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The Defeat of the 12th SS: 7–10 June 1944

Oliver Haller

Phillips Marburg University

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Haller: The Defeat of the 12th SS: 7-10 June 1944

STADT DER AUSLANDSDEUTSCHEN

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INVASION!

Die deutschen Gegenmaßnahmen laufen!

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Bereits in den ersten Gefechten haben sich die Panzergrenadiere der 12. Panzer-Division „Hitler-Jugend“ hervorragend geschlagen.

“While it seems clear the lack of battle experience hampered our formations in Normandy, one must remark that, although some of the German divisions were subject to the same disability, it appears to have had a less serious effect on them. The 12th S.S. Panzer Division, which was responsible for many of our troubles, was formed only in 1943 and had never fought before 7 June 1944. (As we have seen, however, it did contain a high proportion of experienced officers and N.C.Os. It also had the advantage, after the first days of the campaign, of having a commander and a senior staff officer who had special knowledge of the theatre of operations, having exercised there with the 1st S.S. Panzer Division in 1942.) There were other German divisions committed against us in Normandy which had not fought before and which nevertheless gave a good account of themselves. This may have been due in part to the fact that the German formations were on the defensive while ours were attacking, a more difficult role. Nevertheless, one suspects the Germans contrived to get more out of their training than we did. Perhaps their attitude towards such matters was less casual than ours.”

C.P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, p.277.

The Defeat of the 12th SS 7-10 June 1944

Oliver Haller

In the early hours of 6 June 1944, the first reports of a major Allied operation were transmitted to the 12th SS *Hitlerjugend* Panzer Division.¹ In anticipation of the long-awaited Allied invasion of occupied France, a company was sent to investigate the Caen area.² Though the young soldiers of the division were uncertain of what actually awaited them, the first acts in a conflict that would claim most of their lives were being performed. However, defeat was not on their minds during that hectic morning—the men of the 12th SS were fixed on driving the “little fish” back into the sea.

The situation confronting the 12th SS on June 7th was not encouraging. The 716th *Bodenstaendig* or Static Division, had lost two-thirds of its strength and was reduced to isolated points of resistance. During the

Opposite: “Invasion! The German countermeasures are in progress!”

initial hours of the 7 June advance, these were brushed aside as the 7th and 9th Canadian Infantry Brigades moved forward in two separate thrusts, while 8th Brigade dealt with the remaining German strong-points in the rear areas.

The 9th Brigade’s push towards Carpiquet forced a German reaction to secure the staging areas for a co-ordinated move against the Allies. The initial German response was purely defensive. *Standartenfuehrer* Kurt Meyer intercepted the Canadian advance with a battlegroup composed of his 25th Panzer Grenadier Regiment and 50 PzKpfw IVs from the tank regiment’s second battalion.³ In the chaotic melee that erupted, the Germans managed to blunt and deflect the Canadian advance.

Though 9th Brigade failed to seize their objectives, they did draw German attention from 7th Brigade which experienced only “moderate resistance,” mainly “in the form of



*Lieutenant-Colonel F.M. Matheson,
Commanding Officer, Regina Rifles*

snipers.”⁴ By noon D+1, 7th Brigade had settled down in anticipation of the expected German assault. The Regina Rifle Regiment established itself astride the Caen-Bayeux road at Bretteville-l’Orgueilleuse. Major Stuart Tubb, commanding “C” Company, took one look at the approaches to Bretteville and decided to occupy the village of Norrey-en-Bessin a kilometre to the south. This position would allow the Reginas to dominate the approaches to Bretteville and the railway embankment. Brigadier Harry Foster questioned this decision, but Lieutenant-Colonel F.M. Matheson, the commanding officer of the Reginas, insisted that Major Tubbs had made the right decision. Foster accepted his judgement.

Directly to the west, between the embankment and the highway, the Royal Winnipeg Rifles occupied Putot-en-Bessin. The Canadian Scottish Regiment took up a reserve position in Secqueville-en-Bessin. The 7th Brigade in crossing the Caen-Bayeux road and seizing the “high ground” in and around Bretteville, posed a formidable obstacle to any German advance along the main lateral highway in Calvados.

The embankment provided the Canadians a significant barrier to German armour. In order to advance frontally against the brigade “fortress,” the Germans were required to first capture the village of Norrey in order to gain a passage for their tanks across the embankment. The villages themselves, consisting of “stone buildings and narrow thoroughfares,” greatly enhanced the defender’s resilience.⁵ The Brigade was also anchored on its left flank by the Mue River, which was lined with hedges and farm walls. Worse still for the 12th SS, the natural terrain of the area consisted of flat fields and gentle rises interspersed with small wooded areas. The Canadians were able to use the church towers to view enemy movements over a large area.

The inherent advantages offered by terrain were not lost on the Canadians. The 7th Brigade busied itself during the lull in the fighting “to prepare defenses for the counter-attack which was almost sure to come.”⁶ Not only were the troops given a “moment to relax and scrounge something to eat,”⁷ but the



