

THE ASSAULT 6-23 JUNE 1944

THE STORY OF C SQUADRON – 13th/18th ROYAL HUSSARS (QMO)

We had taken part in a number of invasion exercises during the Spring of 1944 so that it was rather bewildering and difficult to believe that on 5 June, as we lay in the brilliant sunshine outside Gosport, that we were on the eve of 'Operation Over Lord' which was to be the real thing. We had motored down in our tanks from Petworth through the delightful and fresh countryside of Sussex and Hampshire which was at its best, but throbbing night and day with engine and vehicles of every type and description. We felt very important and excited as we motored in convoy through towns and villages, all the people of which came out of their houses and opened their windows to smile and wave at us. They must have guessed what was coming off this time, and their feelings of excitement and apprehension were very apparent, as were ours.

After a stay of two days in our marshalling camp where final briefing and instructions were given, and another half of 24 hours where the final waterproofing of tanks was carried out, we eventually reached our port of embarkation, Gosport, on 4 June, and embarked at 10 o'clock in the morning.

It took a little longer than usual to load the tanks on to the LCTs, as they were all towing waterproofed sledges called "Porpoises" in which was a reserve of ammunition in case we required more at short notice after landing on the enemy beaches. They were clumsy things and required a certain amount of manoeuvring on the part of the tanks to get them into convenient positions in the limited space on the craft; however, after half an hour my LCT was loaded and we moved out into the bay taking up our positions in line with hundreds of other craft of every type and size. 4 June was a glorious day and I shall never forget the astonishing sight of that invasion fleet of assault craft, lying spread out as far as the eye could see, westwards to the Isle of Wight and eastwards towards Portsmouth and Hayling Island. Surely the Luftwaffe would attempt to do something to such a target and yet there appeared to be no Luftwaffe. In any case the RAF were prepared to a very high degree to repel aerial attack and of course the Ack-Ack Sentries on the craft were trigger conscious.

Few of us had had any previous experience which added to the excitement of this historic occasion and as we ate our 'Compo' lunches out of our mess tins, I think everyone was very apprehensive and looking forward to getting over the initial shocks and surprises which we felt sure we would encounter on landing. And then, suddenly, during the afternoon, the operation was postponed for 24 hours, apparently there was a considerable swell outside in the English Channel about which the Higher Command were nervous.

This period of waiting and suspension was very tiresome.

On 5 June, however, we received our maps and learnt for the first time the sector on which we were going to land, and places which had only featured up to date as code words. We learnt only 18 hours before landing that Normandy was to be the scene of our fateful operation, and that the 13th/18th Royal Hussars on the extreme left of the assault, were to land (we hoped) just west of Ouistreham on the mouth of the Orne, 10 miles north of Caen.

'H' Hour was to be 0725 hrs on the following day, 6 June, being the time when the first assault landing craft were due to touch down on the enemy beaches.

The grand plan, as far as the 2nd Army was concerned that after a heavy bombing attack on all known enemy coastal defences on the night of 5/6 June, and then the landing of Airborne Forces by moonlight early on 6 June, an attempt would be made to reach Caen and Bayeux by 1st and 30 Corps respectively on D-Day itself, and the road joining them. It was an ambitious plan and 1st Corp on the left were to find that the taking of Caen was easier said than done.

Strong enemy defences in depth and repeated counter attacks prevented us from taking Caen until 15 July.

However, C Squadron were due to land at 'H' Hour plus 45 minutes at a small seaside resort called LaBreche; we were acting as the reserve Squadron following up A and B Squadrons who were going to land with their amphibious "DD" tanks at 'H' minus 10 minutes, a somewhat less enviable but very exciting task. The whole Regiment were in support of the assault of 8th Brigade of the 3rd British Infantry Divisions, and we were supporting the 1st Bn Suffolk Regiment with whom we had worked for the last 3 months on invasion exercises and schemes. After penetrating the beach defences with the aid of the Royal Navy, the RAF, the Assault BEs and their multitude of special equipment, the Squadron was to assist the Suffolks in the taking of 2 strong points consecutively. We had practised similar operations before, and now we were really going to be able to see how easy or difficult it would be under enemy shell fire and machine guns, it would be interesting if not enjoyable.

The invasion fleet finally set sail at 1400 hrs on 5 June by which time the sky was overcast and there was considerable wind.

We sailed eastwards close to the coast for about 80 miles and then turned south when we were able for the last time to see England disappearing rapidly in the fading light.

I might add, of course, that during this exciting voyage naval protection was as full proof as possible. There was still no sign of any aerial activity on the part of the Germans, although our own Spitfires and Mustangs were out in large numbers and swooped down from time to time to inspire confidence.

