

Soldier, POW, Partisan

My Experiences During the Battle of France, June-September 1944

Don Learment

The invasion of *Festung Europa* has been called many things, among them, the greatest military feat in history, the liberation of Europe's downtrodden millions, and many other such high and mighty sounding phrases. But to those of us who were to take part in this operation the mouthings of the country's great meant little. Truly we were impressed by the magnitude of the coming battle, but its true meaning to us who had waited so long was simply "action."

The North Nova Scotia Highlanders had arrived in Britain in the early summer of 1941, and the majority of the time since that date had been spent training for the actual invasion of the continent. The Highlanders were included in the Third Canadian Division, and it was quite apparent to all soon after our arrival in the mother country that this Division had already been ear-marked for a special task when the time for invasion arrived.

Amphibious training was stressed, and exercise upon exercise of this nature was carried out with monotonous regularity. All ranks became fully acquainted with their individual tasks and perfection became the watchword. Early in the spring of 1944 it became quite evident that the long waited invasion was drawing near. Exercises were carried out in greater detail, new vehicles and equipment were drawn and a general "tidying up" took place within units.

Finally, after moving from camp to camp, the North Novas were finally put in a "sealed camp" close to Southampton on England's south coast. All equipment and personnel were given a final check, and then began the period of waiting. It did not last long. All commanders were briefed

on the operation which went under the code name of "OVERLORD." The briefing was carried on down to the lowest possible level so that upon completion every last man knew his job and also that of those immediately above him.

The North Nova Scotia Highlanders finally embarked in Landing Craft Infantry (LCI) with their vehicles carried on Landing Craft Tank (LCT). The invasion was set for 5 June, but due to poor weather conditions was postponed until the next day.

At this point it might be well to touch briefly on the general plan of the invasion, keeping at as low a level as possible. The Third Canadian Division was the only Canadian Division to be included in the actual assault, and it was flanked by both British and American formations. The 7th and 8th Canadian Infantry Brigades were to assault the beaches and proceed inland to the Divisional Intermediary Objective. Here they would hold while the 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade (Highland Light Infantry of Canada, the Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders, and the North Nova Scotia Highlanders) in conjunction with the Sherbrooke Fusiliers of the 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade pushed through them to the high ground south of Carpiquet airfield. The task of the North Novas was to seize and hold the airfield itself.

In order to accomplish this task, the battalion was organized in the following manner. A vanguard group of infantry mounted on Bren Carriers would proceed along the main axis direct to the airfield. It was flanked during this move by other infantry riding on tanks, with further infantry following on tanks directly in the rear.



Photo by G.A. Milne, NAC PA 133757

Above: Personnel of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders and Highland Light Infantry aboard an LCI enroute to France, 6 June 1944.

