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# The Bridgehead Battles

## 7 June – 12 June

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**T**he night of June 6/7 was spent in anxious preparation for the next day's advance to the divisional objectives, Carpiquet, Bretteville-l'Orgueilleuse and Putot-en-Bessin. These villages, on the road and railway between Caen and Bayeux, were to be occupied by the Canadians while 3rd British Division captured Caen. Unfortunately the British battalions had met heavy resistance, as well as an armoured counterattack, on D-Day. Despite the difficult situation in the Sword sector, Montgomery's orders for 3rd Canadian Division at Juno and 50th British Division at Gold remained unchanged. Their advance would continue at first light.

Lieutenant-General Richter's 716th Division had been shattered into fragments on D-Day. Eighty per cent of his men were casualties or prisoners of war and most of his artillery had been destroyed or overrun. At first light on 7 June little stood in the way of either 3rd Canadian or 50th British Divisions. On the Canadian right flank, the Royal Winnipeg Rifles reached Putot-

en-Bessin by mid-day. They met no serious resistance, but contact with 69th British Brigade on their right was lost and patrols to Brouay (or Bronay as 1944 maps mislabelled it) established that the British had not arrived. They were eventually located in Ste. Croix-Grand-Tonne, well short of their assigned objective, endangering the Winnipeg's right flank.

To the left of the Winnipeg, the Regina Rifle Regiment moved quickly from Le Fresne-Camilly to Bretteville-l'Orgueilleuse. Once in Bretteville, Major Stuart Tubb, commanding "C" Company, took his men across the railway track to the village of Norrey-en-Bessin, a kilometre further south. The Canadian Scottish and the First Hussars concentrated at Secqueville-en-Bessin, ready to respond to attacks on either of the forward battalions.

On the eastern flank of the Canadian sector a force drawn from 9th Brigade, composed of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders and the Sherbrooke Fusiliers with M10s (self-propelled

**The view looking west along what was the main Caen-Bayeux highway in 1944. The photo is taken from just west of Rots/la Villeneuve and the spire visible in the distance is the church in Bretteville-l'Orgueilleuse.**

anti-tank guns) from the 3rd Anti-Tank Regiment, led the advance to Carpiquet. Brigadier D.G.B. "Ben" Cunningham called his orders group for 0500 hours. It is not possible to determine how much Cunningham knew about the location of 9th British Infantry Brigade, which was supposed to be paralleling his advance, but he was told that a British attack on the axis Cambes - St. Contest - St. Germain-la-Blanche-Herbe would begin at dawn.

