

MONTY'S MEN

Monty's Men Operation "Marlett Memorial" in Normandy – June 2006

June 2006 Rauray Battlefield Tour Notes

Introduction

Late June 1944 saw the 3rd attempt by Montgomery to take the city of Caen, originally a D-Day objective. In essence the plan for Operation Epsom was for VIII Corps to push south over the River Odon and onto the River Orne, thus encircling the German defences to the west of Caen and forcing the defenders to the east to retreat back or be cut off. In addition to forcing these river crossings the plan also provided for the capture of a feature known as Hill 112. This hill commanded a magnificent view across the lodgement area of the Commonwealth forces. There is a very famous quote, supposedly made by a German officer that "...who has Hill 112 holds Normandy".

However, the topography of the region meant that there was a ridge of high ground to the west of the Epsom attack area. This high ground would have to be taken before Epsom could commence, as any German artillery observers or tanks would have an unparalleled view over the attacking troops right from the moment that they crossed the start-line.

To secure this high ground (and protect the right flank of the Epsom attackers) Operation Martlet was planned to start on the 25th June, the day before Epsom. Its execution was tasked to 49th (West Riding) Infantry Division. Its goals included the capture of Fontenay-Le-Pesnel, the Grande Ferme and the St Nicholas farm, Tessel Woods and the village of Tessel, the village of Rauray and the high ground to the south (the Rauray Spur) and the village of Bretteville. Operation Martlet started as planned but the advancing troops soon fell behind their supporting barrage and at the end of the day the vital high ground around Rauray was still in German hands. That said the 49th had achieved a great deal.

A second attempt to capture Rauray was launched the next morning, but when Operation Epsom started at 0730 hrs the vital high ground had not been captured. The Jocks were going to advance straight onto the guns of the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend".

The next 3 days saw attack and counter-attack, with the "Hitlerjugend" holding the German left flank and preventing the British from getting into Rauray. With the Allied air superiority and massive artillery support interdicting German reinforcements on their way to the battle area and in their forming up points, the battle slowly swung in the Allies favour. Rauray was captured by the DLI and Hill 112 was briefly in British hands. However, intelligence reports (probably ULTRA) informed the Allied commanders that II SS Panzerkorps were forming for a massive counter-attack. The Epsom attack was halted and Hill 112 was abandoned as the Jocks withdrew into the bridgehead they had formed on the Odon, and prepared for the coming attack.

So, on 30th June the Polar Bears were dug in around Rauray and the surrounding area. The Tyneside Scottish were dug in forward (south) of Rauray on and around Point 110. They were supported by the 11 DLI to their NW in the fields on the outskirts of Rauray and were connected to 6 KOSB of 15th Scottish Division on their left flank (the road between the units forming the boundary between XXX and VIII Corps. The village of Bretteville although captured for a time by the British was now back in German hands.

On the 1st July 1944 Kampfgruppe Weidinger and elements of 9th SS Panzer Division "Hohenstaufen" attacked to the NE out of Bretteville (to the south of Rauray) as part of a larger German attempt to cut out the Scottish Corridor that had been formed by 15th Scottish Division's attack during Operation Epsom.

KG Weidinger was comprised of troops from the 2nd SS Panzer Division "Das Reich", a unit with a fearsome reputation earned on the Eastern Front.

The main axis of advance was along the road from Grainville-sur-Odon to Cheux. This route would take them over the Rauray Spur and straight on to the positions of the Tyneside Scottish.

Deployment of the Tyneside Scottish at Rauray

The battalion was mainly deployed to the east of the road running north-west to south-east through Rauray and along the 110 ring contour.

The battalion was positioned as follows (locations for rifle companies and Bn HQ only) –

A Company – left forward company of the battalion, and also of the division and XXX Corps. Linking up with 6 KOSB, right forward company of 15th Scottish Div and VIII Corps. Their positions were in a field bordered with hedgerows.

B Company – centre forward company, positions on ring contour 110.

C Company – right forward company. Positions on the western side of the Rauray to Grainville-sur-Odon road.

D Company – battalion reserve company situated just forward and SE of the foremost buildings of the eastern part of Rauray

Bn HQ – located to the north of the eastern part of Rauray, moved during the battle slightly further east following a barrage on its position.

The 6-pounders of the anti-tank platoon were all located to the east of the Rauray to Grainville-sur-Odon road. (For individual gun positions see sketch map).