At about 10 o'clock in the evening the last tins of self-heating soup for the day were produced (what a boon they were!), and as we made our beds down on the deck of the LCT in a few available feet between the tanks, we were thankful that so far things had gone according to plan but incredulous at the complete absence of any form of hindrance on the part of the Germans. Surely something would happen before the morning!? It was not long however with the monotonous vibrating of the crafts engine and the fresh night air before most of us were asleep, although a few were finding that the increasingly rough sea was resulting in the fish receiving some strange mixtures of food.

I awoke at 0500 hrs on the morning of 6 June after an undisturbed nights rest, which I realised it surprised me considerably. This being the great day I was soon on my feet but found it was not so easy to stand on them. There was indeed a heavy swell coming now and a strong wind blowing up the channel; looking round it appeared that men had been, and still were, being affected. Fortunately, my driver and co-driver were not suffering from sea sickness and it was not long before the kit and bedding was stowed away on the tank and we were making a small breakfast. We were, of course, still well out in the channel and everything appeared to be as well ordered as when we had set sail the previous day; it really was extraordinary. The flotillas of LCTs and other craft were complete and still charging along keeping their correct distances from one another.

The visibility, however, was not so good, in fact it was a trifle misty with the occasional showers, which lent a rather chilly and sinister atmosphere to the proceedings.

By 0530 hrs we had finished our frugal breakfast and just beginning to have a last check over the tank when we passed those well known LCTs, HM BATTLEAXE, THE BROADSWORD and THE CUTLASS which we had seen so many times before. They had stopped now and the infantry assault troops were being offloaded into their small assault craft which had been lowered into the water to receive them, and which were to take them on to the enemy shore whereas 30 Corp on the night succeeded in taking Bayeux on 7 June, the main German effort was to be directed continually.

The last time, this was the real thing. I certainly felt sorry for them. Many of them looked very sick and cold and knew they would be wet before long, but as always they were trying to be cheerful. One could but wonder how many would be alive by the evening and how many would see England again. I think at this moment we were all damned glad to be in a tank, we would at least keep dry and it gives one a feeling of security as distinct from nakedness, even though later that security was to prove false.

Suddenly the mist lifted and we could see many more craft of different types, some stopping, some turning round, and then our LCT flotilla received the signal to turn left which brought us into line facing the Normandy coast, we were now advancing straight towards our enemy.

Now in the tanks the last checks were being made; ammunition correct, grenades readily available, cupolas, periscopes, telescopes, spare parts; all these had been checked many times before but a last look round gave confidence and final assurance that everything was ok.

It was now 0700 hrs and we realised that A and B Squadrons in their DD Tanks must be on the way; they were scheduled to have launched at 0635 hrs but not being on the Regimental Net we didn't know if they were going to swim in this very rough sea or not. Soon afterwards, however, I noticed that one or two of the LCTs in which the DDs had been travelling had turned round and were hanging back; they were empty.

On we went, there was nothing left to check, we could only wait; these were tense moments and very unpleasant for some people who were still feeling very ill; my gunner LCpl Bailey was one of them.

At 0730 hrs there was great excitement as the Normandy coast was sighted, I looked through my binoculars and there was no doubt about it although it was difficult to distinguish any detail; there seemed to be a lot of smoke about and was now a lot of noise. It seemed that all the naval guns had opened up and hundreds of aircraft were roaring in towards the coast.

As we got nearer I began to see the outline of houses amidst and behind a confused mass of craft and clouds of smoke until finally at 0755 hrs, when we were only three-quarters of a mile away, one could see and hear everything. LaBreche itself, which in peacetime had presumably been one of the many popular resorts on the Normandy coast, had not been unlike Angmering or Littlehampton except that the houses were more colourful and continental in appearance. A number of these houses and hotels were already in ruins, some were burning and smouldering, while into others were pouring the machine gun bullets from our DD tanks which had apparently landed successfully.

The atmosphere looked pretty thick now; while A and B Squadrons were supporting their assault infantry over the beach with machine gun fire and HE shells, German shells were continually landing on the shore and on the water amongst the craft. There seemed to be a great congestion of men and vehicles on the beach, in fact there appeared to be a hold up. On investigation the reason for this became apparent.

One of the Avro Churchills on passing through an exit just made in the wire and beach defences by our assault RE Troops, had had a track blown off by an unsuspected mine which had unfortunately been overlooked. This exit was therefore blocked and another was being breached to allow the men and vehicles on our sector to get off the beach. My LCT was very close to the shore now, amidst an enormous number of craft; some had delivered their troops and vehicles and were endeavouring to extract themselves from the scrum, one or two were burning fiercely as a result of enemy shell fire, a few were milling around with the ramps blown off and many were searching for a gap in which to unload and then to get away again as quickly as possible. The shells were landing all around us now when suddenly the craft shook heavily as a very loud explosion caused us to hold our breath. It felt as though the ramp had been shot away just as it was being lowered to let us off. When the smoke had cleared we saw that the forward corner on the port side had been badly damaged but only a third of the ramp had disappeared.

