

Operation ATLANTIC and the Orne River Crossings

Background

We often forget that the Battle of Normandy was more than the D-Day landing. Until the Canadian and US Armies closed the Falaise Gap on 21 August, the Normandy Battle raged at a pace often compared to that of Passchendaele in the First World War. At its peak, over one million Allied soldiers were engaged suffering over 209,000 Allied casualties. Of these, nearly 55,000 soldiers and airmen were killed.

The role of the 2nd British Army, which included the 2nd Canadian Corps, was to hold the bulk of the German forces, especially their armour, in the area of Caen to allow the 1st US Army a more rapid advance in a sweeping motion from the south, ending at Falaise.

The battle for the city of Caen ended on 9 July with nearly 1200

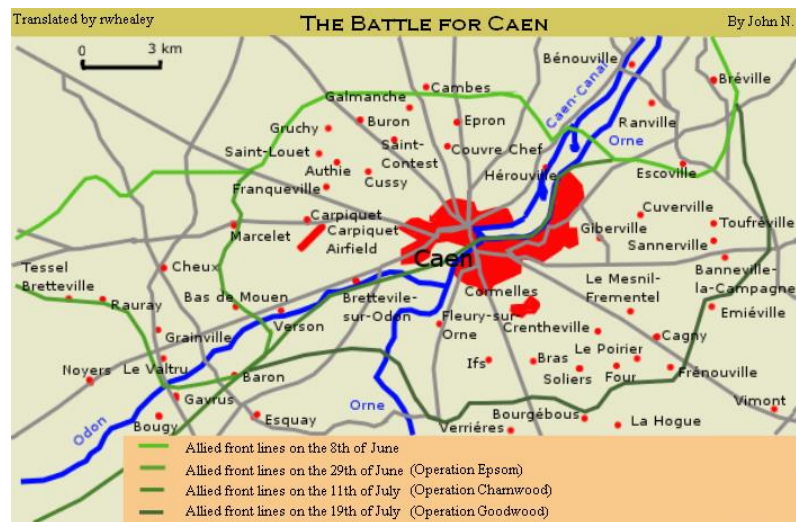
Canadian dead and wounded in the final two days of the fight.

This number exceeded the casualties of the landings themselves. The goal now was to continue drawing German forces away from the 1st US Army and push towards Falaise.

Operation ATLANTIC was the Canadian part of a larger Operation GOODWOOD aimed at securing the western bank of the Orne River and Verrières Ridge to give the Allies a commanding view over German positions to the south of the ridge. It started on 18 July 1944 with elements of the 3rd Canadian Division crossing in the north-eastern parts of Caen and the 2nd Canadian Division crossing into the southern portions and striking south.

Role of the RCE

More than a month had passed since the landings. There were still only two small bridges across the Orne in the British held 'Airborne Bridgehead' north of Caen, and more were



Operation GOODWOOD and ATLANTIC (From Max Hastings: OVERLORD: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy)

needed. Operation ATLANTIC involved all six divisional field companies in theatre plus support from Corps engineers and Service Corps bridge companies. Site reconnaissance started on the 17th and bridging began early on the 18th under heavy enemy observation and fire.

The Germans prevented any progress during the day and work could not begin until late that night and into the early morning of the 19th. Ironically, an early foray across a demolished bridge during the day of 18 July, netted a platoon of the 6th Field Company supporting the Regina Rifles, 27 German prisoners.

The first amphibious crossing in the 3rd Division sector near Hérouville, was not completed until the afternoon of the 19th. Besides enemy interference, the Sappers of the 16th Field Company worked through muddy and unstable banks fighting three-metre tides and six-metre banks on each side. Luckily, the 2nd Division sector took place in non-tidal portions of the River and Canal de Caen.



Mr Churchill and General Montgomery Cross 'Churchill' Bridge 22 July 1944



'Winston' Bridge built by the 31st Field Company, 18 July 1944

Canadian Corps Troops Engineers were assigned two crossings in the centre of the town and to clear the approach and exit routes. Early on the 18th, a Corps Engineer HQ was set-up in Caen and bridging stores for the 29th and 31st Field Companies were marshalled in the city. With the enemy so close, only reconnaissance was possible during the day, although the 30th Field Company was able to clear enough rubble to allow limited infantry to cross the river. At 2200 hours that night, the 29th Field

Company started work on a Class 9 150-foot double single Bailey Bridge, and the 31st Field Company started a Class 40 crossing using the remaining pier and third span of a demolished bridge to link 50-foot and 80-foot double-single Bailey Bridge spans. Potential trouble started before midnight when enemy bombs fell into the marshalling area. Through the quick and brave actions of sapper and Service Corps soldiers at the site, bridging operations were not delayed. Both crossings were open the next morning.

Divisional Engineers were successful in opening more crossings. The 7th Field Company built a Class 9 Floating Bridge Equipment bridge and ferry, while the 11th Field Company built a Class 40 Bailey raft that carried over 100 tanks from one bank to the other.

As the days went on, heavier bridges were built and more routes were cleared. On the afternoon of 22 July, several cars crossed a Class 40 bridge built by the 31st Field Company and returned crossing the 5th Field Company's triple-double bridge downstream. From the cars stepped both Winston Churchill and General Montgomery. Montgomery christened the bridges "Winston" and "Churchill".



'Churchill' Bridge built by the 5th Field Company, 18 July 1944

Engineer Gallantry

These successes were not without cost. Sappers were killed and wounded, and brave men excelled at their tasks. The following section lists the citations supporting decorations awarded to members of the Royal Canadian Engineers during Operation ATLANTIC.

[*Major Malcolm Corsan Sutherland-Brown - 7th Field Company - Distinguished Service Order*](#)

[*Major Douglas Harvey McCallum - 31st Field Company - Distinguished Service Order*](#)

[*Lt-Col Norman Janson Winder Smith - Divisional Engineers, 2nd Canadian Infantry Division - Distinguished Service Order*](#)

[*Lieutenant Robert Cheyne Eddy, MC - 18th Field Company - Military Cross*](#)

[*Lt John Graham Horsburgh - 7th Field Company - Military Cross*](#)

[*Lieutenant George Alexander White - 29th Field Company - Military Cross*](#)

[*Spr Thomas Heavers, BEM, MiD - 31st Field Company - British Empire Medal*](#)

[*L/Cpl William Richardson, BEM - 29th Field Company - British Empire Medal*](#)