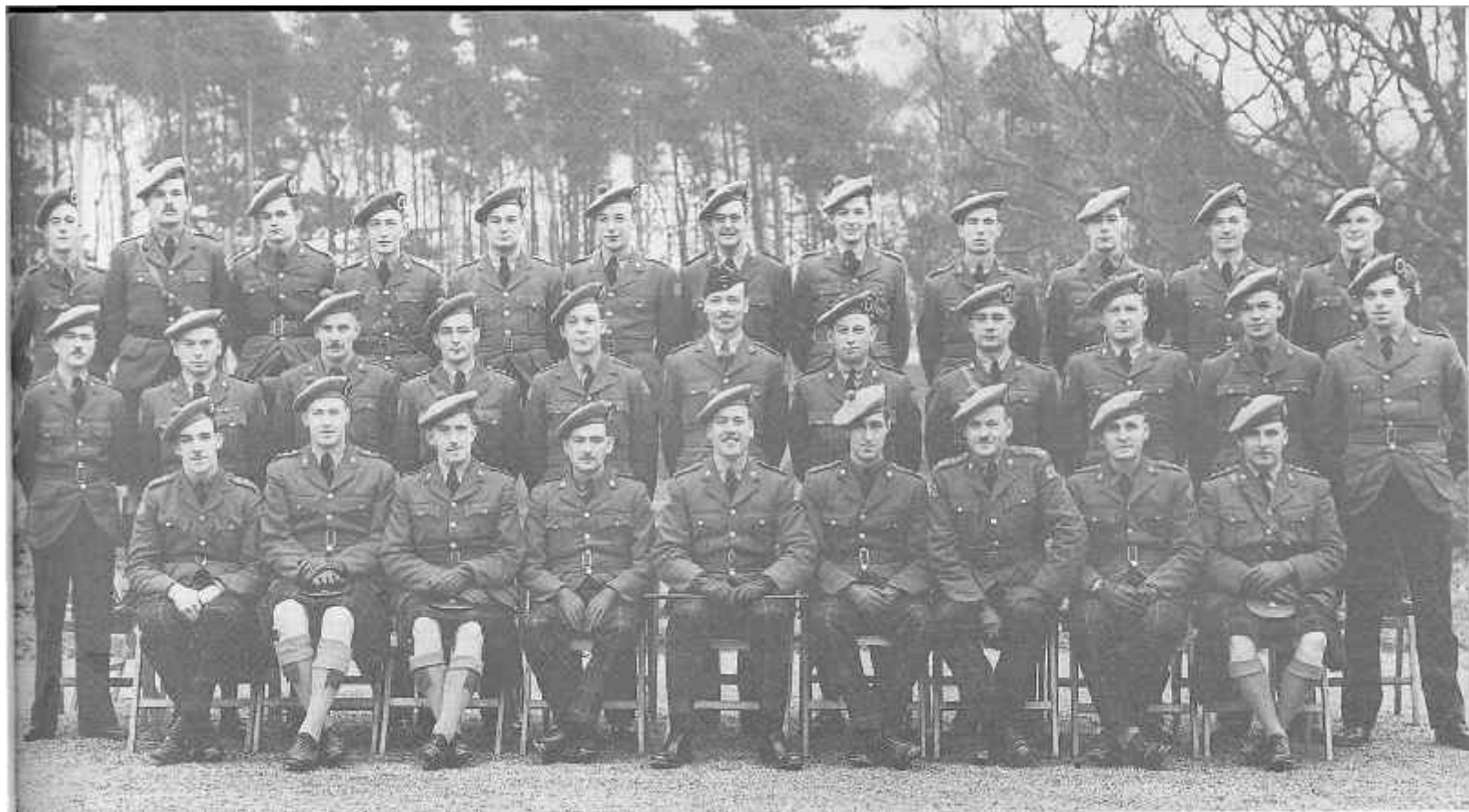


Photo by G.A. Milne, NAC PA 132810

Left: Soldiers from the North Nova Scotia Highlanders boarding an LCI during training for the Normandy landings, 9 May 1944.

The following is a somewhat detailed description of the organization: "C" Company of the North Novas was to be the infantry of the vanguard. Included in the group were the Reconnaissance (Recce) Tanks of the Sherbrooke

Fusiliers, a platoon of Vickers Medium Machine Guns from the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa, a troop of self-propelled anti-tank guns from the 105 Anti-Tank Battery, two detachments of 3-inch mortars from the North Novas and the Carrier Platoon commanded by Captain E.S. Gray, also of the North Novas. Also included were an assault section of pioneers from the North Novas and two flail tanks from the Royal Armoured Corps. On the right flank and slightly behind the vanguard was "A" Company of the North Novas commanded by Major L.M. Rhodenizer, riding on "A" Squadron's tanks of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers. On the left flank was "B" Company, commanded by Major J.W. Douglas and carried on "B" Squadron of the Sherbrookes. Following behind the Vanguard was the Commanding Officer (CO) of the North Novas, Lieutenant-Colonel C. Petch, and the CO of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers, Lieutenant-Colonel M.K.B. Gordon.



Officers of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders,

Christmas morning 1942, Horsham (Monks Common) England

Front row (l. to r.): A.J. Davis, J.W. Douglas, S.E. Ellis, J.D. Stewart, C. Petch (CO), J.D. Learment (author), H.G. Longley (KIA 7 June 1944), L.M. Rhodenizer, H.K. MacCharles.

Middle row: J. O'Hanley, D.R. Gilchrist CM. Lovett, MacDonald, Chapman, Falconbridge, P.A. Thurrott, CF. Kennedy, A. Nicholson, G.R. Creelman (KIA 26 October 1944), Grieve.

Back row: Chipman, F.C. Fraser (KIA 7 June), Kirk, E.S. Gray (KIA 8 July 1944), Holloway, J.A. Trainor, Dwight, D.J. Nicholson (KIA 25 July 1944), Theaskston, Chaisson, S.S. Bird (KIA 8 July 1944), Rodd.

Directly behind the command post came "D" Company of the North Novas carried on the tanks of "C" Squadron, Sherbrooke Fusiliers. The entire group was a potent, self-contained striking force.

The North Novas and the Sherbrooke Fusiliers landed at H+200 or about 1030 hours on 6 June 1944 at Bernières-sur-Mer. From here we were to proceed to Beny-sur-Mer where we would get organized for the drive on Carpiquet airfield. The landing itself was fairly uneventful, the area having been previously assaulted and cleared by the Queen's Own Rifles and Le Régiment de la Chaudière. As soon as the landing was complete everyone started for the assembly area at Beny which was approximately four miles inland. However, troops were still engaged in clearing out the south edge of Bernières and an 88 mm gun had already knocked out three self-propelled guns of the 14th Field Regiment RCA who had attempted to proceed south out of the town. In the meantime, the North Novas dug in in the vicinity of Bernières until the opposition

had been neutralized by the preceding brigade, and the assembly area cleared. At approximately 1500 hours word was passed that the assembly area at Beny was now clear and that the North Novas would move there immediately and get organized with the tanks of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers. The move to this assembly area was uneventful, with the troops riding on any passing vehicle. The assembly area was reached in due course and the process was begun of getting the vanguard organized and the remaining companies put on their respective squadrons of tanks. A few mortar bombs fell in the vicinity and "A" Company suffered some casualties. The battalion was organized in short order, but as the forward troops had not as yet secured the intermediary objective, the 9th Brigade could not leave their assembly area. In the meantime, the other two battalions in the brigade were preparing to follow the North Novas on their portable bicycles which had been carried ashore.

The intermediate objective was finally secured and the North Novas moved off in the



Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Petch (right), Commanding Officer of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders, confers with one of his company commanders, Major C.F. Kennedy, 22 June 1944.

order already mentioned at about 1800 hours, roughly six hours behind schedule. Proceeding along the main axis to the village of Basly, the vanguard encountered light resistance and took a few prisoners, mostly Poles and Russians who appeared happy to be out of the fight. The advance was continued without serious opposition along the Caen/Basly road with a few more prisoners being taken. A sniper in a farm house caused a bit of trouble to the commander of the vanguard until he was taken care of by putting some rounds from the self-propelled anti-tank guns into the house. The advance continued until night fall and at approximately 2200 hours orders were given to halt for the night. This was done and the battalion took up an all-round defensive position near the village of Villons-les-Buissons. There was some patrol activity by the enemy during the night, and "B" Company took some prisoners and suffered some casualties.

As soon as it was dark German aircraft put in an appearance and proceeded to give the beaches a thorough bombing. The anti-aircraft fire put up by the beach defenses filled the sky with a mass of hot steel and numerous enemy planes were lost. With the coming of dawn, air activity decreased and the infantry prepared to move forward again in the same order as the preceding day.