The craft was drifting in on its last 20 yards; the tanks were all ready to go now, engines pulsating impatiently, blocks away; as we came alongside another craft at an angle in what was a very small space in which to manoeuvre, the depleted ramp was lowered to its full extent and we were given the signal to move off.

A minute later we were in the water and wading into the shore; this was Normandy!

It is difficult to paint an accurate picture of the scene on the beach; everything as so confused and so much was happening. But despite this there seemed to be little opposition now in the form of direct fire, the confusion was due to the fact that the income of men and vehicles was increasing rapidly while the pace of dispersal was still very slow, the only Germans I could see were 4 ragged individuals in uniform trying to surrender: I saw three dead carcasses near the waters edge and there were still 2 or 3 concealed snipers making a nuisance of themselves. We blew off our waterproofing material and were thus ready for action, but there was very little room in which to move. The beach was like Piccadilly Circus in the rush hour. I unavoidably ran over somebody's porpoise and must have smashed the towing bars; a number had become detached and were lying wrecked on the beach or in the water.

My operator was now trying to 'report signals' to the Squadron Leader, but it was a little difficult as an obvious German was trying to jam us calling British code signs on the frequency.

We moved on slowly towards the new exit just completed and joined some of the other tanks in the Squadron which had been travelling on different craft; it was comforting to see them and Crew Commanders furtively acknowledged each others presence with apprehensive grins. I passed 3 dead assault infantrymen lying in the water and was somewhat chilled by my first sight of our own soldiers killed in action. The DD Tanks were still in the water or on the beach due to the hold up, and it appeared that several had been sunk or were inoperative only about 15 yards from the waters edge.

Ten minutes later we had at last got off the beach and were making our way inland to our first RV point with the Suffolks, preparatory to our first attack. The maps were difficult to read and I think we all went wrong once or twice, but finally and just in time my troop contacted the Company with whom we were to fight in Phase 1.

Before going on there was one humorous incident which occurred en-route. After leaving the beach my tank was still towing its wretched porpoise, but another tank had inevitably run over it and had bent the towing bars so that it was being towed well over on the right hand side of the road, while we had to drive down on the left of the road. In other words the tank and porpoise were taking up the whole of the road, not that it mattered much as there was only one way traffic! But we had to pass a number of footsloggers who were making their way to various RVs, and who were walking in the road to avoid the possibly mined verges. I managed to bellow to most of them to watch out on account of the porpoise, but suddenly we swept round a corner and before I had time to warn them, 3 unfortunate Tommies found themselves slap on their backs on top of the porpoise and then proceeded to roll off into the middle of the road, leaving 3 steel helmets, 3 Sten guns, 3 respirators on the damned thing. They were fortunately uninjured but somewhat shaken and we stopped to enable them to collect their belongings. How they must have cursed.

We got rid of the porpoise before proceeding across country to join the Suffolks.

The first strong point to be overcome was a concrete defensive position, codenamed "MORRIS". It was well wired and contained machine gun and a couple of anti-tank guns according to the information and the defence map. The plan briefly was for 2 tank Troops to put down HE on the position, mixed with some AP to be fired at the slits in, and corners of, the concrete, while a company of the Suffolks advanced to within 200 yards supported by 3rd Tank Troop. Then, this company would break through, consolidate and through them would pass another Company to the

far side of the position preparatory to forming up for the attack on the second and more formidable strong point, codenamed "HILLMAN".

4th Troops task in the first attacks was to work round on the left flank clearing the village of Colleville Sur Orne with B Company Suffolks. This village lay directly east of "MORRIS", and commanded one of the main roads inland.

The task was much easier than we had anticipated. Two tanks worked through the village, street by street, with the infantry in the approved manner, while 2 more tanks (we had one tank attached to us from 3rd Troop) nosed through the surrounding orchards; we, of course, expected to see something or be fired upon, but in fact we had no occasion to fire a shot.

Much to our surprise the Bosche and a number of the inhabitants had apparently cleared out; perhaps they had been alarmed by the landing of the 6th Airborne nearby at 0400 hrs, and supposedly the troops didn't like their defensive positions in this area on tasting the furious onslaught of the initial landing.

I can recall 2 memories we had of Colleville, firstly the reluctance of my driver and myself to run over a dead German body lying prostrate across the road, and secondly the bewildered and haunted expressions of the few inhabitants left in the village; at this time they must have thought sooner or later their houses would be completely smashed, if they were not already, and they probably doubted ability to remain in Normandy for any length of time.

