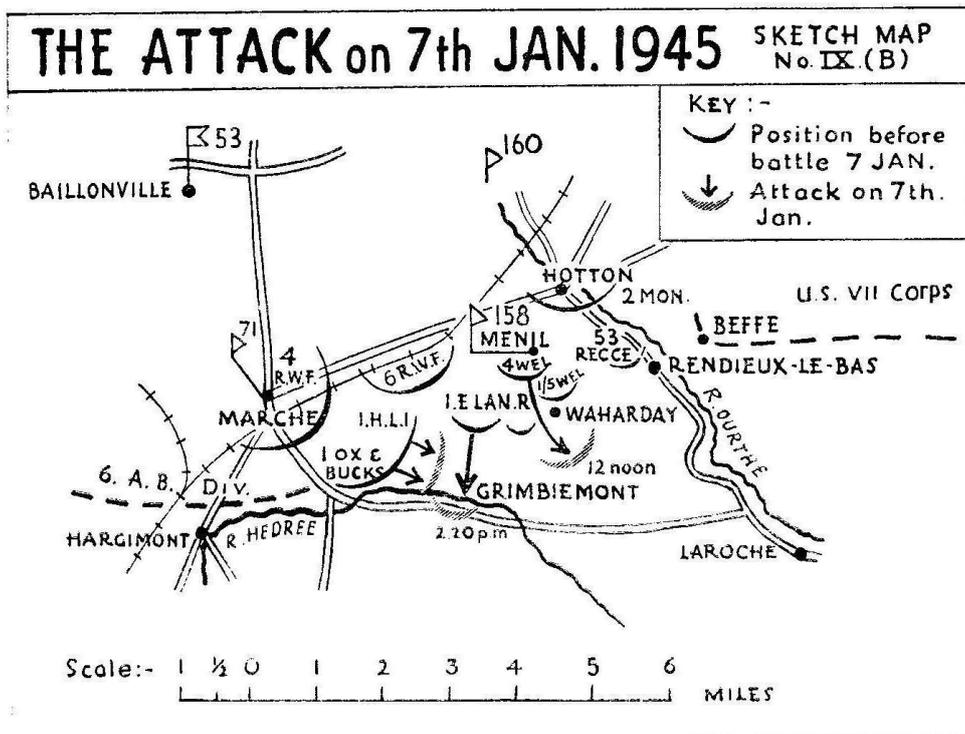
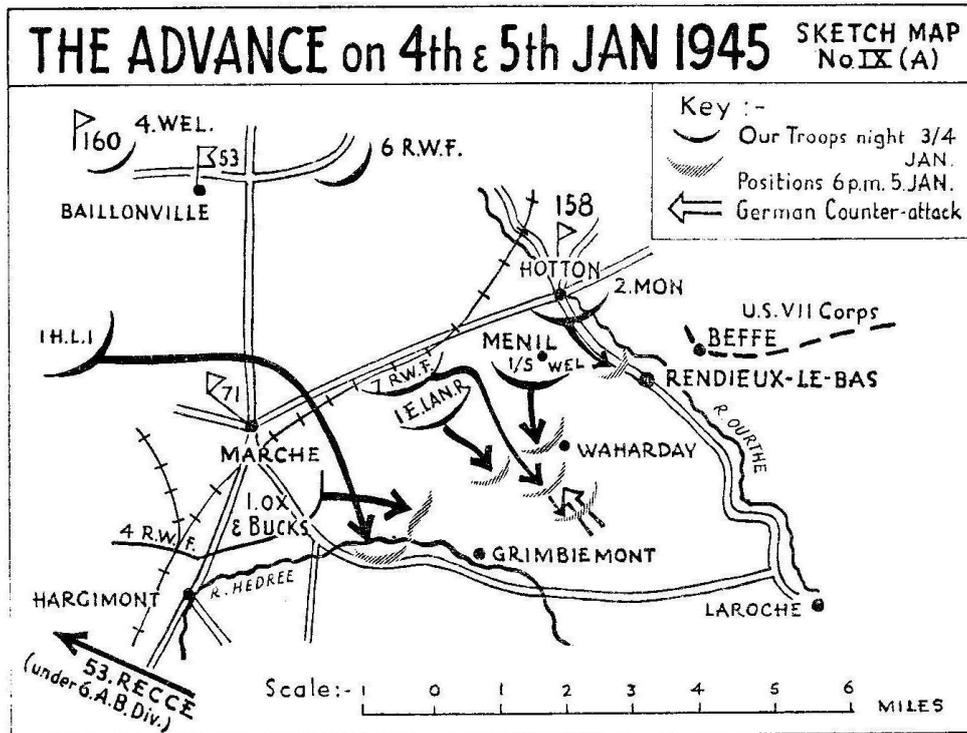


Figure 9.

A sketch map showing disposition of the 43rds Infantry Brigades and axes of advance in the battles around Geilenkirchen (Essame, *Wessex Division at War*).