The vanguard moved off at 0700 hours and a few more enemy were killed and taken prisoner at Villons-les-Buissons. Some light enemy vehicles were shot up by the recce troop of tanks

which was preceding the infantry vanguard. Some difficulty was encountered proceeding to les-Buisson and it was necessary for the infantry to dismount while the vehicles by-passed an 88 mm gun which had been causing some trouble to the tanks. This gun was put out of action personally by Captain Gray who received the Military Cross for his excellent work. The vanguard then reformed in the village of Buron after the village had been cleared in a short sharp skirmish with the enemy who were showing a growing tendency to fight to the last man. Once again, the vanguard pushed on, this time toward the village of Authie, which lay on the axis to the final objective, Carpiquet. At this time, approximately 1200 hours, the recce tanks had a few casualties from shell fire and a troop of Sherman tanks from "B" Squadron under Lieutenant Ian MacLean of Montreal was sent up to assist the vanguard troops in entering Authie. This was done under intense mortar fire and the village was finally cleared.

It now became apparent that the enemy was preparing to mount a counterattack of considerable strength. The shelling and mortaring increased and simultaneously the presence of a larger number of enemy tanks in the vicinity was reported from the recce troop of tanks, who by this time were almost completely wiped out by shell fire, although a number of the crews were successful in making their way back into friendly territory. The fact of enemy tanks was confirmed by the CO of the North Novas, who gave orders for the infantry to dig in where they were and for the carriers to be moved to cover to await the outcome of the tank battle which was now imminent. Captain F.C. Fraser of New Glasgow, second-in-command of "C" Company, had two forward platoons, under Lieutenants Veness and Langley, dig in slightly south of Authie. As the majority of the carriers were in a very exposed position between Buron and Authie they were taken back slightly north of Buron along with a section of 15 Platoon and Company Headquarters, comprising about 19 all ranks.

The author, Major Don Learment, DSO, CD photographed in Ghent, Belgium, March 1945

As the tanks of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers were now preparing to engage the enemy tanks, the infantry dismounted and dug in where they were. "A" Company was in a position slightly south of Buron and to the right of the main axis. "B" Company was on the outskirts of Buron and almost on the axis, having been mortared off their tanks a short time previous to the report of enemy tanks being received. Both their company commander and second-in-command were wounded and evacuated and the company was taken over by Captain A.J. Wilson, the support company commander. "D" Company was dug in astride the axis, about 200 yards behind "C" Company Headquarters position.

At about 1400 hours a report came from the forward platoons of "C" Company that the expected counterattack by infantry supported by tanks had begun. While the enemy tanks were being engaged by the Sherbrookes, an attempt was made to relieve the forward platoons of "C" Company. "B" Company was loaded on all available carriers along with part of 15 Platoon from "C" Company and set out for Authie. As soon as the vehicles pulled clear of Buron they came under heavy shell and mortar fire and it soon became obvious that Authie could not be reached. "B" Company and the elements from "C" Company returned to their previously dug in positions. As the carriers were still in a very exposed position, the commander of the vanguard ordered them under Captain Gray to report back to the CO whose headquarters was in the vicinity of Les Buissons, while the infantry waited for the counterattack to develop against them. This appeared as quite likely to happen as no word had been received from the two forward platoons of "C" Company and it was assumed that they had been overrun. The tank battle was now well under way, with the Sherbrookes firing over the infantry at the enemy tanks.

Communications at this time were extremely difficult due partly to the noise of the battle and also probably to the rough treatment the sets had received since embarking. The battle between the tanks continued for approximately another two hours during which time the enemy began to concentrate his artillery on the positions occupied



by the tanks and infantry. Mortar fire was also extremely heavy and toward 1830 hours German automatic weapons could be heard very close. Soon enemy infantry could be seen in Buron and making their way toward my position. They were engaged with rifle and Bren gun and for a few minutes repulsed. However, they soon got an MG 42 into position from where it could fire from a flank right into the dug-in positions of the infantry. This had the desired effect of keeping our heads down, but not before most of our ammunition had been used.

The first intimation I had of the enemy being close was when an SS trooper armed with a Schmeisser appeared over the rim of the trench and ordered us out. He was shot by someone in a trench behind us and rolled away in the wheat. In the meantime, I was able to get another magazine on the Bren gun and fire it. As I went to fire the fourth and last magazine, the gun jammed and at the same time another Hun put in his appearance. This time there was no alternative but to come out with our hands up.

We could then see that the field was literally alive with camouflaged Germans and a number of Tanks had also put in an appearance at the north edge of Buron. The enemy continued toward the north where "D" Company was dug in and a few of them escorted us on the run into Buron. Here we were lined against a wall and a machine gun put on each flank and as no attempt was made to search or question us, it became increasingly apparent that we were going to be shot. However, a German NCO intervened and gave orders that we be searched. This was done in a rough and disorderly manner, interspersed with a good many kicks and punches. Everything of value was taken from us, including our field dressings and morphine, for which we were to have great need later. During the search one of the Germans noticed a grenade hanging on the belt of the man next to me, Private Jack Metcalfe. The German raised his Schmeisser and as Metcalfe turned toward me he was shot three or four times in the back and fell screaming at my feet. The German then stepped over him and placing the machine-pistol at Metcalfe's head, shot him again. No notice of this was taken by the other Germans who continued their search as if nothing had happened. At this time more of the enemy were moving through the town in the direction of our lines and as our own artillery was starting to fall uncomfortably close, it was a decidedly unhealthy position. One shell dislodged the top corner of a building near us and brought it crashing down on a section of the enemy with good results. The search was then concluded and we were ordered to march toward the rear in the direction of Authie. The road from Buron to Authie was under our own shell fire and a few of us were nicked by near bursts. Private Jeffrey Hargreaves was wounded in the legs and could not continue the march. We were not allowed to help him and he was shot as he lay on the ground. My batman, Private James MacNeil, was also slightly wounded but was able to continue, although we were not allowed to assist him in any way. As we neared Authie we saw some members of the two forward platoons of "C" Company. They were all dead and three of them were laying close together in such a manner, with no weapons or equipment near them, as to suggest that they had been shot after capture, and this was later confirmed.