*Major Stuart Tubbs, Commander,
“C” Company, Regina Rifles*



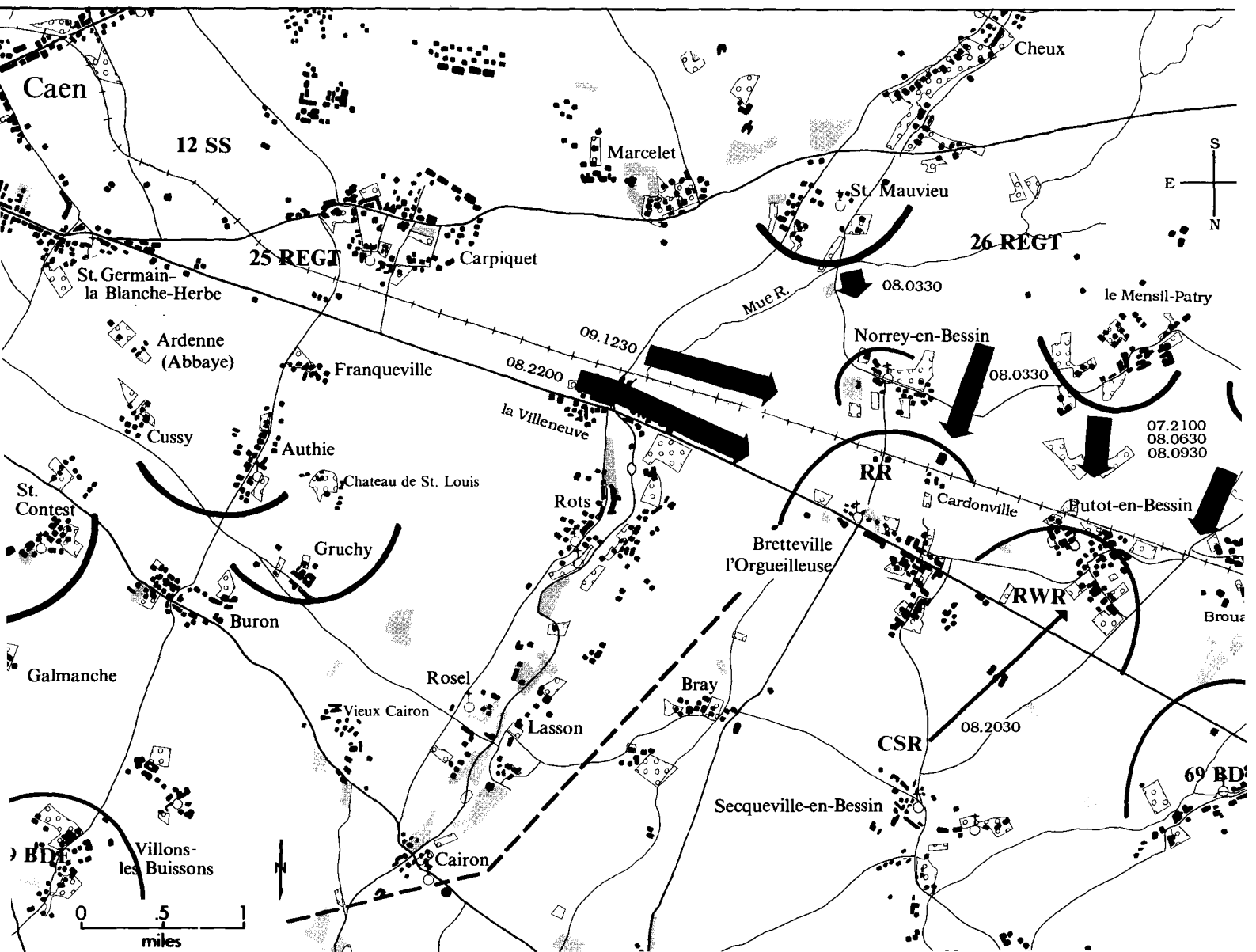
From left to right: Standartenführer Kurt Meyer, commander of the 25th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, Gruppenführer Fritz Witt, commander of 12th SS Panzer Division, Obergruppenführer Sepp Dietrich, commander of I SS Panzer Corps, Sturmbannführer Hubert Meyer, and Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, Commander-in-Chief West.

formation's artillery and anti-tank guns were hustled into position. The guns of the 3rd Anti-Tank Regiment commanded the approaches to both flanks and had a clear line of sight over kilometres of flat and open terrain. The FOOs (Forward Observation Officers) of 12th and 13th Field Regiments were in position as were the machine guns and mortars of the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa.

The men of the Canadian 7th Brigade were first stirred into action by what appeared to be a probing attack by the newly-arrived 26th Panzer Grenadier Regiment. At 2100 hours on 7 June, the defenders of Putot "quickly repulsed" a small group of German infantry.⁸ The brigade could only expect an increase in German effort over the next 24 hours. The 26th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, owing to the greater distance it had to travel and the general lack of information regarding Allied positions, arrived many hours later

than its sister formation. The Regiment established its headquarters in Cheux, approximately 2 kilometres from Norrey.⁹ A potentially dangerous 7 kilometre gap between Rots and Audrieu was filled, and Meyer's 25th Panzer Grenadier Regiment could breathe easier knowing their left flank was defended.¹⁰ However, the flanks of the division were by no means secure. On the left, near Audrieu and Cristot, the 12th SS Reconnaissance Battalion formed the only obstacle to an Allied flanking attempt by the British 50th (Northumbrian) Division. Panzer-Lehr Division had not yet linked up with the 12th SS.

Early on 8 June, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, realizing that time was running short, ordered the Seventh Army to throw the three armoured divisions of the I SS Panzer Corps at the advancing British and Canadians.¹¹ A concerted effort never occurred. The 21st Panzer Division, brushing



12th SS Attacks on 7th Brigade. Note that this map is oriented as the Canadian soldiers would have viewed the battle, with south at the top of the map. Each thick arrow represents a 12th SS attack and the number indicates the date and time of the attack (i.e. 08.0330 - 8 June, 3:30 a.m.).

the right sleeve of the *Hitlerjugend*, had been so severely mauled on June 6th that it mustered only 55 tanks, and could not disengage from combat with 3rd British Division.¹² Kurt Meyer's 25th Panzer Grenadier Regiment had committed its three infantry battalions against the Canadians in the Buron area, and redeployment elsewhere was impossible without surrendering Caen.¹³ The I SS Panzer Corps could not immediately field the resources required for a comprehensive push to the sea.

Despite their inability to concentrate for a large counterattack against the Canadian and British divisions, the Germans were still determined to make preliminary moves for large-scale offensive operations. The villages of Norrey, Putot, and Bretteville, held by the 7th Brigade, were to be cleared by the 26th Panzer Grenadier Regiment in order to open a corridor along the Caen-Bayeux road for the division's tanks. The three infantry battalions of the 26th Regiment were ordered to overwhelm the Canadians beginning in the early hours of 8 June.¹⁴

"D" Company, Regina Rifles at Cardonville, 8 June 1944

On June 7th, "D" Company of the Reginas was at Villeneuve just south of the railway line with "B" Company to the north near Rots. After the Kurt Meyer group drove the 9th Brigade out of Authie, Buron and Gruchy... Colonel Matheson recalled the two companies to Bretteville early on June 8th and placed "B" Company on the Caen-Bayeux road facing south-east. He put Major Eric Syme in command of "Baker." He asked me to command "Dog" Company and to occupy Cardonville south-west of Bretteville astride the railway line ... My company was facing a farm just south of the railway line then occupied by 12th SS Panzer Grenadiers from Mohnke's 26th Regiment...

It is clear now that the Germans thought that

Norrey-en-Bessin, being the furthest penetration of Allied Forces at that time, was to be used as the break-out point. They reckoned that Norrey was heavily defended with little behind it so they made a two-pronged attack. The western thrust came right at us. At least 14 tanks sliced between "C" Company at Norrey and "D" Company at Cardonville. I know because I was there (in the dark). The ensuing battle was horrendous with the tanks circling our solid stone house and surrounding high stone walls. The night was lit by the burning barns at the farm and the tanks overran one platoon in the orchard behind the north wall crushing anti-tank guns, carriers and soldiers. The tanks ultimately left what remained of us at first light as our Typhoons

were ready to pounce. Mohnke then sent large numbers of Panzer Grenadiers to attack "D" Company in broad daylight. Down to 45 men and two officers, myself and Lieutenant Dick Roberts, we all had machine guns of one sort or another (several German) and were protected in our fortress-like position...