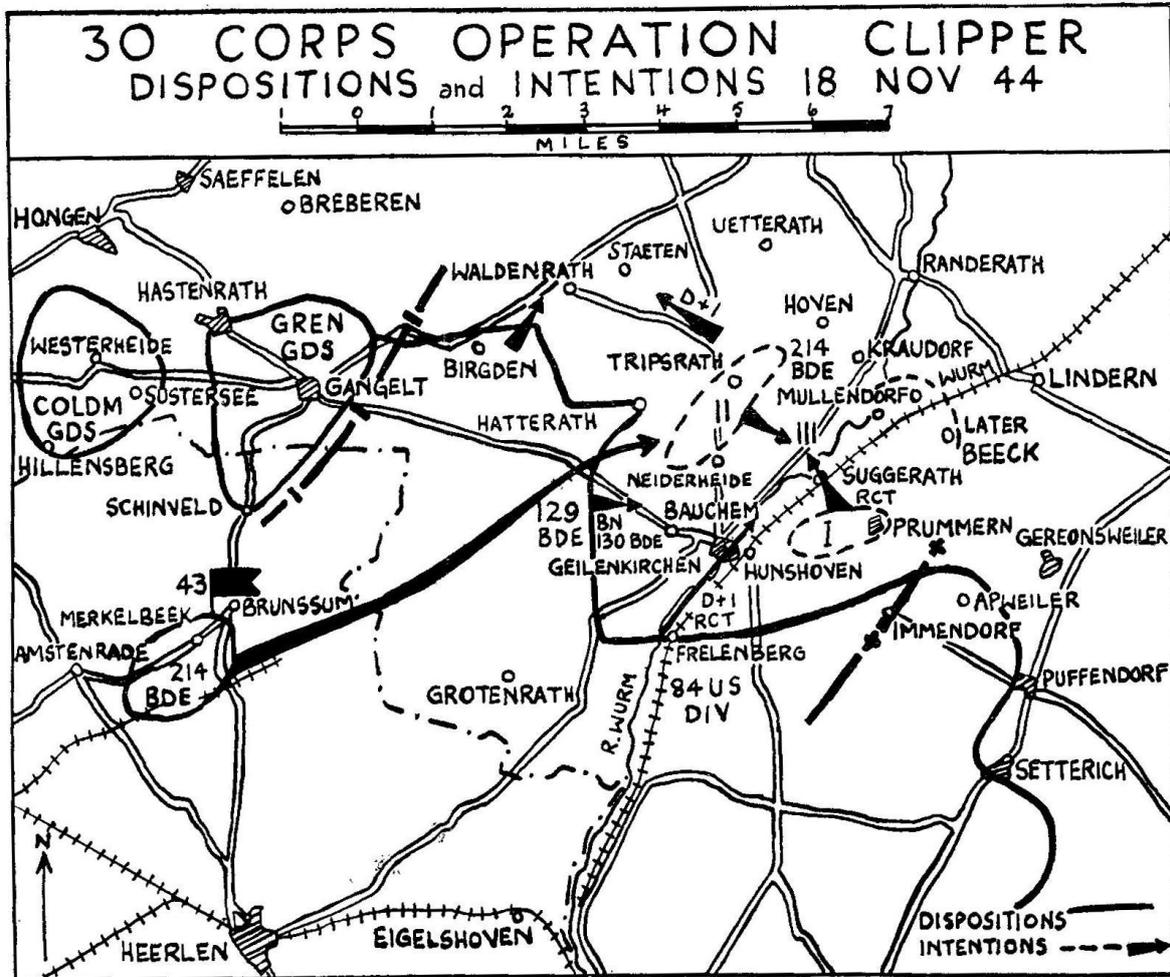


Figure 10.

General axes of advance of Operation Veritable (Essame, *Wessex Division at War*).

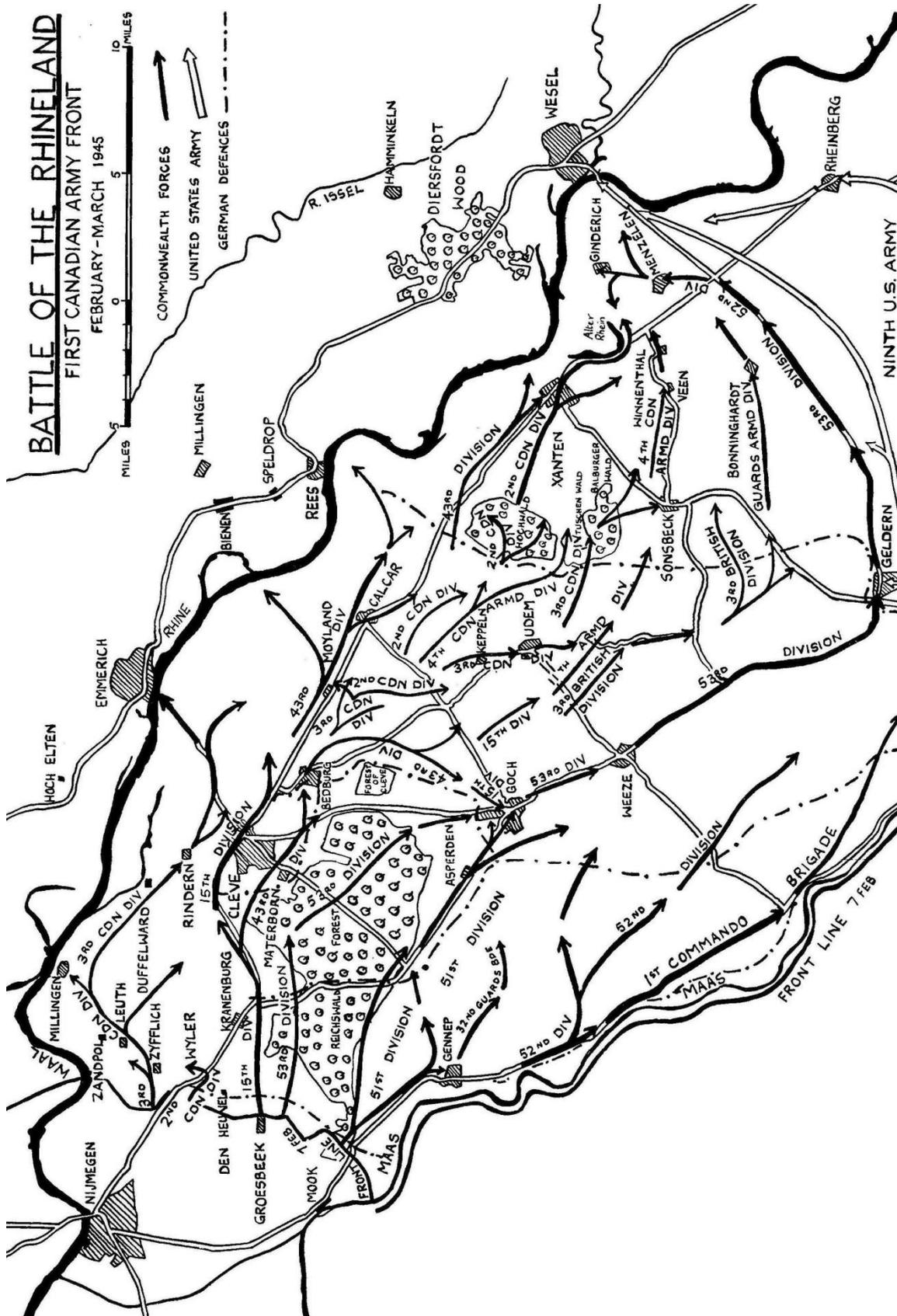


Figure 11.