At approximately 1930 hours our small party arrived at the Abbaye Ardenne, which was being used as a Headquarters by *Brigadeführer* Kurt

Meyer, who later commanded the 12th SS *Hitler Jugend* Division. Here we met Major L.M. Rhodenizer, the OC of "A" Company, and some of his men who had been captured earlier. Also with this group was Lieutenant Veness and a few men from the two forward platoons of "C" Company who had been captured at Authie. Their story was much the same one of brutality and murder, although at this time we were all much too stunned to talk much. We were again searched in a more orderly manner and this time our wallets, watches, etc. were taken. As soon as the search was concluded the entire party of prisoners, numbering approximately 50, was formed up in fours and marched in the direction of Caen. As we marched along I heard a shout from behind and turned to see a German lorry swerve into the marching column, pull out and continue on its way. Two of the "C" Company men were killed almost instantly and a number badly shaken up. This incident took place in the vicinity of Beaulieu Prison and was a deliberate act.

About 2030 hours we reached another headquarters in the vicinity of Caen near Venoix, and here the officers were taken in and interrogated in a group. An English-speaking corporal from the 1st SS Adolf Hitler Panzer Division acted as an interpreter but did not get any information. We were then marched to a school at Bretteville-sur-Odon, where the officers were put in one room, the wounded in another, and the men left out in the walled-in yard surrounded by guards. There were no medical supplies available for the wounded and these were greatly needed. Everyone was so exhausted by the preceding events that they simply fell where they were and tried to sleep.

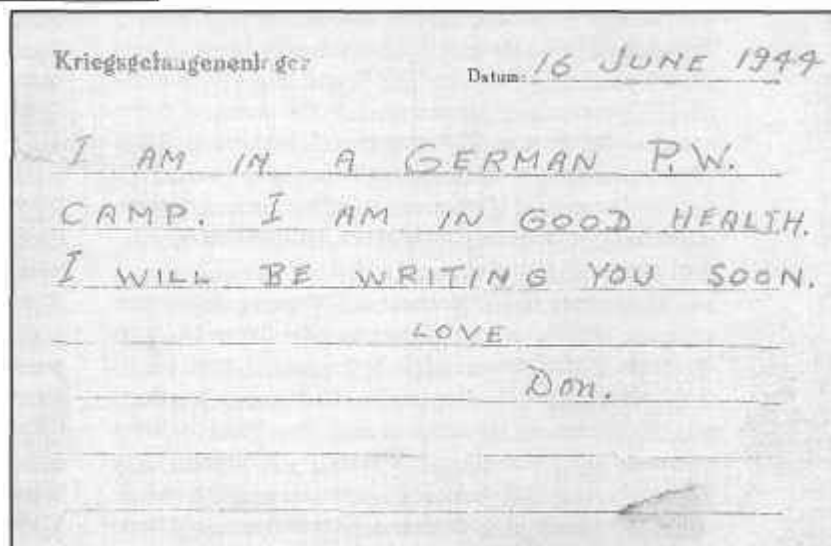
The next morning, 8 June, we got permission to bury the two men who had been killed by the lorry. They were buried at the rear of the school house. I said the Lord's Prayer for one while a civilian priest performed the last rites for the Roman Catholic chap. The remainder of the day passed uneventfully, except for our own aircraft, which were overhead continually and caused the Germans to curse us soundly. There was no food forthcoming, so most of us prepared for another night in the school.

We were wakened early on the morning of 9 June and told to be prepared to move at once. As we were ready to move off we were joined by



A postcard sent by Major Learment to his wife following his capture at Buron on 7 June 1944

another group of roughly 150 prisoners from various units with the Royal Winnipeg Rifles predominating. The march was begun immediately and throughout the five days which it lasted the practice was to march from early morning without a stop until noon, have a short rest and then continue until roughly 2130 hours at night. We were given little food by the Germans and it was only through the generosity of the French along the route that we were able to keep going. These generous people managed to give us bread and wine on many occasions which kept up our strength to continue. Our route lay through Falaise, Vire, Fiers, Ger, Mortain, and finally Rennes, our destination.



Our guards during this march were from the Field Gendarme section of the 1st SS Division and treated us fairly, except after Lieutenants Campbell and Smith from "A" Company managed to escape. From then on their vigilance increased, and we were threatened that if one man attempted to escape, ten would be shot in reprisal. No one else attempted escape at this stage mainly because our physical condition would not permit it. On the third day of the march, 11 June, we were near the village of St. George de Gros-Peillers when our column was spotted by two low-flying Mustangs of the United States Army Air Force. They immediately swooped down and strafed the column, even though we were marching in fours away from the fighting. It was just another case of "trigger happy" pilots shooting at anything that moved. When it was over, 14 of the men were dead or dying, and 35 were wounded, some seriously. We gave them what medical aid we could and the dead were left with the French people in the village who promised to bury them.