The rest of the Squadron apparently found no difficulty in overcoming "MORRIS" at the same time taking a few prisoners; so by 1130 hrs we were ready to attack "HILLMAN".

This turned out to be a very different proposition, however, as its defenders were very much 'in-situ' and prepared to stick it out. The plan was very similar to the previous one, but there were mines to be dealt with.

It was these mines and quantities of wire that caused trouble and delayed us. After reaching the edge of the objective the infantry made 2 attempts to clear a gap by hand, while being covered by the tanks, but the mine lifters were pinned down by intense machine gun fire and suffered some fatal casualties.

The machine guns were difficult to locate as the concealed Germans were not firing tracer and continually changed their positions.

At first my troop was well out on the left flank again with a view to shooting the infantry and tanks in on to the position.

As it appeared, however, that they were not going to be able to penetrate the position without difficulty, we were recalled to bolster up the main fire support on the Squadron. Soon afterwards, however, we were ordered out further over on to the left flank again, partly to reconnoitre some suspected German positions south of St Aubin d'Arquenay, and partly with a view to possibly tickling up the "HILLMAN" position from the left rear.

This turned out to be an unfortunately little adventure. The ground on the left was quite open and absolutely flat, it was almost impossible to advance tactically without the supporting tanks being seen.

Advancing, therefore, as best we could, well spread out, 3 tanks were suddenly fired upon most vigorously and simultaneously. As a result 2 were knocked out and we had to retire hastily to our former positions. My tank, which had been leading, had been fired at but was lucky enough not to be hit.

Here I must mention the bravery of Sgt Haygarth and his co-driver Cpl Pickles. When their tank was hit their driver Tpr Turner was badly smashed up, and Cpl Pickles who had also been wounded in the leg and was non too happy, took over the controls. But the wireless had also been damaged so that Sgt Haygarth found it necessary to get out of the turret and to lie alongside it to direct Cpl Pickles by word of mouth. Together like this they brought the tank back to safety across a 300 yard stretch of country while being fired at continually.

Through their determination and courage they saved a tank which otherwise would have been completely knocked out and blown up.

There were 3 casualties in the other tank unfortunately Cpl Collins, Tpr Shreeves and Tpr Owens who subsequently died.

Soon after this bad spell I returned to the north eastern point of "HILLMAN" and here we immediately got our own back shooting up a machine gun post which had exposed itself, and an anti-tank gun near which we apparently set fire to some petrol cans and oil drums.

The anti-tank gun had been caught while one of its crew was at the front of the muzzle turning the gun round; somehow or other after being shot up his body found itself suspended over the gun barrel – a grotesque sight!

.....moment the infantry and tanks at last succeeded in breaking through. The Tank Commanders had a great time winking the Germans out of their trenches by throwing grenades into them from their turrets at the same time the tanks drove for the far side at full speed, to cut off any retreating Germans. The Squadron Leaders tank amidst all this suddenly almost disappeared from view in a flash. I wondered what on earth had happened and learnt later that he had run over a very large Officers' latrine which collapsed under the weight of the tank!

And so, after a slightly sticky afternoon, the Squadron had captured its 2 D-Day objectives, and soon afterwards we were ordered to retire to replenish with ammunition.

We went back to a small and pleasant orchard where we met the A1 echelon boys who seemed very pleased to see us and who proceeded to issue out ammunition at great speed and to produce the odd drop of whisky. During this time we all witnessed a very inspiring sight which was the dropping of supplies to the 6th Airborne Division on the Orne. These supplies of food and ammunition were dropped from Dakotas by coloured parachutes which filled the sky with colour and reassured everyone of the calm and apparently orderly way in which things were going.

The countryside now was very pleasant and reminiscent of England, there was little shelling in our sector, the evening was fine and sunny and in a way it was hard to believe that we were at war while across the green fields dotted with flowers and the trees in blossom.

We were sent off again at 1930 hrs to take up turret down positions behind a ridge to the west of "HILLMAN" thus to observe and repel the expected counter attacks. We knew the 21 SS Panzers were not far away and felt sure they would put in some kind of counter attack at dusk either to break through to the coast, drive a wedge into us, or to recapture "HILLMAN".

However, nothing developed to our surprise and after waiting 4 hours we finally withdrew to our harbour area, a small orchard north of Colleville; there we refuelled and tried to snatch a few hours sleep.

So ended a historic and exciting day but one which really had not been nearly so difficult nor incurred nearly so many casualties.

Caen hadn't been captured as planned, and it was apparent that there was considerable German strength in front of us, but we had established a bridgehead of anything up to 4 miles or more on

some sectors. Everyone seemed confident we would not be ejected, although some determined counter attacks would obviously be launched sooner or later.