Sketch map showing objectives and axes of advance for Infantry Battalions of the 53rd in the Reichswald Forest (Barclay, *53rd Welsh*, p. 116.).

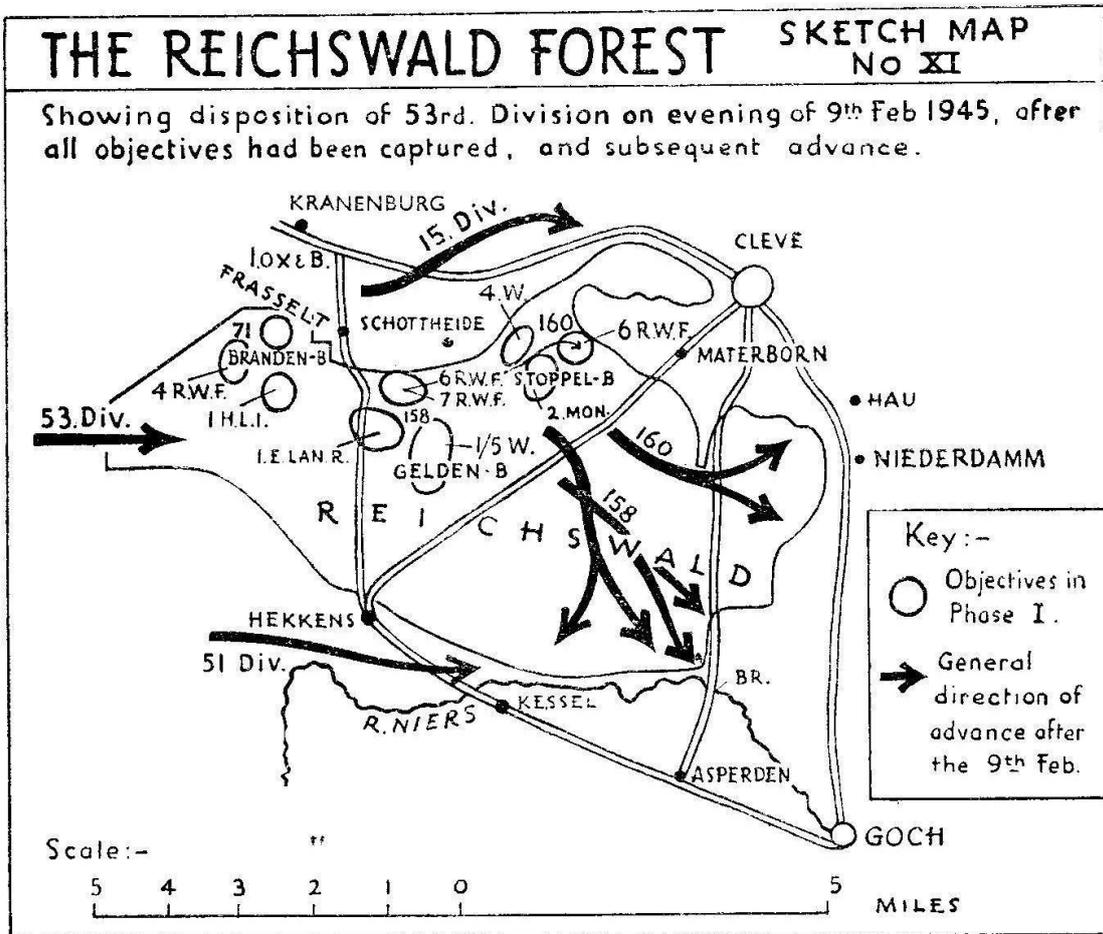


Figure 12.

A sketch map showing the axes of advance on Asperberg (Barclay, *53rd Welsh*, p. 128.).