We finally reached Rennes on the evening of 14 June, having covered the distance of 135 miles on foot in five days. We were marched through the city, much to the joy of some of the French inhabitants, and taken to a temporary prison camp on the outskirts of the city - Stalag 133. This camp had been a French Barracks and was divided in half by a high wire fence. One half was for us and the other half was occupied by French Colonial troops who had been interned after the fall of France. We were interrogated again briefly, and the Germans seemed disappointed that we had already been stripped of our valuables. However, I did manage to smuggle in a bottle of grain alcohol by passing it off as medicine. The camp was well guarded with the conventional warning wire and two fences separated by a path for the patrolling guards. Watch towers manned by machine gunners occupied each corner of the enclosure. The meals were of the worst order and consisted of cabbage soup twice daily. On the other hand, the quarters were reasonably comfortable. I shared a room with Major

Rhodenizer, which was equipped with beds, straw ticks, blankets, etc.

Our stay here was uneventful. Some talked of escaping, but the majority were still too exhausted from our five day trek to put much heart in it. Each day there would be new arrivals, and within two weeks our numbers had swollen to approximately 600, including 40 officers. There were Canadians, Americans, and British troops and a few RCAF personnel. The senior officer was Colonel Goode of the 175th Regiment, 29th US Infantry Division. The senior British officer was Commander Keene Miller of the Fleet Air Arm (Gosport) who had been shot down shortly after D-Day, by the Royal Navy!!

As we gradually regained our strength, attempts were made to organize sports and PT for the men, and this succeeded in some measure due to the efforts of the officers and senior NCOs. An attempt was made by some English Paratroopers to tunnel out of the camp from one of the huts, but they encountered a tunnel begun by some previous inmates which had been discovered by the Germans and liberally filled with mines as it was filled in. This ended tunnelling from that particular hut, which was the only suitable one for such a venture. After approximately two weeks we were given an issue of 40 cigarettes by the Red Cross, and although they were of French make, everyone agreed that they were the finest smoke in the world.

On 5 July during morning roll call we were informed by the commandant that we would be leaving camp that night by train for Germany. The remainder of the day was spent in guessing what our new destination would be and watching two Allied air raids on the railway station at Rennes. A large number of American aircraft took part in the raids and the Germans threw up a heavy curtain of flak from both heavy and light anti-aircraft batteries. Unfortunately, a number of light anti-aircraft shells landed in our compound, wounding a number and killing an American officer.

In the evening we were lined up at approximately 1800 hours and counted off into groups in preparation for our move to the train. The groups each consisted of 40 other ranks and the officers were split into two groups. Our group was 26 in number and seven sergeants were

added who had been left over from the last group of NCOs. We were marched a group at a time under very heavy guard to the train which was drawn up in some railway sidings near the compound.

It was a depressing sight. The train consisted of about 15 French box cars with the familiar "40 Hommes, 8 Cheveaux" lettered on the sides. The German guards travelled in a passenger coach. Vision and ventilation were limited to two narrow and heavily screened windows high on the side of each car, and in many cases these had been covered with planking firmly nailed on. Some of the cars were half-filled with straw which soon disintegrated into a fine dust which added to our discomfort.

The loading was finally completed, and after a great deal of counting and shouting by the guards, we got under way at 2300 hours. We had managed to keep one of the silk maps belonging to an American pilot and thus were able to chart our progress through the various towns. We managed to get some sleep the first night and in the morning found ourselves in the heavily bombed yards at Redon on the west coast of France. Here we remained throughout the day, which fortunately was free from our own aircraft. The night of 6 July we left Redon and again moved southwards to Nantes where we arrived the following morning. Our food so far consisted of one loaf of very old and mouldy bread which had to last a man for three days. Two large pitchers of water were also supplied daily by the guards. The guards were of a different type than we had been accustomed to at the camp in Rennes. Generally, these men were smarter in appearance and seemed to take a definite interest in the work; that of seeing that we made no attempts to escape. The officer in charge of the guards was Lieutenant Wilhelm Hunter. Also to assist the guards were two large Doberman Pinscher dogs who were kept heavily muzzled.

We again left Nantes after darkness had fallen and now began to travel eastward along the Loire River. During the night we heard an aircraft circling the train and presently cannon fire broke out. The train ground to a stop, and we could hear the roar of steam escaping from the engine which had been thoroughly riddled. The guards took to the fields and remained there until the sound of the aircraft had died away. When

morning broke we saw that we were stopped on a high embankment with no shelter of any description. It would have been an ideal target for aircraft, but fortunately for us, none put in an appearance. We remained here until 9 July waiting for another locomotive.

On the night 9/10 July, the train got underway once again, and our route continued to follow along the Loire River. Early in the morning we reached Angers and moved slowly through what had been a once-great marshalling yard. I say once, because now it was a scene of complete destruction, with locomotives and cars hurled end over end as the result of allied bombings. We did not stop here, much to everyone's relief, but continued on in the direction of Tours.

During the afternoon we halted for an hour while the guards gave us additional bread and water. During this halt a large viaduct, some half a mile away, was bombed by Flying Fortresses and some of the bombs fell uncomfortably close. However, the train was not damaged, and we soon continued on our way. It was early evening when we reached Tours and as luck would have it, an air raid was in progress. However, we moved slowly through the yards and stopped at Les Ville aux Dames, approximately three miles east of Tours, where we remained for the night.

The following day, 11 July, we were told by Lieutenant Hunter that we would remain here for a few days, as our engine was needed urgently elsewhere. The few days stretched into ten, but it seemed that there was always something turning up to break the monotony. The French Red Cross added to our meagre food supply by giving us hot soup once a day, but we were still not allowed to leave the box cars under any conditions. There was one heavy Allied raid on the Tours marshalling yards during the ten days, and all of us agreed that it was as close as we ever wished to be to the receiving end of a British night raid. During the day we constantly saw American fighters patrolling and on two occasions they bombed and strafed targets fairly close to us, but once again we were left untouched.