I talked to Colonel Clifford of the 13th Field Regiment who was with Foster Matheson and gave him coordinates for a 105-mm barrage on the Germans at the farm in front of our south wall. It was the best shoot that I ever saw in my nine months of action. The Germans were caught in open ground and had to withdraw.

Gordon Brown
(Lt-Col, ret'd)
April 23, 1994

At 0330 hours, under the cover of darkness, three companies of the 26th Panzer Grenadier Regiment's 1st Battalion moved north from their staging areas at Cheux. The Battalion hoped to envelop the Regina Rifle Regiment in Norrey by striking from two directions. The 1st and 3rd Companies pressed forward to the right of Norrey, while the 2nd Company moved to the left of the village. The German movements had not escaped Canadian attention. The Reginas reported several armoured personnel carriers churning their way towards Norrey and the embankment.¹⁵ It appears that

Sturmbannfuehrer Bernhard Krause's battalion had no intention of achieving surprise even though the attack was not supported by artillery.

To the Reginas left, the German 1st and 3rd Companies passed through St. Manvieu and crossed the Mue River. The Reginas reacted with a torrent of small arms fire supported by artillery. The advancing *Hitlerjugend* threw themselves to the ground, suffering casualties, and a spray of machine-gun fire struck down a company commander. The assault was temporarily suspended, and



the two companies dug deep into the soil. The 12th SS fared better on the Canadian right. The 2nd Company managed to move quickly past Norrey and charge across the embankment. However, the failure of the other two formations forced the extended 2nd Company to withdraw and entrench itself behind the embankment and within Cardonville — a group of houses near the edge of Bretteville.¹⁶

The Regina Rifle War Diary described the assault as a minor “counter-attack.”¹⁷ In fact, the Reginas had easily repulsed an enemy battalion hoping to force a breakthrough in a poorly executed operation. The assault had been undertaken without artillery support even though no efforts were made to surprise the entrenched opponents. Hubert Meyer insists that this serious failure was due to Canadian radio interference which prevented the forward observer from communicating

Left: A forward outpost of the Regina Rifles in Bretteville-l’Orgueilleuse, 8-10 June 1944. (Photo by D.I. Grant, NAC PA 129042)
Below: A young trooper from the 12th SS.



with his battery.¹⁸ Without the suppressing effect of artillery, the *Hitlerjugend* were quite vulnerable to Canadian fire. The 1st Battalion was continuously pounded by Canadian artillery throughout the attack, and the pinned-down German companies waited out the storm in forced silence. The assault cost the battalion approximately twenty-five casualties, while the Canadians suffered minimal losses.¹⁹ That the Regina Rifle Regiment was unaware of the full extent of the attack's scale is a testament to their success. The *Hitlerjugend* had failed in their first push.

The second attempt at a breakthrough came after dawn. To the immediate left of Krause's formation, the 2nd Battalion, commanded by *Sturmbannfuehrer* Siebken, had methodically advanced to its starting point around le Mesnil-Patry. Again highlighting the confusion present within the 12th SS, the battalion delayed its assault for three hours owing to an order demanding careful progress forward.²⁰ It did not attack in conjunction with the 1st Battalion as planned. Neither did the Regiment's 3rd Battalion.

Commanded by *Sturmbannfuehrer* Erich Olboeter, the 3rd Battalion along with the 12th SS Reconnaissance Detachment or *Aufklaerungsabteilung*, were ordered to seize the villages to the immediate left of the 2nd Battalion in order to secure their flank.²¹ As the Canadian 7th Brigade had not extended itself as far as Brouay, the German objective, Olboeter's troops seized the village without interference. The area was the responsibility of the British 50th Division, which had not yet advanced as far as the Canadians. The Reconnaissance Detachment established itself in Audrieu linking up with forward elements of Panzer Lehr. Positioned on the embankment, the Germans posed a threat to the axis between the British and Canadian divisions.

However, British gunfire systematically pounded the Germans until they withdrew. *Oberscharfuehrer* Hans-Georg Kessler of the 3rd Battalion described the frightening results of the bombardment on an element of the Panzer-Lehr Division:

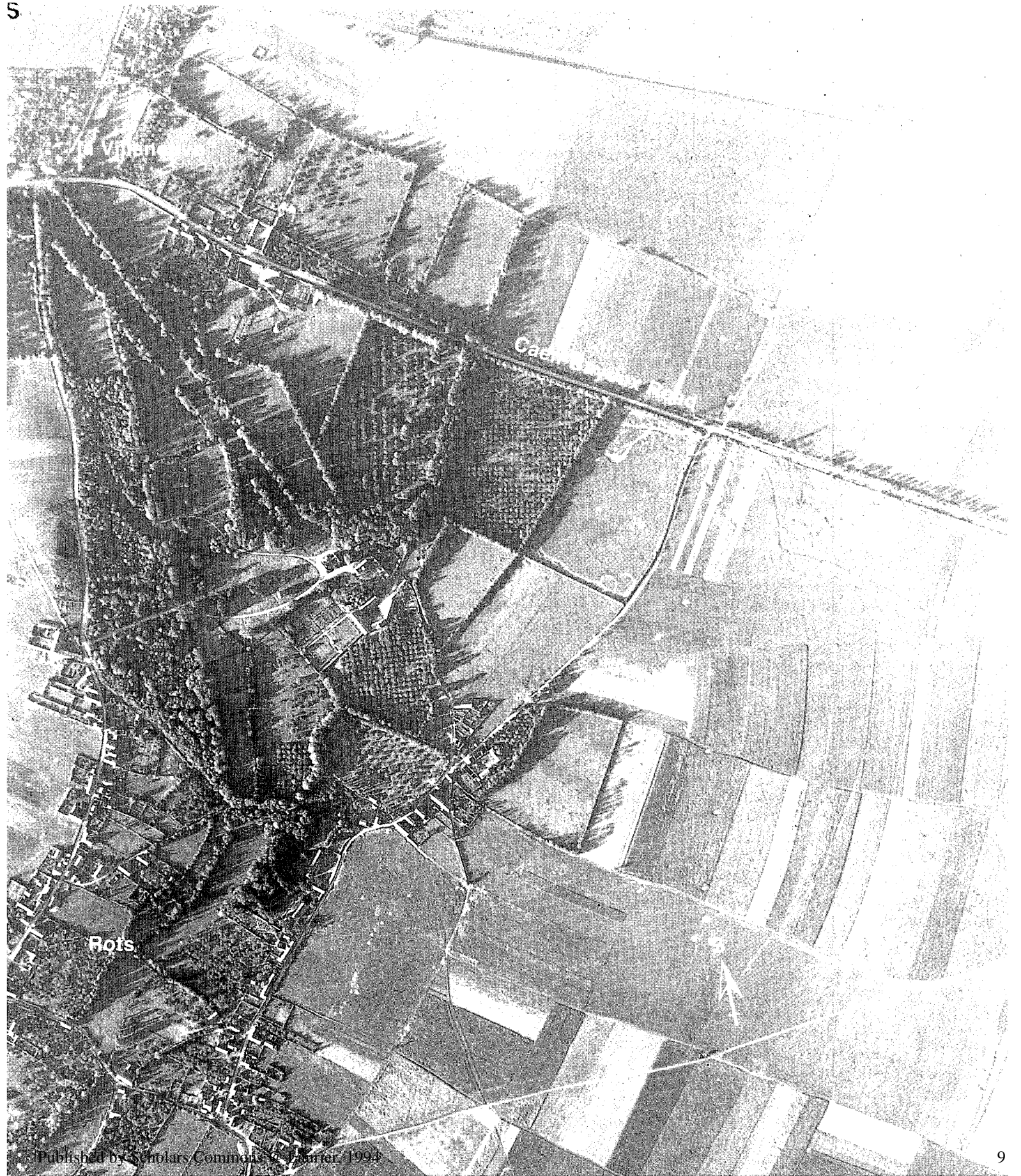
We were offered a glimpse of the most horrific face of war. The enemy had systematically hacked an element of the Panzer-Lehr Division to pieces with heavy artillery. Beside the obliterated vehicles and weapons lay the pieces of our Comrades. Others hung from the trees. It commanded a dreadful silence.²²