A and B Squadrons had, of course, suffered more casualties on account of their hazardous roll which proved to have been of great value. They had swam in a rougher sea than any they had experienced during training, and several tanks had been unfortunate enough to be drowned just off shore, through the congestion of larger craft which over ran them. However, despite getting off the beach with only half their tanks, together they incurred not more than 20 casualties and succeeded in gaining their objectives inland.

The Staffordshire Yeomanry, who were supporting 185 Brigade, had been the second Regiment to land, they had moved through us during the day and had actually got on to LeBesey but they had to withdraw later owing to the Infantry not being able to keep up with them.

We were up at 0430 hrs on D+1 and after a hurried breakfast, made of course in the tank, we pulled out of harbour and took up slightly different defensive positions to the previous night, but in the same area. 4th Troop took up positions in "MORRIS", the first objective of the previous day and there we remained, expecting a counter attack to be launched, until late in the afternoon.

Gunners and Crew Commanders of tanks took it in turns to keep a very wary eye on the surrounding countryside and everyone got their first opportunity of filling their first Field Post Cards to ensure their wives and families knew that so far all was well.

We fired off a few rounds of 75 mm at the church spire in Colleville in an attempt to silence a sniper who must have remained in hiding during the previous 24 hrs, but who was not trying to irritate the Infantry there.

A few of us also paid a very brief visit to the trenches and living quarters of the defenders of "MORRIS". They were in a complete shambles having obviously been evacuated in a great hurry and having been visited by our Infantry. Clothing, food, maps, books, pamphlets and photographs were strewn all over the place in great confusion. This was a foretaste of what was to be a familiar sight later on and here we also became acquainted with a somewhat overpowering, scented and slightly sickly smell which characterised the German dugouts; if it was not a corpse, it was the brilliant soap used by the Bosche.

In the late afternoon we were suddenly ordered to move with the rest of the Squadron to the banks of the River Orne, adjacent to the vital bridge at Benouville (The Pegasus Bridge). A serious attempt on the part of the Germans with 192 Panzer Grenadiers, supported SPs and Tigers, to attack the bridge and break through the defensive positions of the 6th Airborne the far side of the river, was expected.

We moved across country in open formation at great speed and were expecting to cross the river and come in direct support of the 6th Airborne. As it happened we remained on the west bank of the River Orne, the German attack never materialised and we finally moved into harbour at 2230 hrs at Benouville.

Much to everyone's astonishment we remained in this harbour area until 11 June. The build up had slowed down, owing to the very rough sea and on the left flank it was considered unwise to attempt anything other than ensuring a firm defence of the key points, being the Orne and the Bridge at Benouville.

During the first night in our harbour we encountered some sniping activity which caused a little excitement; my hull gunner, Tpr Siveyer, caught a Pole, a pathetic wizened figure and by the morning they were all rounded up.

During the afternoon of 8 June 2 tanks in 4th Troop, and 2 in 3rd Troop commanded by Lt P B R Uttley, sallied forth to observe and report on some movement which had been observed south of Benouville, between Blainville on the Orne and Bieville due west of it.

We saw no movement of vehicles but enjoyed ourselves by some indirect shooting of HE on some German minelayers whom we observed 2000 yards, all in the open and very engrossed in their job. The little party soon dispersed and later an observer reported that he saw some of the party emerge after we left and carry away 2 bodies on stretchers.

On the night of 8 June we were bombed but with no ill effects and also during the course of our stay in Benouville we were machine gunned from the air several times, luckily sustaining no casualties.

Two unfortunate incidents occurred as far as the Squadron was concerned in that Tpr Borer was wounded by a shot from one of our own tanks during the search for snipers, and on 9 June Tpr Gee, my driver, was wounded very unluckily in the thigh by a spent bullet which appeared to have come from a nearby farm.

This farm, although it had provided us adequately with eggs, potatoes and butter during our stay, a most welcome addition to the comports, was always under suspicion, it seemed to be RV for obviously doubtful civilians who slept in its barns during the night. We rounded up a number of them including a not unattractive but very vicious and anti British blonde; these were sent back to the equivalent of the present day DP camp near Bayeux.

Tpr Gee had to be evacuated, of course, and was a great loss to my crew and troop.

On 10 June we were standing by to assist B Squadron who were fighting east of the Orne with 2 Companies of Airborne Infantry in an attack out of their Bridgehead. The attack was successful, the objectives achieved, a 100 enemy were killed and 200 PoWs were taken and the Squadron was not called upon to participate. The Recce Troop who were supporting B Squadron, however, suffered a number of casualties including Lt Hardy who was killed and was a great loss to the Regiment.