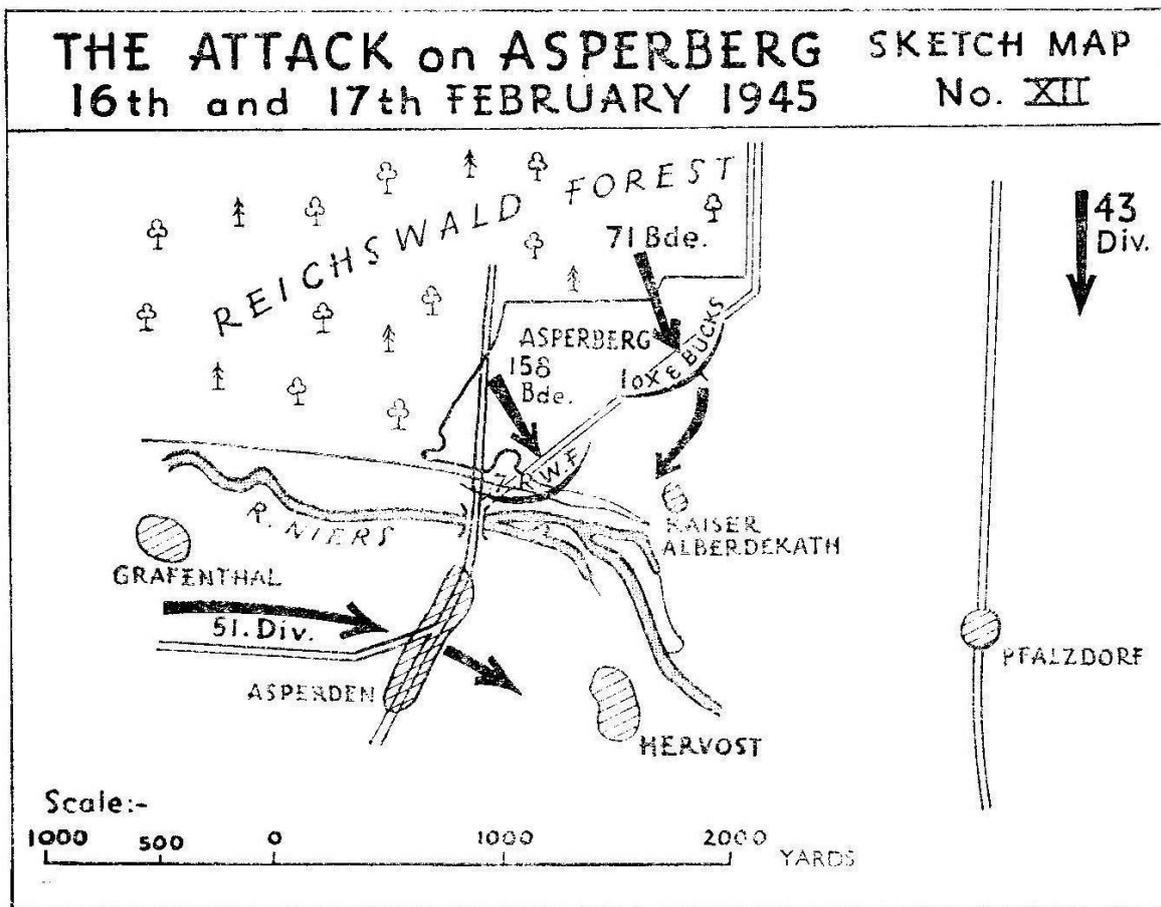


Figure 13.

A sketch map showing the attack on Weeze (Barclay, *53rd Welsh*, p. 136.).

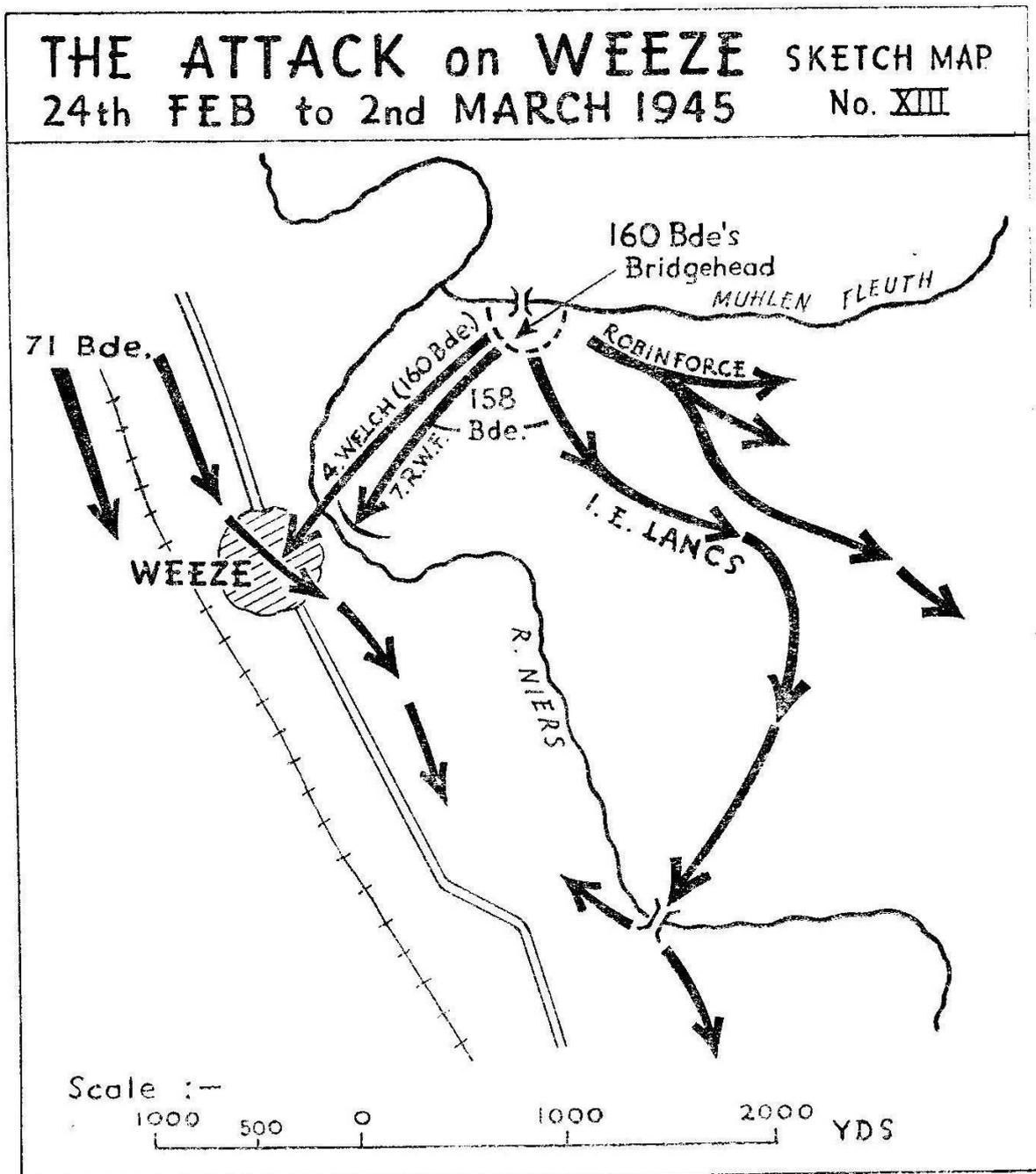
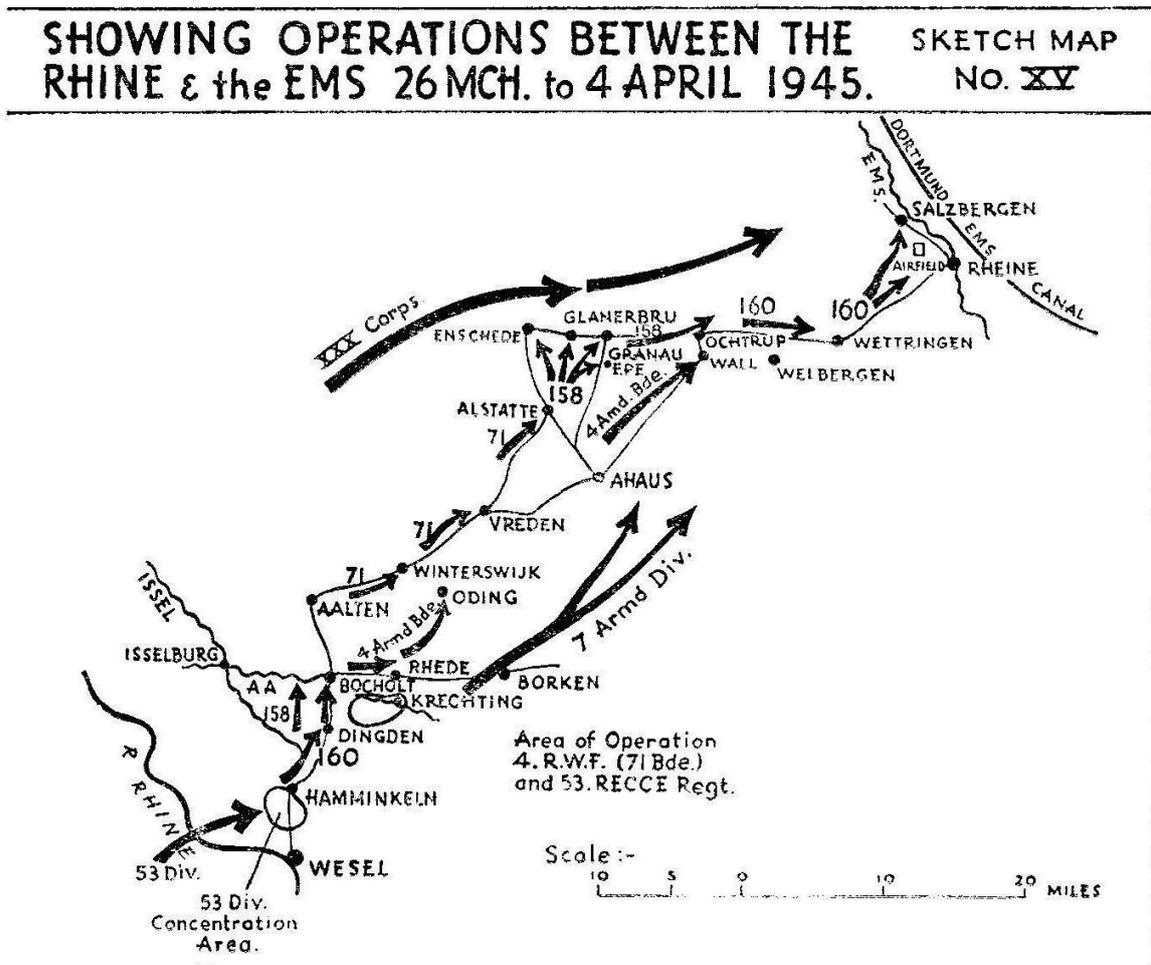