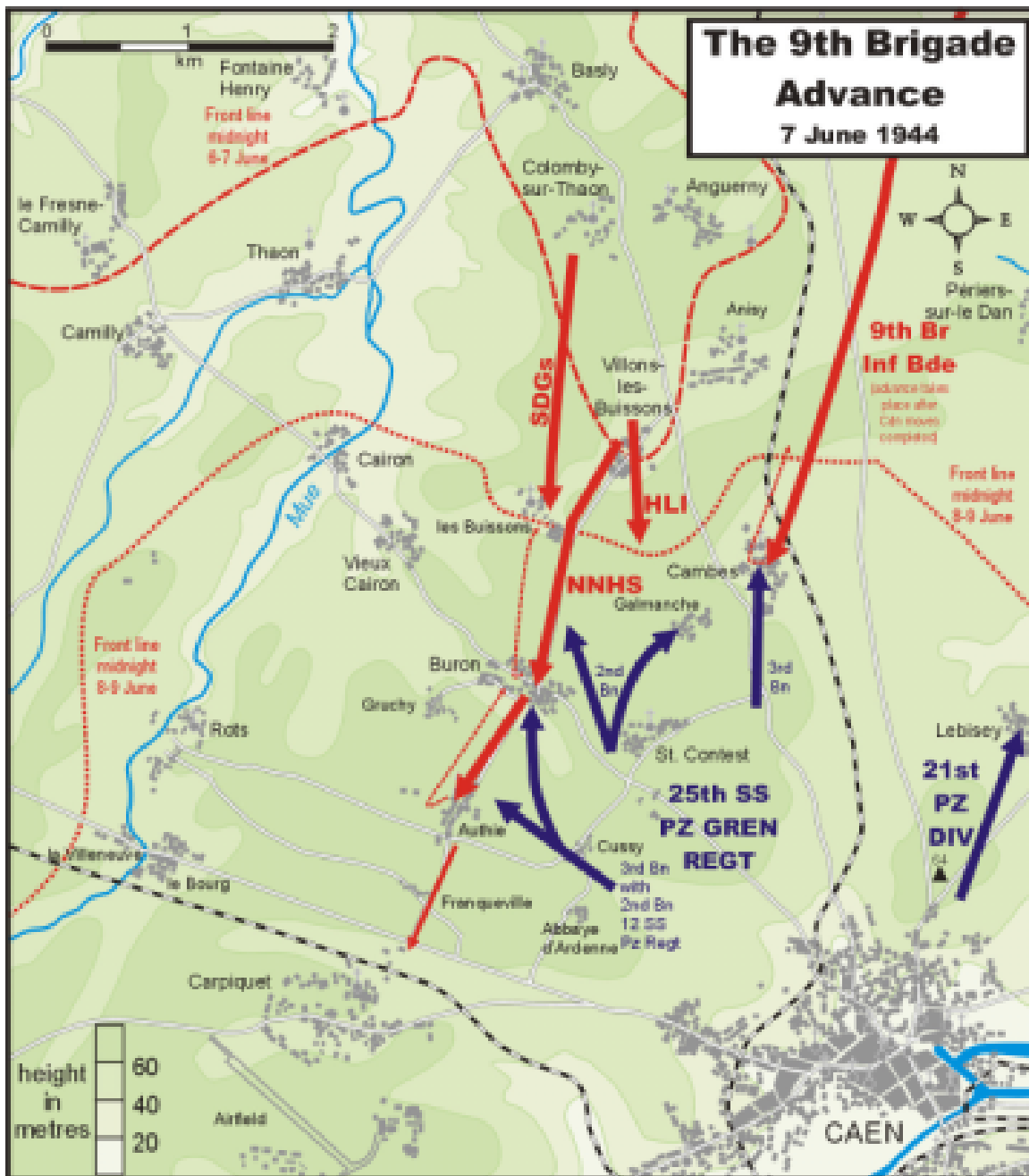
At first everything went according to plan. Les Buissons was cleared after a pincer attack took out an anti-tank gun and 16-barrelled mortar. A second anti-tank gun was destroyed by fire on the road to Buron. At 1150 hours Buron was occupied. By 1230 hours Authie was reached and the light reconnaissance tanks of the Sherbrookes went on to Francqueville. Then it started. Artillery and mortar fire from the higher ground to the left began to blast the area. One squadron of the Sherbrookes tried to put in an attack against St. Contest but were not strong enough to push through.

Back along the road to the beach the chaos of D-Day was returning. Ninth Brigade's other battalions had been late in getting started as the road was choked with transport. The 14th Field Regiment was in the midst of its move forward and could offer no support to the North Novas. The young Royal Navy officer attached to the 9th Brigade had lost wireless contact with HMS *Belfast* and "was actually in tears at his failure to provide support."

The North Nova-Sherbrooke Fusiliers battle group had run into a regiment of the 12th SS Panzer Division. Colonel Kurt Meyer, in command of 25th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment, had watched the approach of the North Novas from the tower of the Abbaye Ardenne and decided to counterattack with two battalions supported by tanks. The North Novas in Authie were overrun after a vicious close quarters battle. Buron was attacked and a fierce tank battle raged around the village. Buron was lost just as contact was re-established with the Navy (two wireless sets salvaged from tanks were used). With support from naval guns, Buron was recaptured and further German attacks broken up, but enemy artillery continued to pound the village and Cunningham

**Canadian soldiers in  
their slit trenches,  
8-9 June 1944.**  
NAC PA 129043





brought the remaining North Novas and Sherbrookes back to les Buissons where the other battalions were preparing a “fortress” position. The vanguard of the 9th Brigade had been decimated; 110 men were killed, 192 wounded and 120 taken prisoner. Twenty-one tanks had been knocked out. Losses equalled more than forty per cent of all Canadian casualties on D-Day!

The day’s events on the road to Carpiquet seem at first to suggest that if Rommel had his way and the Panzer Divisions had been stationed close to the beaches, the story of D-Day would have been very different. It is, however, much more relevant to point out that any advance along a single axis, without artillery support and with an

open flank is an invitation to disaster. Crocker, the Commander of I British Corps, and Major-General Rod Keller based their plans for June 7th on the assumption that 3rd British Division could make rapid progress and parallel the Canadian advance. Instead 185th Brigade was stopped at Lebisey Woods and the 9th British Brigade was repulsed at Cambes late in the day. Cunningham has been criticized for his handling of the battle because the artillery was out of range most of the day and his other battalions were too far back to assist the North Novas. Perhaps the best plan for June 7th was to take the time to organize a full Brigade Group attack with close artillery support and careful reconnaissance of the flanks but on

**Gunner W.G. Magee stands guard in front of a 105 mm self-propelled gun belonging to either 13th or 14th Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery, late on the afternoon of D-Day.**

NAC PA 131440



**Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Petch, CO of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders, consults one of his company commanders, Major C.F. Kennedy.**

NAC PA 133733



the morning of June 7th no one was prepared to wait until such an advance could be organized.