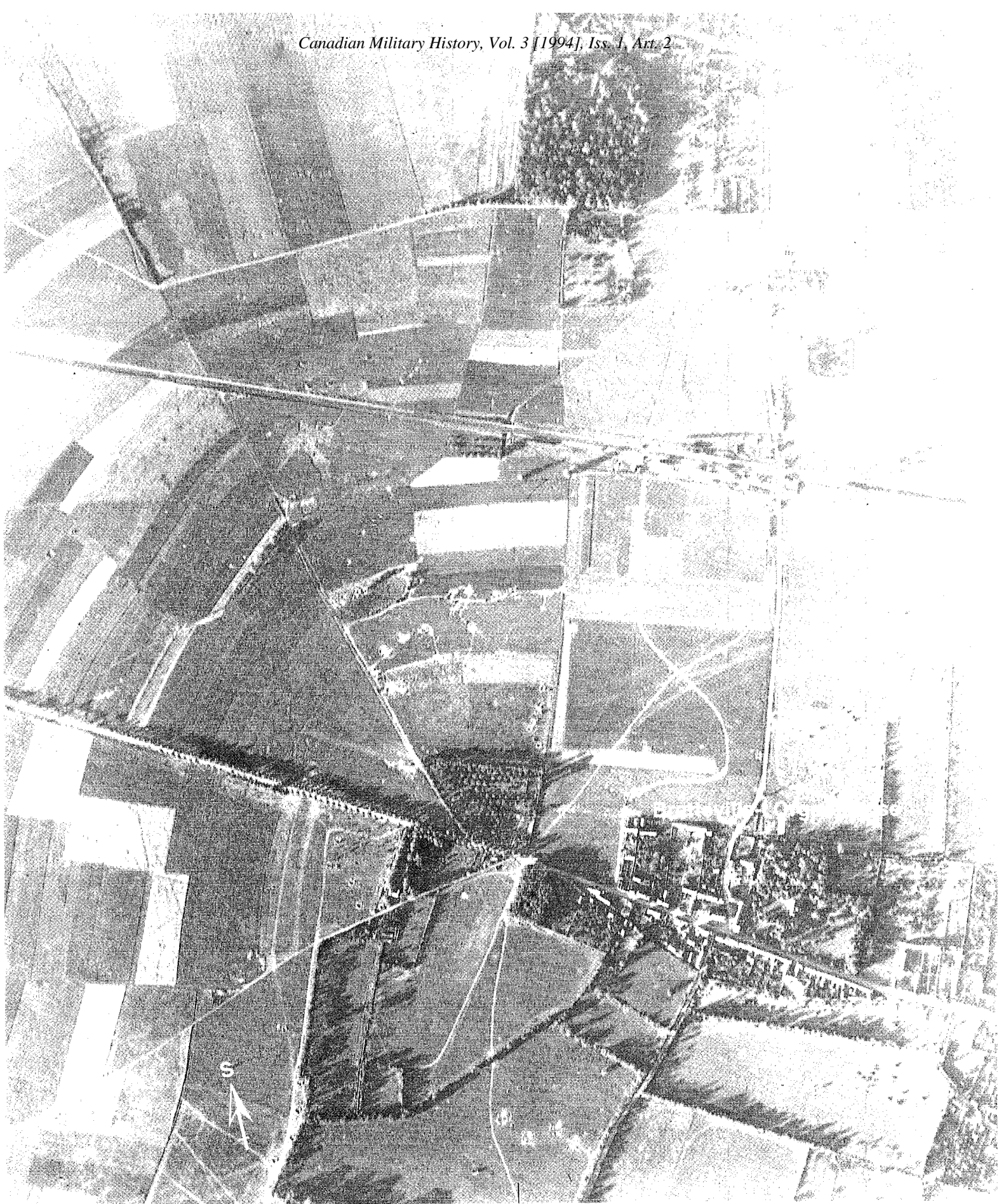
In fact, the reconnaissance detachment could only watch as Audrieu and a nearby chateau were reduced to rubble by naval artillery. The troops were forced back about a kilometre to Cristot to construct a new defensive position.²³ Artillery alone had forced the outcome.

The one reverse the Canadians suffered on 8 June was caused by the 2nd Battalion's assault against the unprotected flank of the 7th Brigade. At 0630 hours, Siebken's massed companies rushed the 1.5 kilometre distance between le Mesnil-Patry and their objective of Putot.²⁴ Canadian radio interference was overcome and German artillery and mortars saturated the village with high-explosives before the *Hitlerjugend* stormed across a railway bridge in front of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles' "A" Company.²⁵ The Canadians resisted the initial assault, and the concentrated Bren and rifle fire "swept the enemy infantry away like a scythe to hay."²⁶ Despite their losses, the young men of the 2nd Battalion "came on inexorably, taking little evasive action despite the heavy fire that greeted them."²⁷ The Royal Winnipeg Rifles remained steadfast. Finally sickened by their losses, the *Hitlerjugend* retreated to regroup. Hubert Meyer, the official historian of the 12th SS, records that the 2nd Battalion now understood the extent of the Canadian defensive preparations.²⁸ Not easily daunted, Siebken's troops prepared a second assault.