Figure 14.

Sketch map showing advance of the 53rd into Germany.



Bibliography

Primary Sources

The National Archives

War Diaries 43rd (Wessex) Infantry Division

WO 171/479	War Diary 43 rd Infantry Division 'G', June-July 1944
WO 171/480	War Diary 43 rd Infantry Division 'G', Aug-Sep 1944
WO 171/481	War Diary 43 rd Infantry Division 'G', Oct-Nov 1944
WO 171/482	War Diary 43 rd Infantry Division 'G', Dec 1944
WO 171/4206	War Diary 43 rd Infantry Division 'G', Jan 1945
WO 171/4207	War Diary 43 rd Infantry Division 'G', Feb 1945
WO 171/4208	War Diary 43 rd Infantry Division 'G', Mar 1945

129th Infantry Brigade

WO171/658	War Diary 129 th Infantry Brigade Headquarters 1944
WO171/4389	War Diary 129 th Infantry Brigade Headquarters 1945
WO171/1372	War Diary 4 th Battalion Somerset Light Infantry 1944
WO171/5271	War Diary 4 th Battalion Somerset Light Infantry 1945
WO171/1394	War Diary 4 th Battalion Wiltshire Regiment 1944
WO171/5290	War Diary 4 th Battalion Wiltshire Regiment 1945
WO171/1395	War Diary 5 th Battalion Wiltshire Regiment 1944
WO171/5291	War Diary 5 th Battalion Wiltshire Regiment 1945

130th Infantry Brigade

WO 171/660	War Diary 130 th Infantry Brigade Headquarters 1944
WO 171/4391	War Diary 130 th Infantry Brigade Headquarters 1945
WO 171/1306	War Diary 7 th Battalion Hampshire Regiment 1944

WO 171/5200	War Diary 7 th Battalion Hampshire Regiment 1945
WO171/1286	War Diary 4 th Battalion Dorsetshire Regiment 1944
WO171/5174	War Diary 4 th Battalion Dorsetshire Regiment 1945
WO171/1287	War Diary 5 th Battalion Dorsetshire Regiment 1944
WO171/5175	War Diary 5 th Battalion Dorsetshire Regiment 1945
214 th Infantry Brigade	
WO 171/708	War Diary 214 th Infantry Brigade Headquarters Jun-Sep 1944
WO 171/709	War Diary 214 th Infantry Brigade Headquarters Oct-Dec 1944
WO 171/4437	War Diary 214 th Infantry Brigade Headquarters Jan-May 1945
WO 171/1373	War Diary 7 th Battalion Somersetshire Light Infantry 1944
WO 171/5272	War Diary 7 th Battalion Somersetshire Light Infantry 1945
WO 171/1396	War Diary 1 ST Battalion Worcestershire Regiment 1944
WO 171/5292	War Diary 1 ST Battalion Worcestershire Regiment 1945
WO 171/1280	War Diary 5th Battalion Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry Jun-Jul 1944
WO 171/1281	War Diary 5th Battalion Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry Aug-Sep 1944
WO 171/1282	War Diary 5th Battalion Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry Oct 1944
WO 171/1283	War Diary 5th Battalion Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry Nov-Dec 1944
WO 171/5177	War Diary 5th Battalion Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry Jan 1944
Divisional Troops	
WO171/1347	War Diary 8 th Battalion Middlesex Regiment 1944
WO171/5422	War Diary 8 th Battalion Middlesex Regiment 1945
WO171/983	War Diary 94 th Field Regiment Royal Artillery 1944
WO171/4834	War Diary 94 th Field Regiment Royal Artillery 1945
WO171/985	War Diary 112 th Field Regiment Royal Artillery 1944
WO171/4836	War Diary 112 th Field Regiment Royal Artillery 1945
WO171/999	War Diary 179 th Field Regiment Royal Artillery 1944
WO171/4853	War Diary 179 th Field Regiment Royal Artillery 1944