Finally, on 21 July we were told that an engine was available and that we would be moving after darkness had fallen. This was in a sense some

relief, as the heat and monotony were beginning to tell on everyone. The locomotive arrived late in the evening, and at approximately 0100 hours we got underway.

A number of us had discussed the possibilities of escaping from the car, and realizing what would happen if we were caught, decided to try it rather than risk being shot up by aircraft or bombed. Lieutenant W.R. Fredenberg, an American pilot, had managed to smuggle a small hammer aboard the train with him, and we decided to try to make a hole in the end of the car that had been damaged, doubtless in an accident, and not repaired very well.

The work of making a hole was more difficult than we had anticipated but after an hour's efforts we were ready to break off the small outside sheathing boards of the car. We now split into groups of twos and threes and prepared to make our break for it. It was not known at this time whether or not there were guards riding on the ends of our car, and it was not until the first pair of us had managed to squeeze through the hole and out onto the buffers that we saw that luck was with us and that no guards were in sight. At this time, roughly 0230 hours, we were passing through a small town and had to wait until we had gone further before attempting to jump. While Fredenberg and I were waiting, the second pair of escapees made their way from the car out to the buffers and also prepared to jump. The train at this time was moving about 20 miles per hour and both Fredenberg and I watched carefully for a spot which was clear of all obstructions before we jumped. At last we saw one and both jumped together, falling to the road bed beside the train, where we lay until the last cars had passed us. There was no sign from the train that we had been detected and, aside from bruised hands and knees, we were free. Of the other escapees, there was no sign.

We immediately headed due south away from the railroad, moving very cautiously and checking our direction frequently with Fredenberg's small button compass. At about 0400 hours we reached the Cher River. We were too exhausted to attempt to swim the river, and as dawn was not far off, it was too risky to search for a boat, we decided to find a hiding place for the day and continue our move south after darkness that evening.

We spent the day in a deep ditch covered with bushes and were not disturbed. In the early evening a number of Frenchmen appeared in the fields around us and began to work. We did not know whether they would be friendly toward us or not, but decided to approach one of them and ask for food. We crawled to the edge of a field and called to the nearest worker. We had some difficulty in persuading him that we were not Germans, but once this was accomplished, he immediately sent his son for food and drink for us.

At this time we made another discovery which was not much to our liking. As we had moved south the railroad had also curved in the same direction, and we now found ourselves less than one half mile from the line. While we were discussing this new turn of events, a long train of box cars hove in sight and simultaneously two flights of American P-38 Lightnings began an attack on the train. The first burst of cannon fire stopped the engine, and then the aircraft began to unload their bombs on the stationary train. Several direct hits were scored, and it became apparent to us that the train had been carrying ammunition, as there were numerous loud explosions and in a few minutes the entire train was ablaze. We could hear the Germans screaming to one another as they ran from the scene, and we at once decided to move further away from the track to avoid detection.

We had just begun to walk toward the river bank when the young Frenchman appeared with a basket of food. It was the first food or drink we had had in more than 36 hours. As soon as we had eaten we again moved toward the river and followed it for some distance in the hope of finding a boat. We continued to search until 0200 hours and at that time decided to sleep for a few hours and then continue our search when the light got a bit better.

I was awakened a short time later with Fredenberg's hand over my mouth and the sound of German voices very close to us. By careful scrutiny I could make out the figure of a German standing less than 20 feet from us while talking to other Germans who seemed to be behind us. We knew that any movement would be heard and decided to lie still and hope to avoid detection. The Germans continued to talk for a few minutes, and it soon became apparent that they believed

we were hiding in the small wood which they had surrounded, as they continued to shout at intervals, "*Aus, aus, wasser kamerad*" in the hope of enticing us out with water and giving ourselves up.

We continued to lie still, and in a few minutes heard a German aircraft approaching. It circled low in our vicinity, and we decided to crawl away from the wood, hoping that the sound of the engines would drown out any noise we might make. Carefully removing our boots, we pushed them inside our tunics, and then blackened our hands and faces with mud. We crawled slowly forward on our stomachs and passed a few feet when we saw three or four figures moving directly toward us. At this time we were in a large cabbage field, and we lay perfectly still as the Germans passed by only two rows away. It was apparently an NCO posting guards, as he was counting in German and posted a soldier every few yards. We again began to crawl and after passing three more guards found ourselves clear of the field but once again uncomfortably near the railroad.

We now decided we would have to abandon our plan to cross the river due to the Germans in the vicinity. We, therefore, headed north and soon reached the railway, which we crossed without being molested. After a stiff climb we reached a dense wood and as dawn was now breaking we hid in a thicket and went to sleep.

We awoke at dusk and decided to stop the first civilians we met and ask them for food. We walked for nearly two hours before finding a road or track of any kind. At about 2130 hours we found a small wood road which we followed in the hope of finding a house. We had gone about a mile when we suddenly came upon a young Frenchman and his wife. The two of them began to run, fearing we were Germans, but we shouted "Americans" to them and they stopped and came back to us.

I described our predicament to them and they immediately took us to their house a short distance away. We were told that we were in the Forest of Amboise, and already these people had heard of our escape and knew that there were many Germans in the area searching for us.

They promised to contact other Frenchmen who would lead us to a Free French camp. We

then shed our uniforms and were provided with civilian clothes and a bed for the night. We were awakened early the next morning by the arrival of two more Frenchmen, who were to be our guides for the first stage of our journey. After a hearty breakfast we said goodbye to our hosts and set out for the village of Amboise with our guides. During our walk through the forest we met many Frenchmen but they showed no interest, a fact which gave us confidence in our disguises.