Prior to their next advance, the Germans shelled Putot extensively. The bombardment, which included air-bursting "88" shells, inflicted heavy casualties on the Canadian defenders.²⁹ Oddly enough, snipers, thought to be from the 716th Infantry Division, "came to life in the buildings throughout the town and made it difficult to move in the whole battalion area."³⁰ Beginning at 0930 hours,

5





the Panzer Grenadiers resumed the attack with a now more cautious advance around the Canadian strong points in Putot. By midday, the *Hitlerjugend* had crossed the embankment and overrun the village — enveloping “A,” “B” and “C” Companies.³¹ Exhausted and short of ammunition, the formations attempted to break out using the cover of a thick smoke-screen in order to link up with the still intact “D” Company.³² Only a few soldiers managed to escape the encirclement, while the remainder “acquitted themselves like Napoleon’s Guard at Waterloo.”³³ With heavy losses on both sides, the *Hitlerjugend* had seized Putot.

Third Canadian Division responded quickly. Four regiments of artillery were brought to bear on Putot, and the soldiers of the 2nd Battalion were sent scurrying for cover.³⁴ The 12th SS withstood the heavy barrage, however, and it became painfully obvious that a counterattack was necessary to regain the village.

Brigadier Harry Foster made quick preparations for the assault. At 1700 hours, a battlegroup was formed using the brigade’s reserve battalion, the Canadian Scottish Regiment, reinforced by two squadrons from the 6th Armoured Regiment and elements of the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa (MG). The attack would be supported by the 12th and 13th Field Artillery Regiments. The formation was to advance with two companies in the lead, two in reserve, with the squadrons of tanks covering the flanks.³⁵ The battlegroup proceeded quickly towards their collection point at la Bergerie Farm woods, and assembled for action. It was hoped that the counterattack would begin at around 2030 hours.

Managing to meet the deadline, “D” and “C” Companies moved in behind a creeping barrage of exceptional force.³⁶ Mirroring the previous defenders of Putot, the dazed and exhausted *Hitlerjugend* manned their automatic weapons and sprayed the advancing battlegroup with machine-gun fire — killing two officers outright in the charge.³⁷ Yet, the Panzer Grenadiers lacked the

equipment to repulse a determined assault supported by armour. The Germans had found it difficult to move anti-tank weaponry into Putot, owing to the interference of Canadian artillery, and shortages of infantry anti-tank weaponry.³⁸ The *Hitlerjugend* withdrew from Putot in the face of the Canadian attack, and streamed towards the embankment. Though the village was in Canadian hands by 2130 hours, the chaotic battle continued to rage on its perimeter, as small groups of men stumbled through the descending darkness. Captain P.F. Ramsey, second-in-command of “B” Company, Canadian Scottish Regiment, described the battlefield as a:

. . . Hornet’s Nest. No other term is quite so descriptive of that hot spot. Mortaring was still going on in strength and all the cacophony of the full dress infantry battle with artillery and tank support filled the still evening air. The distinctive Burrp of the German Machine Guns punctuated the staccato of the Bren. Over all was a fog of dust and smoke.³⁹

The Canadian counterattack succeeded and forced Siebken’s 2nd Battalion to withdraw south of the embankment in order to regroup.⁴⁰ The Canadian Scottish dug-in and consolidated, while the badly mauled Royal Winnipeg Rifles withdrew to the rear.⁴¹ Putot had been retaken, and the brigade fortress was once again secure.

The advance of the *Hitlerjugend*’s 2nd Battalion had yielded nothing. Hubert Meyer states that German losses amounted to 19 dead, 58 wounded and 21 missing — the 6th Company being effectively halved.⁴² These statistics are almost certainly too low.⁴³ On the other hand, the Canadian Scottish suffered 125 casualties, while the Winnipeg Rifles incurred 256.⁴⁴ The fighting for Putot had taken on a First World War dimension — heavy attrition for limited gains. The 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 26th Panzer Grenadier Regiment had failed to dislodge the Canadian 7th Brigade from their defensive position, and the proposed route of advance to the sea remained shut.



Panther knocked out by Reginas using PIATs and grenades in Bretteville on the night of 8 June.

(Photo by F.L. Duberville, NAC PA 130149)

From the tower of the imposing Abbey Ardennes, Kurt Meyer had monitored the dismal progress of Moehnke's regiment during its fruitless attempts to clear the 7th Brigade off of the Caen-Bayeux road. The *Standartenfuehrer* was still concerned, however, with the movement of Canadian 9th Brigade into the Cairon region. Any concerted effort south through Rots threatened to divide the two Panzer Grenadier Regiments, and eliminate any planned offensive.⁴⁵ After further analysis, Meyer correctly discerned that the enemy concentration was defensive in nature. Since the 9th Brigade had been held in front of Carpiquet and Caen, and both Canadians and Germans were well entrenched, Meyer decided to turn his attention west — "I came to the conclusion to help my division on my regiment's left flank with a thrust towards Bayeux."⁴⁶ Not only would such a move aid the hard-pressed 1st Battalion near Norrey, but it would close the four-mile gap between the two Panzer Grenadier Regiments.⁴⁷ The assault also promised to outflank the forward elements of

the 7th Brigade in Norrey and trap them against the Caen-Bayeux highway. Meyer decided it was his turn to seize the staging areas for the drive to the sea.

The Canadians anticipated a German move along the Caen-Bayeux highway. The Regina Rifles had reported groups of tanks advancing on their positions as early as 1220 hours and again at 1700 hours. The War Diaries record that both assaults were repulsed.⁴⁸ Though Hubert Meyer maintains that the *Hitlerjugend* had not conducted armoured operations that early in the day, suggesting that the Canadians had simply erred, it is evident that 3rd Division was assuming the next blow would fall in the area of Bretteville.⁴⁹

Meyer's plan required the armour of Max Wuensche's 12th SS Panzer Regiment — whose tanks were still assembling near Franqueville.⁵⁰ The plan called for the seizure of Bretteville-l'Orgueilleuse prior to the advance towards Bayeux.⁵¹ Why Meyer

thought that he could easily breach the Canadian defenses, considering the difficulties of the 26th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, is difficult to understand. In comparison to the previous battles, the forces allocated to Meyer's grandiose operation were strangely small. The *Kampfgruppe* consisted of the 15th *Kradschuetz* or Motorcycle Company, two companies of the 1st Panzer Detachment, and a battery of self-propelled artillery.⁵² The three motorized infantry battalions of the 25th Panzer Grenadier Regiment were fully committed against the Canadian 9th Brigade, and Meyer had to force a company of engineers into the line to free up the 15th Motorcycle Company for the assault.⁵³ Only when the preparations were completed did Meyer inform the divisional commander of his decision and he then went to sleep.⁵⁴ Meyer had decided to delay the attack until dusk to avoid the hazards of air attack.

