**The North Irish Horse Battle Reports**

**Battle of the Hitler Line**

23rd May 1944

The 23rd May, 1944, was the day of the Adolf Hitler Line battle. There had been plan and counter-plan; order and counter-order going on since 18th May, but, finally, the Army Commander visited 1st Canadian Division on 22nd May and the following general plan was formulated :

The 1st Canadian Division would assault the Hitler Line with two brigades of infantry, each supported by a Regiment of Churchill tanks, and preceded by a block barrage from approximately 600 guns. The division would assault on approximately a three thous­and yards front; 2nd Brigade with N.I.H. on the right, 3rd Bri­gade with the 51st Royal Tank Regiment (R Tks.) on the left, and the first objective would be the centre part of the Pontecorvo-Aquino road.

Brigadier Gibson's plan was to attack two battalIions up: Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry with A Squadron N.I.H. in support on the right; the Seaforths of Canada with B Squadron on the left; C Squadron was to support B Squadron. The Loyal Edmonton Regiment, supported by B Squadron 51st R. Tanks was to follow up and pass through the Princess Pat's once the first objective had been consolidated. "H" Hour was 0600 hours.

The Commanding Officer allotted a forward observation officer from the Royal Devon Yeomanry to each of A and B Squadrons. The Reconnaissance Troop, under Lieut. H. E. Irwin, M.C., was to remain under Regimental control.

At "H" minus 15 hours artillery opened up on located enemy mortar and gun positions and the barrage commenced at "H" hour. Infantry and tanks linked up successfully on the start line and the attack went in to time. However, it appears that the movement of N.I.H. to the forward assembly area and forming up point, and the artillery barrage, had warned the enemy of the direction of our attack for immediately our advance started the enemy brought down heavy concentrations of artillery and mortar fire.

The enemy made good use of air bursts just behind the barrage, where he expected to find our infantry. The first five hundred yards of the attack from start line were through dense country in which were situated several enemy strong points and in the trees were found snipers many of whom had strapped themselves to the trees. Dust caused by the barrage cut down visibility to approximately ten yards. By 0730 hours the tanks reached the edge of the woods and were faced by open ground leading to the fringe of trees and scrub on the objective. The distance to the objective was not more than four hundred yards from this point, but by this time all communication between tanks and infantry on the No. 38 set failed owing to infantry casualties amongst personnel.

A Squadron, with some of the Princess Pat's, found that they were held up by a cleverly concealed minefield and were engaged with fire from various types of anti-tank guns. In this confused fighting this Squadron lost two tanks on mines and four to enemy anti-tank weapons but in their turn destroyed one Panther Mark V, two Mark IVs. and two 75 mm. anti-tank guns as well as several snipers and enemy infantry posts. It is interesting to note here that this was the first Panther tank knocked out by the Allies in the west. Major Griffith controlled most of this operation, which lasted some six hours, on foot and under heavy fire. He ordered Lieut. D. F. Hunt to try and find a way round the right of the minefield but this officer was able to report that the right was blocked by deep wadis into one of which his Churchill turned a complete somersault.

At 0800 hours Major G. P. Russell, M.C., led the move of B Squadron out of the wood and across the open ground towards the objective. One hundred yards from the objective very heavy anti-tank gun fire was opened on this Squadron as a result of which five tanks, including those of Major Russell and Capt. M. B. Pope, M.C., were knocked out. Major Russell was seriously wounded, Capt. Pope slightly. Major Russell's tank was found later to be not more than thirty yards from a Panther turret emplacement but tank commanders could not see more than ten yards at this time owing to the dust. Lieut. J. H. Pyl, however, on the left of B Squadron, reached the objective with his Troop and there found some of the Seaforths who pointed out a house to him which was two hundred yards beyond the objective and from which they said they were being heavily engaged. Lieut. Pyl's Troop immediately destroyed this house and silenced all opposition from it, after which operation he withdrew his Troop to join the remaining tanks of B Squadron. Capt. W. M. Mackean, M.C., now commanding B Squadron, advanced into the clearing, but was immediately engaged by enemy anti-tank guns. Under cover of smoke he succeeded in extricating his tank from this position, but the tank was then knocked out by another enemy anti-tank gun. Captain Mackean and his crew evacuated the tank but were pinned to the ground by enemy machine-gun fire.

At approximately 1200 hours the Commanding Officer was informed by 25th Army Tank Brigade that enemy tanks were known to be in the area between 2nd and 3rd Brigades so he moved the Regimental Headquarters' tanks, including the Self-Propelled Battery Commander's Sherman, to the left flank.

The commanding officer ordered the remnants of B and C squadrons to rally near the start line and by using the regimental headquarters tanks less the Commanding Officer's, another composite force was formed here under Captain Mackean who had returned on foot. There was still considerable enemy activity in and around the Forme d'Aquino and A squadron, under Major Griffith, were fired at by machine-guns throughout the night. Unfortunately just before last light on this day a chance Nebel-werfer burst landed in the regimental headquarters and C squadron refuelling area as a result of which the last casualties in the regiment were incurred.

The commanding officer returned to 2nd Brigade Headquarters at 1800 hours where he reported to Brigadiers Gibson and Tetley. He learned that the whole operation was concluded successfully and 5th Canadian Armoured Division were preparing to exploit through towards the river Melfa. Thus ended the battle of the Adolf Hitler Line, a battle in which both Canadian Infantry and our tanks faced very stubborn and fierce resistance. Heavy casualties had been inflicted on the enemy and we sustained, in our turn, serious casualties. It is now known that 1st Canadian Division suffered one thousand casualties in killed, wounded and missing and the N.I.H. lost twenty-five tanks, thirty-four officers and men being killed and thirty-six wounded.