WO171/917 War Diary 59th Anti-Tank Regiment Royal Artillery 1944
WO171/4770 War Diary 59th Anti-Tank Regiment Royal Artillery 1945
WO171/1129 War Diary 110th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment Royal Artillery 1944
WO171/4955 War Diary 110th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment Royal Artillery 1945

War Diaries 53rd (Welsh) Infantry Division

(Note: as the majority of these battalions were rearranged in August 1944 they have been arranged, for simplicity's sake, in brigade and then alphabetical order)

WO 171/553 War Diary 53rd Infantry Division 'G' Jul-Aug 1944
WO 171/554 War Diary 53rd Infantry Division 'G' Sep-Oct 1944
WO 171/4276 War Diary 53rd Infantry Division 'G' Jan-Feb 1945
WO 171/556 War Diary 53rd Infantry Division 'Q' 1944

Brigade Headquarters

71st Infantry Brigade

WO171/655 War Diary 71st Infantry Brigade Headquarters Jan-Sep 1944
WO 171/656 War Diary 71st Infantry Brigade Headquarters Oct-Dec 1944
WO 171/4384 War Diary 71st Infantry Brigade Headquarters Jan-May 1945

158th Infantry Brigade

WO171/689 War Diary 158th Infantry Brigade Headquarters 1944
WO 171/4423 War Diary 158th Infantry Brigade Headquarters 1945

160th Infantry Brigade

WO171/693 War Diary 160th Infantry Brigade Headquarters Jan-Sep 1944
WO 171/694 War Diary 160th Infantry Brigade Headquarters Oct 1944
WO 171/695 War Diary 160th Infantry Brigade Headquarters Dec 1944
WO 171/4428 War Diary 160th Infantry Brigade Headquarters Jan-Mar 1945

Battalions

WO 171/1330	War Diary 1 st Battalion East Lancashire Regiment 1944
WO 171/5224	War Diary 1 st Battalion East Lancashire Regiment 1945
WO171/1296	War Diary 1 st Battalion Highland Light Infantry 1944
WO171/5191	War Diary 1 st Battalion Highland Light Infantry 1945
WO171/1348	War Diary 2 nd Battalion Monmouthshire Regt 1944
WO171/5245	War Diary 2 nd Battalion Monmouthshire Regt 1945
WO171/1356	War Diary 1 st Battalion Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry 1944
WO171/5253	War Diary 1 st Battalion Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry 1945
WO171/1389	War Diary 4th Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers 1944
WO171/5281	War Diary 4 th Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers 1945
WO171/1390	War Diary 6 th Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers 1944
WO171/5283	War Diary 6 th Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers 1945
WO171/1391	War Diary 7 th Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers Jan-Jun 1944
WO171/1392	War Diary 7 th Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers Jul-Sep 1944
WO171/1393	War Diary 7 th Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers Oct-Dec 1944
WO171/5284	War Diary 7 th Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers Jan-Apr 1945
WO171/1386	War Diary 1/5 th Battalion Welch Regiment 1944
WO171/5287	War Diary 1/5 th Battalion Welch Regiment 1945
WO171/1385	War Diary 4 th Battalion Welch Regt 1944
WO171/5286	War Diary 4 th Battalion Welch Regt 1945

Divisional Troops

WO171/1336	War Diary 1 st Battalion Manchester Regiment Jan-Aug 1944
------------	--

WO171/1337	War Diary 1 st Battalion Manchester Regiment Sep 1944
WO171/1338	War Diary 1 st Battalion Manchester Regiment Nov 1944
WO171/5234	War Diary 1 st Battalion Manchester Regiment January 1945
WO171/565	War Diary 53 rd Regiment Reconnaissance Corps 1944
WO171/4281	War Diary 53 rd Regiment Reconnaissance Corps 1945
WO171/979	War Diary 81 st Field Regiment Royal Artillery 1944
WO171/4826	War Diary 81 st Field Regiment Royal Artillery 1945
WO171/980	War Diary 83rd Field Regiment Royal Artillery 1944
WO171/4827	War Diary 83rd Field Regiment Royal Artillery 1945
WO171/993	War Diary 133rd Field Regiment Royal Artillery 1944
WO171/4844	War Diary 133rd Field Regiment Royal Artillery 1945
WO171/923	War Diary 71st Anti-Tank Regiment Royal Artillery 1944
WO171/4775	War Diary 71st Anti-Tank Regiment Royal Artillery 1945
War Diaries - Other Units	
WO 171/841	War Diary 22 Dragoons 1944
WO 171/4687	War Diary 22 Dragoons 1945
WO 171/1807	War Diary, 79 Assault Squadron Royal Engineers 1944
WO 171/5323	War Diary 79 Assault Squadron Royal Engineers 1945
WO 171/877	War Diary 141 Royal Armoured Corps 1944
WO 171/4719	War Diary 141 Royal Armoured Corps 1945
WO 171/869	War Diary 9 Royal Tank Regiment Jan-Dec 1944
WO 171/838	War Diary 4/7 Royal Dragoon Guards Jan-Dec 1944
WO 171 4685	War Diary 4/7 Royal Dragoon Guards 1945
WO 171/879	War Diary 147 Regiment Royal Armoured Corps Jan-Dec 1944
WO 171/845	War Diary 13/18 Royal Hussars (Queen Mary's Own) Jan-Dec 1944

WO 171/839 War Diary 5 Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards Jan-Dec 1944

Miscellaneous War Office Papers

WO 205/1164 Operational Research in North West Europe

WO 106/1775 Bartholomew Committee Report on lessons to be learnt from operations in Flanders: evidence, report and action arising. October 1940

WO 163/456 Committee on the Supply of Officers March 1937

WO 205/998 Combat Lessons After Action Reports

WO 205/1176 Engineers: Lessons of the Campaign in N.W. Europe

WO 205/1122 Crossing of the River Seine at Vernon by 43 Division

WO 205/1133 Operation Veritable, 21ST Army Group

Cabinet Papers

CAB 23/15 Cabinet Conclusions. Naval, Military and Air Estimates 15 August 1919.