At 0730 hrs on 11 June our unexpected and long stay in Harbour finally ended and we moved westwards to the high ground near Plumtot for an observation role which we took over from the ERYs. By this time the 12 SS Panzer Division had joined up with the remnants of the 21st Panzer Division and there was much speculation as to how and where it might be employed against us. However, we saw and learn nothing during the day 11 June and finally at last light pulled back from the ridge and the tanks formed a 'Leaguer' for the night.

The next day nothing happened until the evening, but we were at short notice to move back to cross the Orne and support A Squadron who were assisting the 6th Airborne to maintain and extend their firm base between Salenelles in the north, Breville to the east and Herouvillette to the south.

During the course of the day 1st Troop Lt Riviere, exclusive of its 18 pdr tank commanded by Sgt Cooper left the Squadron to become a protective Troop to General Montgomery's HQ the other side of Bayeux.

It is not until half past 4 in the afternoon after a pleasant enough day in the sun writing letters, cooking food, getting clean and speculating idly, that we were called upon to retrace our steps to Benouville, with a view to crossing over the Orne to support A Squadron near Breville.

We went into Harbour at Benouville in a small orchard where as it happened we remained for 6 hours. I always remember this orchard as it was here I made the acquaintance of a very pleasant type of Normandy farmer and his wife. They presented every tank crew with a bottle of very special red wine which had been hidden in their cellar during the occupation. I often returned to see them later and they invariably gave us something in the way of a dozen eggs, a duck, a

chicken or a couple of rabbits. On 2 occasions I was presented with a rabbit already cooked in the inimitable French way, with lashings of butter and garnished with herbs and all sorts of good things; as a rabbit it was unrecognisable but it was very delicious.

As it grew darker in the orchard we listened on the wireless to the activities of A Squadron and they appeared to be involved in a fairly heated action at Breville.

Nevertheless we were not ordered to move until after 0200 hrs when we rumbled slowly over the Orne bringing down a certain amount of spasmodic shelling from the Germans who were always trying very hard to destroy the "Pegasus Bridge". By this time the Bosche had been expelled from Breville again, A Squadron's battle had terminated and so we moved into a harbour area just north of Ranville. In this village were the HQ and hospital of 6th Airborne Division, and the area into which we had just moved proved to be our own Regimental and base for nearly a fortnight.

A Squadron had undoubtedly given invaluable moral support to the tired and severely tested Airborne Troops and by first light on the 13th had withdrawn from Breville less one Troop. On 14 June C Squadron were called upon to send a Troop to Breville to relieve the A Squadron Troop.

The presence of a Troop of tanks in Breville not only made the Infantry feel very much happier, but also probably confused the Germans as to our intentions and always remained a potential threat.

And so until 18 June while the remainder of C Squadron took up anti-tank positions around Ranville, we always had a Troop in Breville. Breville was a very unpleasant and demoralising spot. Beneath its scars one could see that not so long ago it had been an attractive and pretty village, but now it was in a state of complete ruin. Dead cattle were lying everywhere and numbers of corpses were to be seen, as the Infantry had not the time or suitable opportunity to bury these fatal casualties of 2 battles. The smell was more than pungent in the heat of the midday sun and a less healthy spot could hardly be found. Troops relieved each other 24 hour intervals and this was sufficient length of time for us, although the wretched Infantry had to stay there for many days.

My Troop paid 2 visits to Breville, each tank was placed in a suitable position for observation and for supporting the Infantry with fire should an attack have been made, but nothing occurred.

..... but the Germans probably over estimated the numbers in the area as they never put in any form of major counter attack until 23 June by which time we were very adequately warned and better prepared to deal with it.

The 51st Highland Division had been east of the Orne for a week now and were in defensive positions to the south of Ranville having a very sticky time from German mortaring and shelling. The build up in the bridgehead had very nearly come to a standstill due to the very rough sea which was making it impossible for craft to come in-shore. During this period therefore, it was a question of standing firm where we were, pending an all out attack in a suitable sector at an opportune moment.

The depressing atmosphere of Breville was relieved for us by the never failing cockney humour of Tpr (Slash) Wallace who had become my hull gunner. On one occasion, having disappeared for half an hour to find potatoes, re-appeared again amidst the dead cattle in an immaculate top hat, white tie and tails which he had apparently salvaged from what had once been one of the wealthier establishments in Breville.

The only casualties suffered by the Squadron during these 6 days were unfortunately Sgt York and Tpr Summer whose tank unfortunately ran over one of our own Infantry mines concealed in a verge; this occurred while we were drawing out of Breville after our second visit.

I must here also record on a very great blow which affected the Squadron and Regiment deeply; this was the loss on 16 June of our Colonel, Colonel R T G Harrap. He was killed while being about to attend a conference at one of the 51st Highland Brigades Headquarters. Colonel Harrap

had only just taken over the command of the Regiment and the tragedy of such a loss was felt by everyone. He had been with the Regiment for many years and was loved by all ranks. He was buried at Colleville Sur Orne on 17 June.