In about an hour we came to the village of Amboise and were taken to the house of one of the guides and told that we would remain there until nightfall, when we would continue our journey south by car. This was the 24th of July. At midnight we were taken to another house for dinner, or rather a banquet, as there were about 15 guests and more food than we had seen for many weeks. At about 0400 hours another guide came for us and took us to his house a few miles distant where we were to wait for the car which was to take us to the Maquis camp. While at this house we were given a Resistance newspaper to read and thus learned of the attempt on Hitler's life and the employment of the V-1s against England.

We remained at this farm house during the day and were given the opportunity of a wash and a chance to rest for the next stage of our move. At approximately 1700 hours our host warned us to prepare to move as our car had arrived. The car itself was of rather ancient vintage, but the driver assured us that it would take us to our destination somewhere in the South of France. We drove to Amboise village where three more Frenchmen joined us, making a party of six. We proceeded south to Blere, where we stopped for a time while one of the Frenchmen acquired a Colt .45 automatic from a house in the town. We then crossed the Cher River over a large bridge which was guarded on each end by anti-aircraft guns. The gunners gave us a passing glance but made no move to stop us. We all breathed a sigh of relief when we cleared the town and were once more in open country.

We proceeded due south for approximately 20 miles, eventually arriving at a large chateau. We were taken in and introduced to the owner, a lady, and were informed that we would remain here for the night. The Frenchmen who had thus

far escorted us now took their leave after the usual French farewells. The evening was spent at the chateau relating our experiences to other Frenchmen, who seemed to come in from all over the surrounding countryside. We later learned that this chateau was raided a few days after we left by the Gestapo and the owner sent to prison.

The night passed uneventfully and morning found us waiting for the members of the underground movement who were to come for us. About 1400 hours they arrived in two powerful sedans well armed with Bren and Sten guns. After introductions were made and the health of all the heads of the Allied forces toasted, we once more continued our journey southward.

During this stage of our trip we travelled on secondary roads and at all times were alert for any Germans we might encounter. We travelled about 40 miles and then arrived at the Maquis camp which was then situated in the Forest of Brouard. This group of Free French were commanded by a Captain Georges LeCoz, who immediately took charge of us and did all possible to make us welcome. We had barely gotten settled when we were confronted by two of the American Sergeants who had jumped from the same car a few moments after we had. They had been more fortunate in crossing the Oher River, in fact they had done so shortly after they escaped, which accounted for their early arrival at the Maquis camp.

Captain LeCoz insisted that we accompany him to the nearest town, where we could buy some better clothes. This we did and soon returned to the camp looking more like Frenchmen than ever. It soon became apparent that this group was in the early stages of organization and a good deal of our time was spent instructing them in the use of the Sten and Bren guns. Our days were interspersed by forays with the Captain in search of food, collaborators, Germans, or whatever came into his mind.

On our third day with this group it was decided that we would move the camp to another location in the same forest, for at present we were very close to the main highway which the Germans were still using.

The move to our new camp site was accomplished without incident. Shortly after our



Major Don Learment with Groupe Le Coz, in German-occupied France, August 1944

interspersed with numerous forays in search of so-called collaborators. Many of these were shot on our return to the camp and the number of executions rose to 17 during the time we were with Captain LeCoz's group. A number of those shot were ex-members of Darnand's Fascist Militia who were attempting to hide their identity by joining the Free French. These men, who had worked with the *Gestapo* and SS, received their just desserts.

We continued to move our camp from time to time and during one of these moves found ourselves almost completely surrounded by German troops. We were forced to leave all our vehicles and personal equipment and make our way out of the trap as best we could. The entire group eventually made its way to a farm in the vicinity of Cusson and here spent several days re-organizing and acquiring new vehicles. During this time a number of us contracted diphtheria and were unable to be on our feet for several days.

move to this new area, two of the FFI [French Forces of the Interior] Lieutenants and myself went out on a search for petrol for the cars and trucks of the group. While on this mission we encountered two Frenchmen on bicycles who told us that seven more escapees were hiding in the village of Luzille, which was not far distant. We immediately returned to *the* camp and, securing another car and extra arms and ammunition, set out for Luzille.

The trip was a difficult one as we travelled only on secondary roads with the consequence that it was dusk when we arrived at the house where the escapees were hiding. Quickly going to the barn, we threw open the doors and found seven of our comrades who had escaped from the train when we did. This group included Lieutenants Veness and Fairweather from my own unit, three American pilots, and two private soldiers from the Royal Winnipeg Rifles. We gave them arms and ammunition and quickly returned to the Maquis camp, as we were told that there were still Germans in the area searching for us.

In the days that followed we continued our instructing on weapons and grenades,

During our stay with the Free French we were assured that efforts were being made to contact another branch of the organization who would arrange to have us flown to England. It was now the 10th of August and all of us were anxious to be on our way, not caring for the methods of pillaging and shooting employed by Captain Lecoz. We finally decided to remain with him for another week and await developments.

The group now moved to a chateau called Raxay in the vicinity of Cere. While here, we received a large number of rifles and machine guns which had been dropped from aircraft. At the same time we were joined by other escapees from our train so that we totalled 22 Americans and Canadians. While at Raxay there were several light encounters with Germans in the vicinity and we now had a total of two officers and 18 privates as prisoners. Among these prisoners we had captured were an officer and some clerks who had comprised the administrative staff of the prison in Rennes. They were rather chagrined to learn that we had been in their prison for a number of weeks.

On 12 August the group moved to another chateau in *the* vicinity of le Liege. We were just in

the process of moving into this chateau when we were told that there were German SS troops in the village of Epeigne-les-Bois, five miles distant. They were members of the *Deutschland* Division and were attempting to buy horses and carts from the French to facilitate their movement to eastern France.