CAB 23/15 War Cabinet 585B 27 June 1919.

CAB 23/55 Cabinet Conclusions. The Basis of Army Estimates 28 July 1927.

CAB 23/58 Cabinet Conclusions. The Basis of Service Estimates 18 July 1928.

CAB 24/159 Future Size of our Regular Army 17 April 1923.

CAB 24/132 Appendices to Report of Cabinet Committee Appointed to Examine Part 1 (Defence Departments) of the Report of the Geddes Committee on National Expenditure February 1922.

CAB 24/273 Defence Expenditure in Future Years December 1937.

CAB106/220 Final Report on the Bartholomew Committee on Lessons to be learnt from the operations in Flanders, December 1940.

Other Primary Sources

HW 1/3285 West Europe: Germans expect Allied tank attacks at Hertogenbosch and north of Antwerp, Oct 24; 88th Army Corps withdrawal, Oct 24; 88th Army Corps situation, noon Oct 24; Army Group B report for Oct 22.

79th Armoured Division Final Report (July 1945)

Infantry Section Leading (London, HMSO, 1938).

Infantry Training Part VIII – Fieldcraft, Battle Drill, Section and Platoon Tactics (London: War Office, 1944).

The Official names of the Battles, Actions & Engagements fought by the Land Forces of the Commonwealth during the Second World War, 1939-1945 (London: HMSO, 1956).

Published Primary Sources

Carver, M., Lord, *Out of Step: Memoirs of a Field Marshal* (London: Hutchinson, 1989).

Hills, S., *By Tank Into Normandy* (London: Cassell, 2003).

Horrocks, B.G., *Corps Commander* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1977).

Jary, S., *18 Platoon* (Winchester: The Rifles Regimental HQ, 2009).

Montgomery, B.L., *The Memoirs of Field Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein* (London: Collins, 1958).

Rogers, D., Williams, S. (eds), *On The Bloody Road to Berlin: Frontline Accounts from North-West Europe and the Eastern Front, 1944-45* (Solihull: Helion, 2005).

Swaab, J., *Field of Fire: Diary of a Gunner Officer* (Stroud: Sutton, 2007).

Taylor, G., *Infantry Colonel* (privately published, 1990).

Tedder, A.W., *Air Power in War: The Lee Knowles Lectures* (London: Hodder, 1947).

White, P., *With The Jocks: A Soldier's Struggle for Europe 1944-45* (Stroud: History Press, 2002).

Web pages containing primary sources

Clarke, W.S., Operation "VERITABLE", XXX Corps. Report on 34 Armoured Brigade Operations, The Reichswald Forest Phase, 8 to 17 February 1945,
http://www.royaltankregiment.com/9_RTR/tech/reichswald/Reichswald%20Report.htm
[accessed 14 June 2012]

Administrative History of 21 Army Group - 6 June 1944 - 8 May 1945,
<http://www.movcon.org.uk/History/Documents/DID/D-MCHS%200514.htm> [accessed 29 March 2012]

Secondary Sources

Monographs and Books

Addison, P., and Calder, A., *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West 1939-1945* (London: Pimlico, 1997).

Ambrose, S., *D-Day: June 6, 1944 The Battle for the Normandy Beaches* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

Arthur, M., *Forgotten Voices of the Great War* (London, Ebury, 2003).

Barclay, C., *The History of the 53rd (Welsh) Division in the Second World War* (London: Clowes, 1956).

Barnett, C., *The Collapse of British Power* (London: Methuen, 1972).

Beevor, A., *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy* (London: Penguin, 2009).

Boff, J., *Winning and Losing on the Western Front: The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Bond, B., *British Military Policy between the Two World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

Buckley, J., *Monty's Men: The British Army and the Liberation of Europe* (London: Yale University Press, 2013).

Bull, S., *World War II Infantry Tactics: Company and Battalion* (Oxford, Osprey, 2005).

Chandler, D.G., (ed.) *The Oxford History of The British Army* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Chappell, M., *The British Army in World War I (2): The Western Front 1916-18* (Oxford: Osprey, 2005).

Crang, J. A., *The British army and the People's War 1939-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

DeLaforce, P., *Monty's Marauders* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000).

- *The Fighting Wessex Wyverns: From Normandy to Bremerhaven with the 43rd (Wessex) Division* (Stroud: Sutton, 2002).
- *Churchill's Secret Weapons: The Story of Hobart's Funnies* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2006).
- *Red Crown & Dragon: 53rd Welsh Division in North-West Europe 1944-1945* (Stroud: Amberley, 2009).

D'Este, C., *Decision in Normandy* (London: Penguin, 1994).