The greatest gallantry and devotion to duty was displayed by all ranks throughout the battle and their determination to support the infantry at all costs has caused the highest praise from all sources. The regiment is known to have destroyed two Panther Mark V tanks, two Mark IV Specials, one self-propelled 75 mm. gun, one Panther turret emplacement, one 88 mm. anti-tank gun, one 75 mm. anti-tank gun, one 20 mm. dual purpose gun, two armoured machine-gun posts and several snipers. Casualties on enemy infantry could not be computed. Some six months had been spent by the enemy in constructing this line, emplacements for anti-tank guns and machine-guns being made of steel and concrete and very cleverly sited. Minefields and wire were laid tactically so as to draw on tanks and infantry into definite killing grounds. Tank obstacles were found on the flanks, again to force our tanks into desired areas All artillery and mortar fire had been registered previously, lanes of fire had been cut cleverly in woods and scrub and in some cases large clearings had been made. Camouflaged snipers formed the outposts of the line and must have acted as artillery and mortar observation posts. The static defences of the line were augmented by approximately thirty tanks and self-propelled guns. At first light on 24th May, 1944, the regiment was put at one hour's notice and ordered to re-organise as quickly as possible on the basis of two Churchill troops and two Sherman troops per fighting squadron.

Brigadier Gibson informed the Commanding Officer at approximately 1300 hours that the remnants of the leading companies of the Seaforths had succeeded in reaching the first objective but that they were being attacked by enemy tanks and had only Piats with which to defend themselves. The Commanding Officer formed a composite force of the remaining tanks of B and C Squadrons and put them under command of Capt. C. M. Thomas. Fortunately this officer was in possession of a mosaic aerial photograph and by using this, the Commanding Officer was able to guide Captain Thomas and his force away from, and around, the clearing which was now known to be the enemy tank killing ground. This force reached the objective but was unable to find any trace of the Seaforths. At this juncture, this force came under very heavy enemy artillery fire, three tanks being hit almost immediately and knocked out by heavy calibre shells, probably 210 mm.

Captain Thomas displayed great coolness and judgment and ordered the force to disperse slightly. At this point the Commanding Officer ordered Captain Thomas to withdraw to a position from which he could dominate the objective but, unfortunately, in trying to carry out this order the force came under heavy fire from many enemy anti-tank guns as a result of which seven tanks were destroyed, including Captain Thomas's. Lieut. G. Mahon's Troop of three tanks, before being themselves knocked out, destroyed an enemy Panther turret emplacement and a 75 mm. anti-tank gun. It is interesting to note that both the Churchill 6-pounder and Sherman 75 mm. easily penetrated the Panther turret and that the Besa not only penetrated the two shields of the 75 mm. anti-tank gun but also killed the crew. The range was two hundred yards. Captain Thomas and the survivors were heavily engaged by enemy machine-gun fire when they evacuated their burning tanks.

At this stage Major Griffith reported the presence of several enemy tanks and self-propelled guns on the west bank of the Forme d'Aquino and near the road. After a reconnaissance he decided not to use artillery against them owing to the presence in that area of men of the Princess Pat's, but asked for Sappers to gap the minefield in front of his Squadron. The Sappers, despite casualties, did gap the minefield in one place and two Churchills led by Sjt. Best [sadly, shortly afterwards, he was killed] advanced through the gap only to be knocked out on the far side by cleverly-concealed anti-tank guns.

The Adolf Hitler Line had now been overrun twice by tanks, and men of both the Princess Pat's and Seaforths had reached the objective. It is true that both infantry and tanks sustained heavy casualties in doing this but enemy resistance began to slacken at approximately 1600 hours and it was at this stage that the Pontecorvo wing of the enemy line folded up. Major Griffith was ordered to form a firm base in his area with Princess Pat's and the Loyal Edmontons, and Brigadier Gibson ordered up anti-tank guns.

Reconnaissance during this morning showed that the enemy had withdrawn his remnants from the entire Hitler Line during the early hours of the morning, leaving all heavy equipment in our hands. At first light the 5th Canadian Armoured Division passed through the line and by the evening had pushed elements over the river Melfa. At 1300 hours A B and C Squadrons, now re-organised, were concentrated in harbour in the area of the forward assembly area and the collection of the dead had commenced. In the afternoon Brigadier Gibson honoured the Regiment by requesting the burial of N.I.H. dead in the 2nd Canadian Brigade Cemetery and congratulatory messages for our part in the action were received from the Canadian Corps Com­mander, G.O.C. 1st Canadian Division and Brigadier Tetley.

On Thursday evening, 25th May, a burial service was held in the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade Cemetery where a plot had been reserved for the North Irish Horse. The cemetery lies about four and a half miles to the south of Pontecorvo and is enclosed on three sides by oak trees, the open side looking across the Liri Valley towards the historic Monastery Hill and Mount Cairo.

It was fitting that the men of the North Irish Horse should be buried near their Canadian comrades in arms, who fought and fell with them in the Adolf Hitler Line. The 23rd of May took a heavy toll of the Regiment. Thirty-two of our friends were buried in that plot of land.

A simple and moving Service of Consecration was held at the cemetery and the site has left associations deeply imprinted upon the minds of the Canadian and British Troops concerned.