Seventh Brigade listened to reports of the battle throughout the afternoon. Brigadier Harry Foster decided to position a company of the Canadian Scottish, with elements of the First Hussars and 3rd Anti-Tank Regiment, on the high ground west of the Mue River to guard the

Brigade's flank. He also advised Lieutenant-Colonel Foster Matheson, CO of the Reginas, to concentrate in Bretteville. Matheson, confident of his dispositions, persuaded the Brigadier to let "C" Company remain in Norrey.

German intentions, at Army and Corps level, were to wait until both 12th SS and Panzer Lehr, along with 21st Panzer Division, were in position and then launch a co-ordinated attack. Such an operation against the lightly defended Allied perimeter might have succeeded in splitting the Anglo-Canadian bridgehead, but in the first days of the invasion no one on the German side appeared able to exercise command and control.

The 26th Panzer Grenadier Regiment began a series of attacks on 7th Brigade within hours of its arrival. The 3rd Battalion of the 12th SS advanced three companies up, in full view of the Reginas who used artillery and mortar fire to inflict heavy casualties.

The 2nd Battalion had much better luck. The Royal Winnipeg Rifles had suffered heavy casualties on D-Day and the rifle companies were badly under strength. Putot-en-Bessin was (and is) a scattered village which proved difficult to

defend. Lieutenant-Colonel Meldram used “A” Company to defend the “Brouay crossing” on the right flank and placed “B” and “C” Companies in Putot with “D” Company in reserve. Meldram’s real worry was the open right flank towards Brouay. He decided to place a battery of 62nd Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Artillery, equipped with 17-pounder self-propelled anti-tank guns, at la Bergerie farm where they could counter an enemy armoured thrust. Unfortunately the 12th SS sent an infantry battalion through Brouay outflanking the Winnipegs who soon lost control of the village. The British anti-tank guns destroyed two armoured assault guns but could do little to stop infantry infiltration.

Three of the Winnipeg companies were cut off and surrounded. Battalion HQ moved to “D” Company’s position east of the village, continuing the battle while Brigadier Foster organized a counterattack. The Canadian Scottish Regiment, under Lieutenant-Colonel Cabeldu, with a squadron of First Hussar tanks, advanced behind a carefully prepared artillery barrage and quickly recaptured the village in a fine example of combined arms co-operation.

Sixty-four Canadians were taken prisoner during the capture of Putot and 45 of them were murdered by the 12th SS. Recent attempts to justify this war crime by comparing it to the killing of prisoners in the heat of battle misses the point. The Canadian prisoners were well away from the

battlefield under guard when a staff officer of the 12th SS ordered their execution. The wounded were placed in the centre of the group and all were made to wait until a half-track with a machine gun arrived. The executions took place over a period of several hours in the grounds of the Château d’Audrieu and were carried out under orders from field-rank officers. Similar cold-blooded murders of Canadian prisoners took place in the grounds of the Abbaye d’Ardenne on June 8th. The 12th SS was the only division, German or Allied, to be charged with such crimes in Normandy.

By the evening of 8 June, 7th Brigade’s position was highly vulnerable. With only the battered Winnipegs in reserve and the eastern flank lightly held, the prospects were grim. On the evening of 8 June, without any serious reconnaissance, Kurt Meyer ordered his men to push the “little fish” into the sea by advancing straight down the N13 to Bretteville.