At approximately 2200 hours, the *Kampfgruppe* began to roll down the Caen-Bayeux road towards Bretteville. The few infantrymen designated for the mission hopped onto the Panthers, and Meyer fulfilled his promise to the 15th Motorcycle Company by leading them into their first battle.⁵⁵ The group quickly by-passed the unoccupied village of le Bourg and crossed the Mue River on an intact bridge. Under the cover of twilight, the German armour advanced to within a few hundred meters of Bretteville before the Canadians opened fire. The Panthers halted.⁵⁶

The torrent of Regina machine-gun fire was well aimed, and the commander of the 15th Motorcycle Company was struck in the stomach — “he fell down to the road to the edge of the ditch.”⁵⁷ Meyer's motorcycle then took a direct hit which instantly killed the driver and set the *Standartenfuehrer* ablaze.⁵⁸ Meyer's men extinguished the fire, and the undaunted commander led the wildly-firing Panthers onto the objective. The six-pounders of the 3rd Canadian Anti-Tank Regiment, supporting “A” Company of the Regina Rifles with a single troop, claimed six tanks knocked-out in the first charge. The *Hitlerjugend* attempted to shift the attack towards the

south, but other tanks were ignited by the accurate artillery fire.⁵⁹

Tanks from the 4th Panzer Company then attempted to churn their way into the eastern edge of Bretteville, but anti-tank fire destroyed the command tank, and the infantry dismounted to storm forward on foot.⁶⁰ The Germans were taken aback by the ferocity of the Canadian response. “We were surprised by heavy anti-tank weapons.”⁶¹ Due to the intense small arms fire, the small numbers of infantry could not press the attack and went to ground. The *Kampfgruppe* had shattered the Reginas' outer defenses — “several carriers were knocked out and their position overrun,”⁶² but before assaulting Bretteville itself, the German armour shelled the village at a distance of about 300 yards. This continued for approximately half an hour before the Panthers again ventured forward. At midnight, two German tanks approached the Regina headquarters. The Canadians swarmed the advancing armour. One Panther was dispatched with multiple PIAT hits and a “necklace of 75 grenades,” and the other quickly withdrew after firing “like a child in a tantrum.”⁶³ Without sufficient infantry support, the 12th SS armour circled the village helplessly, and the fires they ignited with their 75-mm guns merely created more light for the Canadians to shoot by — “The whole sky was aglow with gun fire, blazing buildings and the dazzling of the Canadian Parachute flares, which illuminated the PANZERS for the defenders' anti-tank guns and blinded the German crews.”⁶⁴ It was difficult for the combatants to understand what was happening in the chaotic battle. At one point, a confused German officer rode his Volkswagen down the main street, “dismounted and gazed around for a few seconds until a PIAT gunner let fly a bomb which hit him directly.”⁶⁵ As late as 0445 hours, the *Hitlerjugend* were putting in “determined attacks.”⁶⁶ But without additional infantry there was little hope of success.

Late in the assault, Meyer and Wuensche had attempted to reach the 1st Battalion of the 26th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, in order to collect infantry to support the tanks, but



Sherman Firefly 17-pounder

(Photo by Ken Bell, NAC PA 131391)

they were driven off by the heavy anti-tank fire.⁶⁷ Moreover, the 1st Battalion was pinned down by the single company in Norrey and they remained in their fox-holes. Reluctantly, Meyer ordered the withdrawal back to Rots.⁶⁸ The Canadians had again repulsed a German attack. Altogether, the casualties of Meyer's *Kampfgruppe* totalled 152 with 43 dead.⁶⁹ According to the Germans, at least six Panthers were destroyed, though the Canadians claimed twelve. The improvised assault had been repulsed, and the Canadian "fortress" in Norrey-Putot-Bretteville remained intact.

The 12th SS had attempted to seize a defended position without sufficient infantry support. Meyer himself realized this as the fundamental reason for failure, though he was quick to cite the strength of the Canadian position.⁷⁰ However, it should have been plain to a man of his experience that infantry have inherent advantages over armour in close-quarter combat; they are able to swarm

the tanks and get flank shots in individual vehicles. Denuded of their infantry, the Panthers were helpless. The most startling fact was Meyer's insistence on remaining in the Bretteville area for the rest of the night when success was plainly impossible. The *Standartenfuehrer's* actions might be considered those of a confused and desperate man. With no one was exercising command and control, confusion reigned.

Throughout the assault on Bretteville, the 12th SS Panzer Regiment's 3rd Company sat idle in Authie. This formation was the last to arrive in the staging area near Franqueville and was unable to participate in the first attack on Bretteville. Kurt Meyer, who had intercepted the formation on a motorcycle, had initially ordered the Panthers to support the 25th Panzer Grenadier Regiment north of Caen. Though the 3rd Company crews heard the noise of a fierce battle to the southwest, they were not aware a major operation was being conducted.⁷¹

At around 0900 hours on the morning of 9 June, the 3rd Company was replaced in the line by a detachment of PzKpfw IVs, allowing the company to rumble through Rots towards la Villeneuve on the Caen-Bayeux highway. When the company reached the junction, the crews received their first orders to assault Norrey. Together with an infantry attack from the 1st Battalion of the 26th Panzer Grenadier Regiment south of the village, the Panthers were ordered to Norrey with the support of a small number of infantry from the 25th Panzer Grenadier Regiment. The assault would depend once more on surprise, as the 12th SS could provide no artillery support.⁷²

Hubert Meyer states that no one knows who developed the plan for the assault. The commander of the 12th SS Panzer Regiment had been wounded, and was consequently being attended to at a field hospital. In all probability, the scheme was once again devised by *Standartenfuehrer* Kurt Meyer, who was being pressured to seize the staging areas for a German offensive. The villages controlled by the 7th Brigade were still considered vital starting-points for the plan to work.⁷³ The Panthers were ordered to launch their assault at 1300 hours when the Tactical Air Forces, still based in Britain, would be absent.

From la Villeneuve, the 3rd Company crossed the rail embankment through an underpass, turned right and deployed for battle. The 12 Panthers fanned out in a single line at a right-angle to the embankment. A few minutes past 1230 hours, the company began the attack on Norrey — across open and flat terrain covered by wheatfields.⁷⁴ The company was led by *Hauptmann* Luedemann, as the commander, *Oberststurm-fuehrer* von Ribbentrop, had been wounded earlier.