- Dinaro, R.L., *Germany's Panzer Arm in WWII* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2006).
- Ellis, J., *Brute Force: Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War* (London: Deutsch, 1990).
- English, J.A., *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2009).
- Essame, H., *The 43rd Wessex Division at War 1944-1945* (London: Clowes and Son, 1952).
- Evans, M.M., *1918 The Year of Victories* (Kettering: Index, 2004).
- Farrell, B.P., *The Basis and Making of British Grand Strategy 1940-1943* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998).
- Fennell, J., *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign: The Eighth Army and the Path to El Alamein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- Ferguson, N., *The Pity of War* (London: Penguin, 1999).
- Fletcher, D., *Vanguard of Victory: The 79th Armoured Division* (London: HMSO, 1984).
- Ford, K., *Assault Crossing: The River Seine 1944* (Newton Abbott: David & Charles, 1988).
- Ford, K., *Assault on Germany: The Battle for Geilenkirchen* (Newton Abbott: David & Charles, 1989).
- Fraser, D., *And We Shall Shock Them: The British Army in the Second World War* (London: Cassell, 1999).
- French, D., *The British Way in Warfare 1699-2000* (London: Unwin, 1990).
- *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War Against Germany 1919-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- Graham, D., *Against Odds: Reflections on the experiences of the British Army 1914-45* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999).
- Griffith, P., (ed.) *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (London: Cass, 1998).
- Hamilton, N., *Monty: The Battles of Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery* (London: Hodder, 1994).
- Harris, J.P., *Amiens to the Armistice: The B E F in the Hundred Days' Campaign, 8 August – 11 November 1918* (London: Brassey's, 1998).
- *Men, Ideas and Tanks: British military thought and armoured forces* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).
- Hart, B.H., *History of the First World War* (Trowbridge: Cassell, 1979).
- *History of the Second World War* (Trowbridge: Cassell, 1973).

- Hart, R.A., *Clash of Arms: How the Allies Won in Normandy* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001).
- Hart, S.A., *Colossal Cracks: Montgomery's 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe, 1944-45* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2007).
- Hastings, M., *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy 1944* (London, Pan, 1984).
- Henry, C., *The 25-Pounder Field Gun 1939-72* (Oxford: Osprey, 2002).
- Holborn, A., *The 56th Infantry Brigade and D-Day: An Independent Infantry Brigade and the Campaign in North West Europe 1944-1945* (London: Continuum, 2010).
- Holmes, R., *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front 1914-1918* (London: Harper, 2004).
- Hunt, E., *Mont Pinçon: August 1944* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2003).
- Imlay, T., *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics, and Economics in Britain and France 1938-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- Kaufmann J.E., and Kaufmann H.W., *Fortress France: The Maginot Line and French Defenses in WWII* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2007).
- Keegan, J., *Six Armies in Normandy* (London: Pimlico, 1992).
- *The Face of Battle* (London: Pimlico, 2004).
 - *The Second World War* (London: Random House, 2011).
 - (ed.) *Churchill's Generals* (London: Abacus, 1991).
- Kersaudy, F., *Norway 1940* (London: Collins, 1990).
- Macksey, K., *Armoured Crusader* (London: Grub Street, 2004).
- Messenger, C., *Trench Fighting 1914-19* (London: Pan/Ballantine, 1973).
- Middlebrook, M., *The First Day on the Somme: 1 July 1916* (London: Penguin, 1971).
- Millett, A.R., Murray, W., (eds.) *Military Effectiveness, Volume II: The Interwar Period* (London: Unwin, 1988).
- Moorehead, A., *Montgomery: The Life Story of one of the Greatest Leaders of Our Time* (London: Four Square, 1958).
- Neilson, K., and Kennedy, G., (eds.), *The British Way in Warfare: Power in the International System, 1856-1956* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).
- Neitzel, S., *Der Luftkrieg über dem Nordatlantik und der Nordsee 1939-1945* (Bonn: Bernard & Graefe, 1995).

North, J., *North-West Europe 1944-5: The Achievement of 21st Army Group* (London: HMSO, 1977).

O'Connell, J.F., *The Effectiveness of Air Power in the 20th Century: Part One (1914-1939)*(Bloomington: iUniverse, 2007).

Omissi, D.E., *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force 1919-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

Place, T.H., *Military Training in the British Army 1040-1944: From Dunkirk to D-Day* (London: Cass, 2000)

Reid, B.R., *Studies in British Military Thought: Debates with Fuller and Liddell Hart* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

Rogers, D., and Williams, S., (eds.) *On The Bloody Road to Berlin: Frontline Accounts from North-West Europe and the Eastern Front 1944-45* (Solihull: Helion, 2005).

Rostron, P., *The Military Life & Times of General Sir Miles Dempsey GBE KCB DSO MC, Monty's Army Commander* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2010).

Saunders, T., *Hill 112: Battles of the Odon – 1944* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2001).

- *Operation Market Garden: The Island* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books, 2002).

Saunders, T., *Operation Plunder: The British and Canadian Rhine Crossing* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2006).

Sheffield, G., *Forgotten Victory The First World War: Myths and Realities* (London: Headline, 2002).

Smart, N., *Neville Chamberlain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

Smith, P., (ed.), *Government and the Armed Forces in Britain 1856-1990* (London: Hambledon, 1996).

Strachan, H., (ed.), *Big Wars and Small Wars: The British Army and the Lessons of War in the 20th Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

White, B.T., *British Tanks and Fighting Vehicles 1914-1945* (London: Allan, 1971).

Journal Articles

Corum, J.S., 'The Luftwaffe's Army Support Doctrine, 1918-1941', *The Journal of Military History*, Vol 59, No.1 (Jan 1995).

Ferguson, N., 'Prisoner Taking and Prisoner Killing in the Age of Total War: Towards a Political Economy of Military Defeat', *War in History*, 11; 148 (2004)

Ferris, J., 'Treasury Control, the Ten Year Rule and British Service Policies', 1919-1924, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Dec., 1987), pp. 859-883

French, D., 'Tommy is No Soldier: The Morale of the Second British Army in Normandy, June-August 1944', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol 19, No. 4. (1996)

Higham, R., 'The Dangerously Neglected – The British Military Intellectuals', 1918-1939, *Military Affairs*, Vol 29, No. 2 (Summer 1965).

Jacobs, W.A., 'Air Support for the British Army, 1939-1943', *Military Affairs*, Vol 46, No.4 (Dec 1992).

Namorato, M.V., 'A Concise History of Acoustics in Warfare', *Applied Acoustics* (2000), Vol. 59(2). pp. 101-135.

Strange, J.L., 'The British Rejection of Operation SLEDGEHAMMER, an Alternative Motive' *Military Affairs*, Vol 46, No.1 (Feb 1982).

Sweetman, J., 'Crucial Months for Survival: The Royal Air Force 1918-1919'. *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (July 1984). pp. 529-547.