The first assault was made by the Regimental reconnaissance company, which Meyer had promised to lead into battle along with two companies of Panther tanks. The attack was supposed to be co-ordinated with a renewed advance by 26th Panzer Grenadier Regiment from the south, but Meyer had failed to realize that the Reginas’ position in Norrey would split the German offensive into two separate battles. The attack turned into a night-long battle at



**A modern air photo of Putot-en-Bessin looking south. The rail line bisects the photo horizontally. The village has changed very little since 1944.**

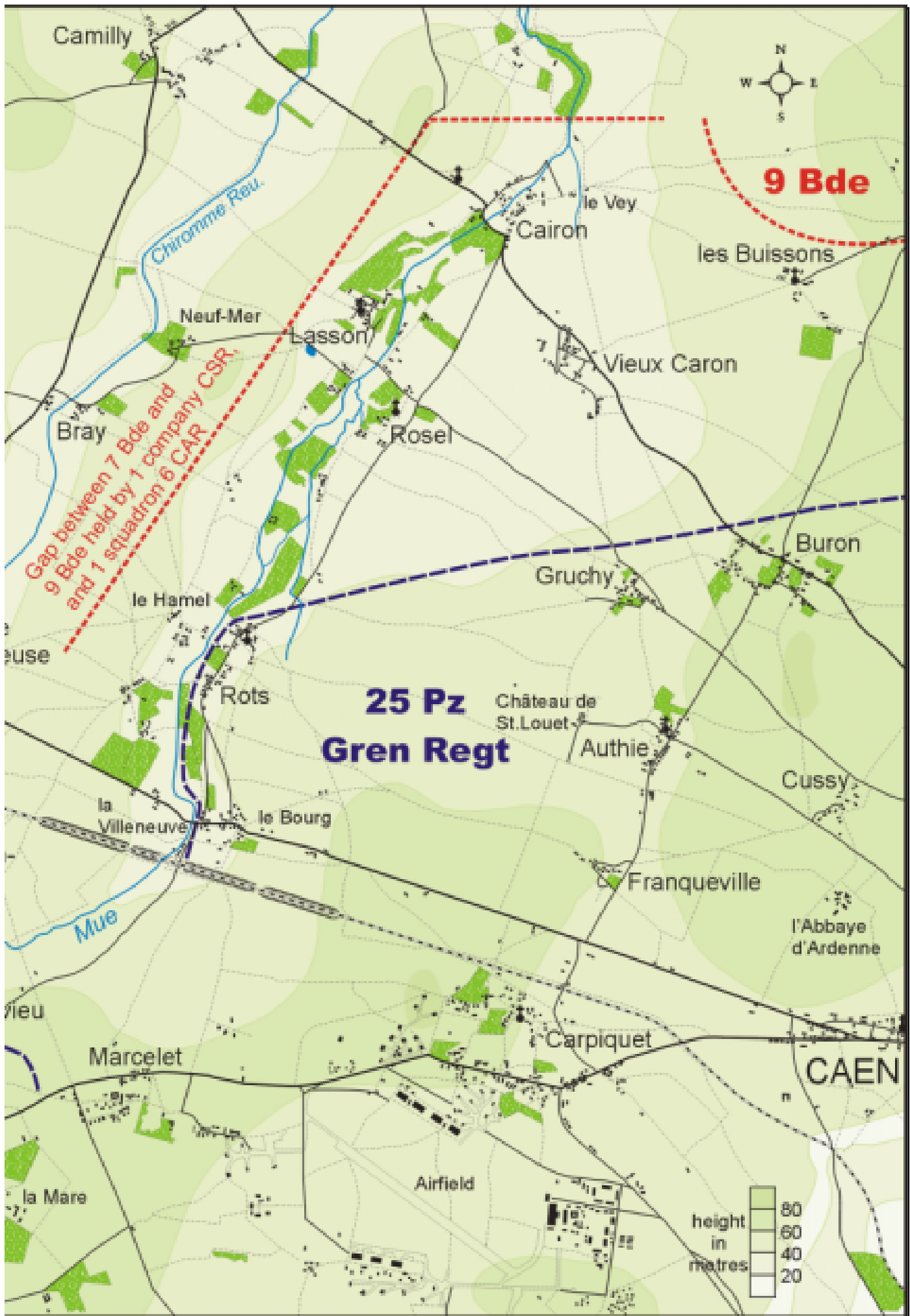


**7th Brigade Fortress**  
 7-10 June 1944

- main roads
- secondary roads
- ... tracks
- - - - - railroad
- ▬▬▬ embankment, cutting
- wooded area

0 500 1000 1500 2000  
 metres





Cardonville and in the streets of Bretteville which cost the Germans six tanks, including five Panthers. They withdrew at dawn.

Meyer now decided that Norrey would have to be captured before the attack on Bretteville was renewed. This time the battle group crossed the railway track and turned west across the open fields. As the Panthers approached Norrey they exposed their side armour to a single Sherman "Firefly" 17-pounder tank of the First Hussars firing at a range of less than 1000 metres.