Though von Ribbentrop merely watched from the rear area along with Max Wuensche, he had recommended that the company drive at high speeds in a broad front — only stopping to fire their 75-mm guns. Luedemann followed Ribbentrop's advice, and the infantry were left far behind.⁷⁵

As the Panthers approached the village, not yet facing any enemy fire, Luedemann ordered the company to swing left. The five tanks of the 3rd section hugging the rail embankment were forced to speed past the 2nd section in order to keep a solid line of tanks facing Norrey. The four tanks of the 1st section had by this point slowed to form a reserve. Although the order to swing left, presenting the Panther's thicker frontal armour to the Canadian defenders in Norrey, was an understandable action, it had consequences that the *Hitlerjugend* had not anticipated.

Nine Sherman tanks including several "Fireflies" equipped with the 17-pounder, were being moved towards the front to reinforce the Reginas' position in Norrey. As the tanks, from the Elgin Regiment, were making a detour in front of the village when they spotted the advancing Panthers. Catastrophically for the 3rd Panzer Company, the swing to the left, though protecting them from the 6-pounders in Norrey, exposed their flanks to the Shermans at not more than 1000 metres distance. The Canadian tanks deployed in a straight line and opened fire.⁷⁶ A "Firefly" commanded by Lieutenant Henry hit the tank nearest the rail-line first. Adolf Morawetz thought he had struck a mine; "after a dull bang and shaking, as if the tracks had been ripped off, the tank came to a standstill."⁷⁷ After another bang, the ammunition for the MG-42 ignited and the Panther burst into flames. Before Morawetz desperately attempted to open the hatch he had just closed, he looked through his periscope and watched as the neighbouring Panther exploded — throwing the turret into the air. Morawetz survived, but his tank and crew had been destroyed. Six other Panthers were quickly dispatched in the next four minutes. The survivors, including the badly burned crews who had bailed out of their destroyed tanks, fled back towards the underpass. The infantry were forced to join the men of the 2nd Company under the bridge, as an artillery barrage began to pound the area inflicting heavy casualties. The converging attack of the 1st Battalion of the 25th Panzer Grenadiers never materialized. The assault was a complete and total failure.⁷⁸



The face of defeat: a panzer-grenadier from the 12th SS captured by the Canadians.

The gallant stand of the 7th Brigade against *Hitlerjugend* impressed two thoughts on the mind of the German commanders. First, since the 12th SS was unable to throw the Canadians off the Caen-Bayeux highway, the planned drive to the sea was considered hopeless. General Geyr von Schweppenburg, commander of the recently activated Panzer Group West, visited Kurt Meyer at the Abbaye Ardenne on 9 June to evaluate the progress of the *Hitlerjugend*. On hearing the *Standartenfuehrer's* report, von Schweppenburg uttered a sardonic reply — “My dear Meyer, the war can only now be won through political means.”⁷⁹ The command structure in disarray, the Germans and the 12th SS were now firmly on the defensive.

A second thought was impressed on the minds of the officers and men of the 12th SS. The Canadian 3rd Division was considered a formation of exceptional skill, and the artillery which they commanded inspired nothing short of fear. Allied high explosives had time and again inflicted severe wounds on the *Hitlerjugend*. Hubert Meyer summarized this feeling:

The anti-tank weapons around Bretteville were so powerful that outflanking movements to the north and south were thwarted. The surprising employment of parachute magnesium flares blinded the Panthers and lighted clear targets for the enemy anti-tank guns. Our opponents were especially strong on the defensive, and they did not allow themselves to be surprised. They fought ferociously and bravely.⁸⁰

On the other hand, the Canadians were less than impressed with German offensive capabilities, though they did not question their enemy's spirit. Brigadier Harry Foster, commander of 7th Brigade, pointed out that the 12th SS did not attempt to take advantage of the open flanks of the Regina Rifles, and the “enemy flung himself straight against the strongest points and utterly failed to exploit the undoubted weakness of his opponent's position.”⁸¹ Even C.P. Stacey argues that the *Hitlerjugend* assaults “leave the impression of rather hasty and ineffective improvisation. The attacks were pressed with courage and determination but with no particular skill . . . the operations seem to have been locally conceived and control on the divisional level was ineffective.”⁸² The disjointed timing of the assaults, with Kurt Meyer's *Kampfgruppe* advancing on Bretteville hours after the 26th Panzer Grenadier Regiment had been repulsed from Putot and Norrey, suggests that the regiments were not communicating effectively, if at all. That Meyer and Wuensche were forced to drive towards the 1st Battalion, in order to scrape up support for their failing assault, was indicative of a general lack of communication, command and control. Clearly, the *Hitlerjugend* efforts were not those of an exceptional division.

The battles also highlight the problems of offensive action in Normandy. The fields around Caen were relatively open and the notorious “bocage” lay to the Canadian right. The battle area seemed to furnish ideal tank country owing to its apparent lack of significant obstacles, but it also provided ideal conditions for anti-tank gunners. The German Panthers paid a heavy price for movement out of dug-in defenses.

It is evident that the 12th SS was not capable of conducting successful offensive operations against prepared positions in Normandy. Artillery and anti-tank guns were the key to victory, and the Allies possessed large numbers of these effective weapons. All of the German assaults were checked and defeated in detail. The 3rd Canadian Division had won a decisive victory.

This study has shown the need for re-evaluating the traditional arguments about the military effectiveness of 12th SS and 3rd Canadian Infantry Divisions. If the true nature of the Normandy campaign is to be understood the historian must avoid a simplistic approach. The strengths and weaknesses of specific military operations must be evaluated without relying on broad generalizations. Only then can the myths be swept away. The initial Normandy battles were significantly influenced by the relationship of heavy weaponry to terrain, as well as by command and control problems. It became evident that offensive operations had become dangerous undertakings — a reality that would plague the Allies for the remainder of the Normandy campaign, and give rise to the myth of German military superiority. If only the initial battles were to be considered, a German army official historian might conclude, in words borrowed from C.P. Stacey:⁸³

While it seems clear that lack of battle experience hampered the German formations in Normandy one must remark that although some of the Allied divisions were subject to the same disability it appears to have had a less serious effect on them. The 3rd Canadian Division which was responsible for many of our troubles was formed in 1940 but had never fought before 6 June 1944. Moreover it did not contain a high proportion of experienced officers and NCOs. There were also other Allied Divisions in Normandy which had not fought before and which nevertheless gave a very good account of themselves. This may have been due to the fact that heavy reverses were suffered when Allied divisions were on the defensive when ours were attacking, a more difficult role. Nevertheless one suspects that the Allies contrived to get more out of their training than we did . . .