On 18 June the Squadron came under command of the 153 Brigade, 51st Highland Division, who were in a somewhat 'Hot' wooded area east of Herouvillette and north east of Escoville. The area was not altogether wooded but consisted of strips and squares of wood separated from each other by small fields around the edges of which the Scotsmen were entrenched. The Germans were only 200 or 300 yards away from those on the edge of the area and on the slightest provocation brought down mortar bombs and shells and 'Moaning Minnies' into it. Therefore, although the Infantry were only too pleased to have some tanks with them, we were never popular when we had to move into or out of the area as we always attracted a lot of unwanted attention.

Initially 2nd Troop was attached to the 1st Gordons, 3rd Troop to the 5th/7th Gordons and 4th Troop to the 4th Black Watch whilst Squadron HQ remained with Brigade HQ. The whole position occupied little more than one and a half square miles, and the tanks when they were in position, could see little more than 100 yards ahead of them.

Anti-tank guns could have performed the task allotted to us in a very much more discreet and effective way, but a tank lifted the morale of the Infantry to a greater degree and our mobile machine guns were considered to be ideal for clearing snipers out of the thickest of wooded cover. Apart from 2nd Troop, who fought a small action, killing 12 Germans and capturing 6 others with a mortar and Spandau, the re-shelling and mortar which continued day and night and one was always expecting something to happen any moment, particularly at night.

They liked firing their Spandau at night, mostly into the air, and made a lot of noise, partly in an attempt to worry us and encourage themselves and partly by way of signalling each other.

The Infantry who had not the advantage of armoured protection were inflicted with a steady flow of casualties during this time.

On the morning of 19 June we received showers of propaganda leaflets from the Germans informing us that London was in flames and rapidly being destroyed by their new 'Flying Bomb'. If we didn't believe it we only had to make our way to a nearby hill (adjoining their positions) from where we would be able to see in the far distant sky the reflection of the flames and smoke belching forth hundreds of feet into the air, from the doomed capital. It was a crude form of propaganda and everyone laughed, although we were indeed a trifle worried about the capabilities of this 'Flying Bomb' which the Germans had just launched against England.

Early on the morning of 20 June we were suddenly surprised by a very loud, low, raucous and vibrating noise in the sky. Thinking it to be a strange type of German Aircraft about to dive bomb us we were ready with the Ack-Ack guns, but as the object came into view we held our breath somewhat incredulous. The noise was exploding forth from what looked like a long and enormous bomb, at the tail of which flames were spouting. Suddenly we realised, the 'Flying Bomb'!

It must have been tipped by one of our own fighter planes over the channel, and had consequently been turned round and was now flying due south over towards the Germans. We didn't hesitate to leave it alone.

On 20 June 154 Brigade (HD) relieved 153 Brigade and 2nd Troop went to 7th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, 3rd Troop to 7th Black Watch and 4th Troop to the 1st Black Watch.

We who were with the 1st Black Watch moved into the most forward position of the area at the tip of the salient, around which were a lot of Germans and a lot of dead cattle, but we didn't get stonked so intensely and at the centre of the position were Squadron and Brigade. At night we were always expecting the Germans to become very aggressive and make a nuisance of themselves, but surprisingly enough they never did.

At last on 22 June we heard that something decisive was about to come off. The Germans during that day were concentrating a considerable number of tanks and SPs south of Caen and from information received together with an intelligent appreciation of the situation, it was decided that they were probably going to try and sweep across the open ground south west of Escoville (The Butte de la Hogue), penetrate our positions in force and make a serious attempt at breaking through to the bridges at Benouville. Were they to have succeeded a very nasty dagger would have been thrust in to the left or eastern side of the bridgehead, one that could have seriously threatened it with disaster.

A Squadron were at Longueval, 2 miles south west of Escoville on 22 June, the most forward position occupied by us down the Orne; B Squadron were in reserve at Ranville and we, of course, were still with the Highland Division in the woods north east of Escoville. It was decided that the German attack should be repelled by tanks, supported on the flanks by anti-tank guns, by the RAF, the artillery and lastly, if necessary, naval fire power would be available for indirect shooting on specified targets.

..... Royal Hussars QMO were the only tanks east of Orne and so we were called upon to reconnoitre suitable fire positions with a view to occupying them just before dawn on 23 June ready for action.

A Squadron before dawn at 0300 hrs were to attack and take St Noncine la Chardenerette, thereby putting themselves in a more favourable position to deal with oncoming threat, in a position from where they might be able to deliver an effective right hook as it were.