The Battle

Stand 1 – A Company, TS

You are standing on the road that formed the corps boundary between XXX and VIII Corps, and between Operation Martlet and Operation Epsom. If you turn to the west the gate in front of you leads into the feature known as the “5-sided field”. It was in this field that A Company dug in with 7 platoon in the SE corner, 8 platoon in the SW corner and 9 platoon along the northern side. Also deployed in this field were detachment Nos 1 and 2 of the anti-tank platoon.

As the German attack developed the troops in the 5-sided field (and the KOSB to their left) were subjected to a huge bombardment of artillery, Moaning Minnies and tank gun fire. As the bombardment lifted the troops rushed to positions along the hedgerow to be greeted by the sight of tanks and infantry advancing out of Queudeville to the south. The Germans had chosen the road between the units as its axis. The enemy are engaged, with number 1 gun claiming 2 tanks. The anti-tank section commander is concerned about his other gun (number 2, positioned to cover the road and vital to the defence). On reaching No 2 gun he finds the crew wounded, caused by a direct hit on the barrel, also rendering the gun useless.

It is soon evident that the main effort of the German attack is via this area and as a consequence it is not long before the positions on the left of the southern hedgerow are untenable and the troops there move across the road to the 6 KOSB positions and then onto Haut-Le-Bosq to reorganise.

A second German attack seems that it will break through but FOO's in the Belleval Farm and in Rauray itself bring down massive bombardments and these stem the flow of the enemy.

Disaster strikes for A Company at about 1230. Its left flank is about to give way. German tanks are rampaging out of the south and right up to the perimeter of the positions and start to surround the field. Any hope of further resistance is dashed as the tanks start to fire point blank into the trenches.

The German infantry start to occupy the abandoned positions, though there are still trenches occupied by A Company troops within the field, though there is little they can do except keep low and hope for a counter-attack. These troops, including the wounded, remain here throughout the battle despite rumours that A Company had abandoned their positions.

A Company are ordered to link up with C Company, 6 KOSB on their left (who themselves are practically surrounded) but this is next to impossible, so the troops make their way back to Rauray itself.

The enemy now start to exploit the gap on the battalions left flank.

Stand 2 – B Company, TS

You are standing on ring contour 110 (on modern maps 120), one of the main objectives for Operation Martlet. If you move to the south side of the track and look north you are looking directly over B Company's positions. The large hedgerows that bordered part of the southern side of the

large field running N-S have long been scrubbed out. Those hedgerows were the only protection available to Company HQ, the rifle platoons were dug in on the open ground you are standing on. Take a moment to appreciate the exposed nature of these positions. As you look northwards 11 platoon were to your left, 12 platoon in the centre and 10 platoon to your right. Co-located with B Company was No 3 gun from the anti-tank platoon. It was facing SW – straight towards the German attack.

B Company reported the enemy in its positions at 0645 hrs. The tanks had continued through the smokescreen and past C Company on the right. The Panthers and Mk IV's pour fire into the positions and B Company try to respond from the cover of their slit trenches. Vickers MMG's from 9 Platoon, C Company, 2nd Kensingtons add their firepower to the defence from a range of 150 yards!

By 0710 hrs the action of Sgt Watson's No 3 gun has blunted the enemy's first attack on ring contour 110. By the time his gun is put out of action (by all of his crew being wounded) it had accounted for 5 tanks within B Company's area.

By 0725 hrs B Company is surrounded but holding. The supporting artillery is vital to the continued success of the defence. The supporting fire from the Shermans of the 24th Lancers to the north of B Company is also keeping the German armour from exploiting through the gap between A and B Company.

As the battle continues the smoke, dust and noise makes communication (verbal and visible) difficult, and unable to link with the other platoons the PC of 12 platoon orders his remaining troops to move to the northern side of the field hedgerow to the north of the track.

As we have seen over at A Company, the Germans had established positions in the southern area of the field. From these positions they now start to take B Company under fire and pin them down. Captain Calderwood (B Company commander) is constantly relaying co-ordinates for DF and reporting the results of the shoots. The support of the artillery is keeping the enemy from progressing. As B Company are now under massive pressure 17 Platoon D Company are tasked to reinforce the troops on ring contour 110. (see Stand 4).

At 1115 the enemy launch a second attempt to breakthrough. B Company report 7 enemy AFVs are 300 yards NE of ring contour 110 and the 24th Lancers respond. The reinforcements from D Company have still not arrived in B Company's position. At 1225 Captain Calderwood asks for another "stonk" in front of his trenches.