Seven Panthers

Canadian and 50th British Divisions to cut off the German salient in converging attacks. Major-General Keller assigned the Canadian



**This composite air photograph, taken on 6 July 1944, shows the 7 Brigade battlefield surrounding Putot, Bretteville and Norrey.**

were destroyed in a matter of minutes. Lieutenant-General Crocker was not content with a defensive victory. On June 7th and 8th, 50th Division had crossed the railway line west of Brouay and the 8th British Armoured Brigade advanced through their position to Audrieu and the high ground above Tilly-sur-Seulles. Crocker ordered 3rd

part of the operation to Brigadier Wyman commanding 2nd, Armoured Brigade, because the advance was to be led by tanks. Since the heavily-armoured Panthers had proven so vulnerable to anti-tank guns, the idea of using Shermans to lead an attack across open fields from Norrey to le Mesnil-Patry should have been reconsidered. The attack, which started

at 1430 hours on the 11th of June, failed to achieve its purpose. Casualties suffered by the First Hussars, and the Queen's Own Rifles who accompanied them, were close to 200 men. The concurrent attacks by 50th Division

also failed. All across Normandy men were digging in. A battle of attrition was about to begin.

The Canadians won an important victory at Bretteville, Norrey and Putot. If the Germans had broken through the Canadian position astride the Caen-Bayeux highway, both Panzer Lehr and 12th SS could have launched a coordinated attack towards Bayeux splitting the Anglo-Canadian bridgehead. Hubert Meyer, an officer in and historian of the 12th SS Hitler Youth Division, described the Canadian victory:

Four attempts to capture Norrey, a cornerstone of the Canadian defence, had failed. Together with Bretteville, the village formed a blocking position [in the path of the planned offensive of Panzer Group West].



**Right and below left:  
Riflemen of "D"  
Company, Regina Rifles,  
man defensive positions  
inside Cardonville farm,  
8-10 June 1944.**

NAC PA 131423 & 129042

**Below right: Members of  
the Support Company of  
the Regina Rifles man a  
3-inch mortar located on  
the grounds of a  
chateau in Bretteville.  
This particular mortar  
(still smoking from a  
recent shot) fired over  
1,000 rounds during the  
battles in early June.**

**The riflemen in the  
mortar pit are Dan  
Cortvriendt, Swede  
Renwick and Win  
Powell, while the men in  
the background are  
George Cooper, Tom  
Holt and Ben Wilson.**

NAC PA 128794



Therefore, repeated efforts were made via different approaches to take these positions. They failed because of insufficient forces, insufficient preparation due to real or imagined time pressures, and, not least of all because of the bravery of the defenders... who were well entrenched and effectively supported by strong artillery, anti-tank defence and tanks.

Lieutenant-General Crocker was not content with a defensive victory. On June 7th and 8th, 50th Division had crossed the railway line west of Brouay and the 8th British Armoured Brigade advanced through their position to Audrieu and the high ground above Tilly-sur-Seulles. Crocker ordered 3rd Canadian and 50th British Divisions to cut off the German salient in converging attacks. Major-General Keller assigned the Canadian part of the operation to Brigadier Wyman commanding 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade because the advance was to be led by tanks. Since the heavily-armoured Panthers had proven so vulnerable to anti-tank guns, the idea of using Shermans to lead an attack across open fields from Norrey to le Mesnil-Patry should perhaps have been reconsidered. The attack, which started at 1430 hours on 11 June, failed to achieve its purpose. Casualties suffered by the First Hussars, and the Queen's Own Rifles who accompanied them, were close to 200 men. The concurrent attacks by 50th Division also failed. All across Normandy men were digging in. A battle of attrition was about to begin.

## The Tour

**B**egin your tour at Villons-les-Buissons. As you pass the road to les Buissons you will note the monument to the 9th Brigade at "Hell's Corners" – "Le Coin De L'Enfer." Drive east on the D22 towards the large telecommunications tower in the village of St. Contest. Pull off at the first road to the right and look west to Buron and Authie. You are only 7 metres higher than the road traversed by the Canadians, but you will have no trouble grasping the problem of advancing with