The Maquis group immediately prepared to attack them. We split into small groups and rode on our trucks to within a mile of the village where we debussed and moved toward the village on foot. The SS troops were caught unawares - in fact, a number of them were shot as they lay taking a sun bath. When the skirmish was over, we had six dead Germans and seven prisoners, as well as one truck and a small command car.

On the following day we received word that reprisal troops were in the area. We discarded this as a rumor until a number of shells began to land near the chateau. It became apparent that the enemy were armed with tanks and it was decided to leave the chateau under cover of darkness. The group moved to another chateau in the vicinity of Biard. The following day, 15 August, it was learned that the Germans had left the area and once again we moved back to the chateau near le Liege.

A number of us had now decided that Captain LeCoz had no intention of trying to arrange our passage to England, and that he simply wished to keep us with his group, because of our knowledge of arms, etc. One of the owners of the chateau told us that English aircraft occasionally landed some distance to the south, in the vicinity of Mezieres, and a number of us decided to set out for there, hoping to contact some Maquis en route who would drive us there, as the distance was about 35 miles. Captain LeCoz supplied us with food and maps, and after splitting into small groups we began to walk south through the forest of Loches.

En route we met a Frenchman who spoke excellent English, and he volunteered to guide us as far as Sennevieres. This he did and from there we proceeded on foot to St. Hippolyte where we rested for two days while I contacted the cure who provided us with a guide to take us to another farm a few miles distant where we would be met by another Maquis group who would drive us south to Mezieres.

This guide took us to a farm in the vicinity of le Grand Liege where we were warmly received by the farmer and his family. We remained here for three days until three former officers of the French Army arrived with a large car to move us south. These officers spoke English and were members of a large and well organized Maquis. We were taken to their headquarters and provided with an excellent meal. They promised to drive us further south to a British-operated shortwave station where we could contact England and get instructions as to our next move. At the conclusion of the dinner we were invited to inspect a guard of honor which was turned out in a soldierly manner complete with English and American flags.

When this ceremony was over we once more started our journey south. This trip was uneventful and we arrived at the radio station early that evening. In charge of this small station was an English officer, Major "Crowne," who told us that the possibility of an aircraft arriving in the near future was very uncertain. However, he suggested that we stay with him until he could contact England by radio. This was done and a message was received to the effect that we should once again proceed to the north and attempt to contact American troops who might be in the area north of the Loire River.

We decided to try this plan, and a rendezvous was arranged with a guide who would take us through the German lines and across the Loire. However, due to a breakdown of one of the vehicles we were to use, we were late for the meeting with the guide. We later learned that the guide was captured and shot by the Germans.

We were now back in the vicinity of St. Hippolyte where we had left the Maquis of Captain LeCoz. We went to the hotel in that village to eat and plan our next move. There we once again met Captain LeCoz who begged us to rejoin his group. We decided against this, however, and instead made our way to one of the farms near the village where we had rested during the first stages of our journey to the south.

The farmer welcomed us back and after we explained our predicament to him, he agreed to let us stay with him until the area was free of the enemy and we could make our way north unmolested. Our stay at this farm for the next



Major Learmont with his wife, Lieutenant (Nursing Sister) Cecelia McDonald, No. 16 Canadian General Hospital, Ghent, Belgium, 1945.

two weeks was uneventful. We helped with the daily chores but had to be careful of our movements as there were known to be collaborators in the area who would be glad to turn us over to the Germans.

At the end of two weeks, about 29 August, some of the Maquis shot at some Germans who were passing through St. Hippolyte. The enemy possessed some light anti-aircraft cannon and at once a lively battle ensued. We were virtually in the middle of it and without arms of any description. We therefore decided to leave the farm and live in an adjacent wood until the trouble died down. The fighting lasted for two days, and the Maquis lost a number of men. The Germans then searched the area, and at one time passed within 50 yards of our hiding place. They were SS troops and we had no desire to be caught by them. However, they soon gave up the search, and as a parting gesture burned the entire village of St. Hippolyte.

We now returned to the farm and remained there until 6 September. On that day we were informed that there were no Germans in the immediate area so we set out on foot for the city of Loches. Here we were royally received by the Mayor and the Chief de Resistance, and that evening were given an excellent dinner and rooms

at one of the hotels. The following morning we were taken to Tours by car and there contacted an American patrol who had just crossed the Loire River. They promised to send us north by truck that evening where we could contact an American headquarters. We spent the remainder of the day wandering through the city and rejoicing in the fact that we could now walk about unmolested.

True to their word, an American truck was waiting for us on the north bank of the river that evening. We had some difficulty in crossing as the bridges had long since been bombed and the foot bridge partially submerged. We proceeded due north to le Mans arriving there about 2300 hours. Due to the lateness of the hour, we could not be taken to the main American Headquarters in the town, but instead were turned over to the Military Police, who, not being sure of our identity, promptly put us in the city jail for the night. We were released in the morning and taken to Headquarters where we established our identity satisfactorily.

We were then given transport which took us directly to Paris. As that city had only been liberated a few days previously, it was not advisable to move about too freely, especially in our civilian clothes, so we remained in a large hotel which had been taken over by the Americans to deal with escapees and évadées.

Here we were thoroughly interrogated and supplied with American uniforms. On 9 September we were alerted to proceed to England that afternoon by aircraft. We were taken to Le Bourget airfield and after a short wait loaded aboard Dakota transports. The flight to England was uneventful and that evening we were in London where we were further interrogated and eventually cleared to respective Canadian Headquarters.

Don Learmont returned to the North Novas for two more periods, during the Battle of the Scheldt, and again for the crossing of the Rhine. Following the war, Don finished university and spent his career working for CIL, retiring in 1978. He also continued his military service, serving for periods as the second-in-command of the Saskatoon Light Infantry and the commanding officer of the Toronto Scottish Regiment.