C Squadron were to act as left flank protection, occupying positions south of Escoville.

B Squadron were to move up to occupy positions between A and C Squadrons so that finally in whatever direction the attack may come it would meet solid resistance.

At 0400 hrs on 23 June all C Squadron's tanks less 3rd Troop moved out of the 51st HD area and half an hour later were in suitable hull down positions south of Escoville overlooking the eastern slopes of The Butte de la Hogue. At 0500 hrs A Squadron reached St Honorine la Cherdonerette and although finding the Infantry had not arrived as planned, took up defensive positions around the villages and expelled the remnants of the enemy with their Browning fire.

At about 1000 hrs a fairly considerable counter attack by the 21st Panzer Division was put in on the left flank and at the same time a similar attack took place on the right flank as a diversionary measure. Capt J W Wardlaw and Tpr Urquhart were in a first class forward observation post and from here could see any movement of enemy vehicles so far as 5 miles away to the south. Consequently we were all warned and ready for the oncoming attack, and a great toll of enemy vehicles was taken particularly by A Squadron.

At 10 o'clock 50 Mark IVs and other types of armoured vehicles came rumbling across the plain but they did not get very far; the Regiment claimed 17 Mark IVs knocked out, of which C Squadron claimed 2 tanks and one lorry. These were all knocked out by 2nd Troop which had been moved into a suitable position as a result of Capt J W Wardlaw reporting the direction in which the German armour was coming. For the remainder A Squadron were chiefly responsible, but Sgt E Cooper who was attached to them at the time with his 17 pdr claimed 4 tanks knocked out. Sgt Short's tank was hit but no casualties were incurred and the tank remained in action. No tanks were lost by the Squadron or either by the Regiment.

The Germans, obviously taken aback on encountering such a forceful defence and such accurate tank gunnery, slowed down, paused, and finally withdrew. Half an hour later as they endeavoured to regroup their tanks in the villages of Courreville, Demouville and Frenouville, they were easily spotted by Capt J W Wardlaw and other FOPs as a result of which they were severely trounced by artillery and naval gun fire from the sea and the Typhoons had a complete field day knocking out 19 German vehicles.

We remained in observation until 2230 hrs but the Hun after such a severe defeat didn't attempt to move their tanks forward again and penetrate our positions.

We returned to 154 Brigade for the night and then moved out early to Escoville on 24 June; nothing happened all day but at dusk the Germans attacked the 7th Black Watch and after much deliberation the Squadron, instead of going into reserve, were sent back once again to 154 Brigade. This night march proved to be somewhat unpleasant as having moved back to a new position prior to going into reserve, it was not easy to find our way back to our old area across new country in the pitch black, particularly in a rather heavy concentration of mortar and artillery fire and 'Moaning Minnies'. The Squadron Leader's tank ran into one of our own minefields which caused some alarm but it suffered no damage. It took a very long time to make our way through the woods up to the forward positions as the narrow tracks were congested with traffic among which were a number of carriers full of wounded. By the time we reached our destination the 'Jocks' had repelled the German attack with the aid of 3rd Troop and all was quiet once more. On 25 June we were relieved by B Squadron in the evening and went into reserve at Ranville. During the course of these last 3 days 3rd Troop, who had remained with the 7th Black Watch, had lost 3 men (Tprs Yates-smith, Hedgecock? and Watt) wounded from mortar fire. One more loss incurred by the Squadron on 24 June was that of the M14 which was blown up by a mortar, as a result of which Signalman Watson received burns to his hands and Maj Sir D J A Cotter Bt and Capt J W Wardlaw, much to their fury, lost most of their kit.

Soon after this last battle of St Honorine Le Chardonnerette the Second Army were no longer to remain on the defensive. On 8 July the Regiment took part in their first big offensive battle since the assault itself; the period of consolidation was over, and the Germans on our front appeared to have given up the idea of dislodging us from the bridgehead although they did their utmost to prevent us from taking Caen. Caen fell, however, on 15 July and so at this period I think that the assault phase of the great Allied Expedition might be considered to have ended. For the Squadron it had been a trying period, after D-Day itself there had been surprisingly little action but a lot of waiting on the defensive due to the slow build up as a result of the storms in the channel and the traitor June. However, the real battle inoculation was over, everyone had grown accustomed to battle conditions and to living in their tanks, fortunately without paying the price of a heavy toll of casualties. At the end of the phase, after much waiting and receiving their full share of indirect fire, everyone was anxious to get on with the offensive and really push the Germans out of France prior to their final defeat. It now remains for someone else to carry on with the story of successes which accompanied the Squadron and the Regiment until they reached Bremen in the heart of Germany, and until 8 May 1945 when the ruthless and terrible foe who had waged war for 5½ years on innocent nations, finally capitulated.