**Two views of the 7 Brigade battlefield as it appears today:**

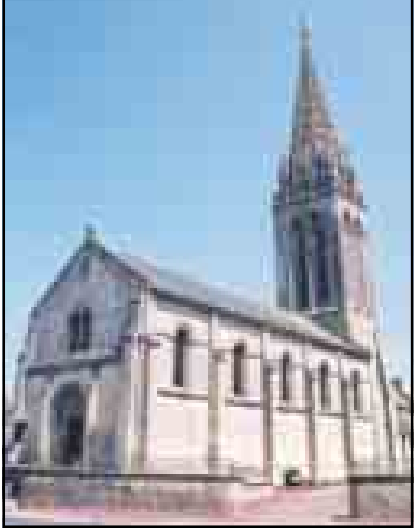
**Above: Cardonville farm (beside the rail line, underneath the yellow crane) is now surrounded by a modern industrial development. Norrey is visible at the top of the photo. The town church was largely destroyed during the battle, but when it was restored after the war, the steeple was not replaced, leaving it with a distinctive square top.**

**Below: The open fields surrounding la Bergerie farm are still evident today. It was from this position that the Canadian Scottish Regiment launched their counterattack to retake Putot.**





**Top: One of the Panthers destroyed in Bretteville on the night of 8/9 June 1944. Above left: The same Panther as seen from a different angle. Beside the tank are the three men from the Reginas who knocked out the Panther with a PIAT a mere 30 yards from the Battalion HQ; (l.-r.) Rifleman J.E. Lapointe, Rifleman Carnie and Lance Corporal C.V. Hewitt. Above right: This location, close to the church in Bretteville, was where the destroyed Panther came to rest.**



the enemy overlooking your flank. In Buron you will want to pause at the small park to visit the memorials to the Sherbrooke Fusiliers and the Highland Light Infantry.

In Authie there is a memorial to the North Nova Scotia Highlanders “who lost their lives on the 7th of June 1944.” The Abbaye d’Ardenne where Kurt Meyer watched the Canadian advance is visible on your left. Reconnaissance tanks of the Sherbrookes reached Franqueville, which is the cluster of houses just short of the N13. You now have some idea of the task confronting the North Novas and Sherbrookes on D+1.

The Abbey d’Ardenne is now an archive and research centre. To visit the Abbaye and the memorial in the walled garden where 20 Canadian soldiers were murdered you must ask permission

at the entrance. When construction is complete there will be a more formal arrangement.

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An overview of the 7th Brigade battlefield can be obtained from just east of Secqueville-en-Bessin. This is the future site of a battlefield viewing area. To your right, the steeple of St. Croix-Grand-Tonne may be seen and the extent of the gap between the and the Green Howards of Winnipeg 50th British Division measured. On our battlefield tours we begin a Tactical Exercise Without Troops (TEWT) here asking participants into syndicates to plan the

defence

**Top: The churches in Norrey (left) and Bretteville (centre) as they appear today.**

**Above: Sergeant J.S. McGraw and Captain (Rev.) Graham Jamieson of the Regina Rifles examine a map beneath the church in Bretteville following the battle.**

**Note the sign to Norrey on the wall.**

NAC PA 169258

**Below: The Reginas HQ in Bretteville as it appeared after the battle. The church steeple is visible in the background.**

NAC PA 133735





**Above left: Memorial to the North Nova Scotia Highlanders in Authie.**

**Top right: Memorial square in Buron containing memorials to the Sherbrooke Hussars and Highland Light Infantry.**

**Middle right and above: Memorial to 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade at les Buisson.**

**Bottom centre: Street sign in Authie which recognizes the Canadian soldiers executed by the 12th SS.**

of the area with a single brigade, two squadrons of tanks and the available artillery and anti-tank guns. Another good view of the battlefield may be obtained from the N13 over-pass on the Secqueville-Putot road, the D217. The enemy's perspective can be appreciated by crossing the railway line west of Putot, the "Brouay crossing," and looking backwards towards the Canadian positions. We also explore each of the villages trying to translate the outline plan into specific tasks for companies, platoons and troops of tanks and anti-tank guns. There are memorial plaques in Bretteville, Cardonville, and Norrey. Bretteville's main street is little changed. The church has been repaired as has the Chateau that was the Regina battalion headquarters. The

N13 did not exist in 1944 but the old Caen road from Bretteville to la Villeneuve looks just as it did more than half a century ago. If you cross under the highway and railway at la Villeneuve you have an excellent view of the route followed by the 12th SS Panthers on their last attempt to seize Norrey-en-Bessin. The Hussars troop, including a 17-pounder Sherman "Firefly," was south of the old Caen road well within killing range.

The infamous "Charge of the Light Brigade" carried out by the First Hussars and "D" company of the Queen's Own Rifles began at Norrey-en-Bessin and you can retrace the route to le Mesnil-Patry where there is a memorial plaque opposite the church.