NOTES

1. A Luftwaffe sentry alerted the 12th SS *Hitlerjugend* Panzer Division as early as 0230 hours on D-Day. See Hubert Meyer, *Kriegsgeschichte der 12 SS-Panzerdivision "Hitlerjugend"* (Osnabrueck: Munin Verlag GbmH, 1987) p.52 and NAC RG 238, Records of Proceedings, Trial of Kurt Meyer, p.526.
2. The Company began its move as early as 0400 hours. Meyer, p.53.
3. Craig Luther, *Blood and Honour: The History of the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitler Youth," 1943-1945* (San Jose, California: R. James Bender Publications, 1987) p.129.
4. Rginald H. Roy, *1944: The Canadians in Normandy* Canadian War Museum Publication No.19. (Ottawa: MacMillan, 1984) pp.30-31.
5. Luther, p.153.
6. Roy, p.229.
7. NAC RG 24, Vol.14,461, War Diary (WD), 12th Field Regiment, 7-10 June 1944.
8. Eric Wells, *Little Black Devils: A History of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles* (Winnipeg: Foye Publishing, 1983) p.150.
9. Meyer, p.88.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Luther, p.150.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. Due primarily to the embankment, the 12th SS divisional commander decided on a frontal assault using infantry. (Meyer, p.92) The Canadian War Diaries are misleading in repeatedly recording visual contact with German tanks — "At 0858 enemy tanks were seen at 963703. 8 tanks were seen at 9220 and reported to Bde HQ. At 1220 enemy tanks reported advancing along road to our HQ. At 1100 hours, "D" Coy reported enemy tanks in considerable strength 1000 yards to their front." (NAC RG 24, Vol.15,198, WD, The Regina Rifle Regiment, 7-10 June 1944.) The Panthers and PzKpfw IVs would not enter the melee until the evening of 8 June. The best explanation for this error is that in the chaos of battle the Canadians confused armoured personnel carriers (*Panzers-paehwagen*) and self-propelled guns with tanks.
15. NAC RG 24, Vol.15,198, WD, The Regina Rifle Regiment (RR), 7-10 June 1944.
16. Meyer, p.92.
17. NAC RG 24, Vol.15,198, WD, RR, 7-10 June 1944.
18. Meyer, p.92.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, p.93.
21. *Ibid.*, p.95.
22. Translation of: "Hier bot sich uns das schrecklichste Bild des Krieges. Der Feind hatte eine Einheit der Panzer-Lehr Division mit schweren Waffen regelrecht zerhackt. auseinandergerissene Schuetzpanzerwagen und Ausruestungen daneben lagen Koerperteilen, der gefallen Kameraden oder hingen in dem Baeumen. Es herrschte grausame Stille." *Ibid.*, p.95.
23. *Ibid.*, p.98.

24. *Ibid.*
25. NAC RG 24, Vol.15,233, WD, The Royal Winnipeg Rifles Regiment (RWR), 7-10 June 1944.
26. Wells, p.157.
27. Luther, p.157.
28. Meyer, p.93.
29. Wells, p.151.
30. NAC RG 24, Vol.15,233, WD, RWR, 7-10 June 1944.
31. Luther, p.151.
32. Stacey, p.135.
33. Wells, p.52.
34. NAC RG 24, Vol.15,233, WD, RWR, 7-10 June 1944.
35. Roy, p.233.
36. *Ibid.*
37. NAC RG 24, Vol.15,036, WD, The Canadian Scottish Regiment (CSR), 7-10 June 1944.
38. Meyer, p.94.
39. NAC RG 24, Vol.15,036, WD, CSR, 7-10 June 1944.
40. Luther, p.157.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Meyer, p.95.
43. Considering the fact that the 1st Battalion's casualties were listed as 25, for an action that was both much shorter in duration and subdued in intensity, it is doubtful that the Germans suffered only less than four times that total in Putot. Second, that the Canadians suffered almost four times the German total, even when allowing for the fact that the Winnipeg Rifle Regiment was overrun, is difficult to understand. The intensity of Canadian artillery, their use of tanks against an infantry short in anti-tank weapons, and the nature of the terrain makes Meyer's estimates seem slightly off.
44. Stacey, p.136.
45. NAC RG 238, Records of Proceedings, p.586.
46. *Ibid.*, p.586.
47. Luther, p.162.
48. NAC RG 24, Vol.15,198, WD, RR, 7-10 June 1944.
49. Meyer, p.100.
50. Records of Proceedings, p.594.
51. Luther, p.162.
52. Meyer, p.100.
53. Records of Proceedings, p.587.
54. *Ibid.*, p.594.
55. Meyer, p.100.
56. *Ibid.*
57. Records of Proceedings, p.595.
58. *Ibid.*
59. Stan Medland, unpublished account of the 3rd Canadian Anti-Tank Regiment, p.9.
60. Meyer, p.100.
61. Translation of: "Wir wurden von einem heftigen PAK-Feuer ueberascht, der Ortsrand schein von einer grossen Anzahl Panzerabwehrkanonen besetzt." Meyer, p.100.
62. NAC RG 24, Vol.15,198, WD, RR, 7-10 June 1944.
63. *Ibid.*
64. Medland, p.9.
65. *Ibid.*
66. NAC RG 24, Vol.15,198, WD, RWR, 7-10 June 1944.
67. Meyer, p.102.
68. *Ibid.*, p.105.
69. *Ibid.*, p.103.
70. Luther, p.168.
71. Meyer, pp.105-106.
72. *Ibid.*, p.106.
73. *Ibid.*, p.105.
74. *Ibid.*, p.106.
75. *Ibid.*, and Georges Bernage, *Les Canadiens Face A La Hitlerjugend: 7-11 Juin 1944* (Heimdal, 1991) p.65.
76. Though the issue of how the Panthers were destroyed so quickly is still mysterious, the presence of the "Fireflies" goes far to explaining the German debacle. Bernage, pp.66-67.
77. Translation from: ". . . als nach einem dumpfen Knall und einem Schaukeln, als ob die Kette abgerrissen waere, der Magen zum stehen kam." Meyer, p.106.
78. *Ibid.* pp.105-106.
79. Luther, p.170.
80. Translation from: "Die Panzerabwehr rund um das Dorf[Bretteville]war so stark, dass Umgehungsversuche der Panzer im Sueden und im Norden vereitelt werden konnten. Der ueberraschende Einsatz von Leuchtfallschirmen mit grellem Magnesium licht blendete die Panther und beleutete sie klar fuer die feindliche PAK. Dieser Gegner war in der Abwehr besonders stark und liess sich nicht ueberrumpeln. Er kaempfte hart und tapfer." Meyer, p.104.
81. Stacey, p.137.
82. *Ibid.*
83. Adapted from Stacey, p.277.

Oliver Haller, a graduate of Wilfrid Laurier University, is currently pursuing advanced studies at Phillips Marburg University in Germany. This essay is based on his Laurier B.A. thesis.