Around 1240 the reinforcements arrive. Some of 11 platoon's positions have been occupied by the enemy.

As the enemy launch their third attempt to break through (at 1254 hrs) more artillery (and mortar and naval gunfire) is requested to the south of the position. There now seemed to be a change in the enemy's tactics and the panzers now seem to bypass B Company and head for C Company on the right.

The enemy try another two attacks both of which are broken up by supporting fire from all types of artillery. At 1810 hrs D Company reinforce the beleaguered B Company defenders of ring contour 110.

Stand 3 – C Company, TS

C Company were the right forward company of the battalion, dug in among the hedgerows of the fields to the west of the Rauray – Grainville-sur-Odon road. If you look to the south you are facing directly into the advance route of both the Hohenstaufen troops (left as you look) and KG Weidinger (to the right).

C Company were the first position to come under fire (artillery, mortar and MG) as part of the enemy's first attack at 0530 hrs. As the troops in the forward positions strain to see through the large smokescreen laid to their front they can hear the sound of vehicles moving up. These are the tanks of 9th SS Panzer Regiment in support of KG Weidinger. These tanks advance with supporting infantry from Bretteville and immediately head for ring contour 110 and the road to Cheux. The tanks support their infantry by firing into the battalion positions but do not attack C Company directly. Instead they cover the deployment of the supporting infantry. The panzers main aim is to breakthrough the frontline and drive along its axis to cut off the Scottish Corridor. This support allows them to position their MGs and to succeed in infiltrating a number of troops around C Company's positions and into the western parts of Rauray itself, between 11 DLI and 4 Lincolns.

A quick counter-attack by C Company 4 Lincolns straightens the line and plugs what could have been a serious breach in the British line.

Back in C Company's positions the situation is confused. The forward platoons (13 platoon to the right and 14 platoon in the centre) are considered surrounded. The Germans have succeeded in infiltrating to the left and are now threatening to move in on the right.

Company HQ and 15 platoon (dug in by the road) are now in danger of being surrounded themselves are allowed to fall back northwards into positions backing onto the DLI (this occurs at 0830 hrs).

KG Weidinger continues to infiltrate the TS and DLI positions and at 1147 hrs mounts a concerted effort to break into Rauray on the western side. This attack is fought back and the Germans revert to sniping from the hedgerows and orchards. At about 1420 hrs Major Angus (C Company commander) tries to gather as many survivors from the forward platoons as possible and after a brief venture forward returns with about 30 men. It seems that some of the forward platoons sections did manage to hold on.

The enemy launch 2 more major attacks with the last one heading for C Company's old positions. A fifth attack was forming up but this was destroyed by artillery fire. The infantry on the west of Rauray continue to be plagued by snipers and infiltration attempts throughout the afternoon. At about 1810 hrs C Company 11 DLI and D Company TS attack southwards towards A and B Company TS positions on the left of the battalion position.

C Company take advantage of this attack to push towards their old positions supported by Crocodile tanks from 141 Regt RAC. B Company from 11 DLI also push forward on the right of C Company.

By 2300 hrs C Company are back in their old positions.

Stand 4 – D Company and Bn HQ, TS

You are now standing in the northern most part of the main fighting positions of the TS. If you look to the north you will see why this area had to be taken before Epsom could begin. The area to your 2 o'clock is the ground over which the 15th Scottish Division had to advance. Visible in the distance is the start line for the Jocks, so as you can appreciate the enemy had a wonderful field of view and fire.

During the Rauray battle this area was used by Bn HQ. Early on the enemy shelled the area causing Bn HQ to move further to the east along the hedgerow. Also deployed here were the tanks of 24th Lancers. Behind them in the area to the north were the tanks of the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry.

D Company were dug in on the southern side of a hedgerow forward of this position, facing down the long field towards B Company. This company were the battalion reserve and as such could be used as a whole or by platoon to plug gaps in the defence, counter-attacks or as reinforcements for the forward companies.

After the initial enemy bombardment the 24th Lancers moved the remainder of C Squadron over to this eastern side among the hedgerows to support the 2 troops already there (2 and 4 troops). From here the tanks had a good field of fire over the long field (800 – 1000 yards). Their job is to stop any panzers from getting past the 5-sided field. However, this means that for some of the troops in 18 platoon the tanks are firing right over their trenches.

By 0855 hrs the company are starting to skirmish with the infiltrating Germans and some sharp short clashes occur near the main road. As we have seen B Company are now under severe pressure and the TS CO, Lt-Col de Winton, orders D Company to reinforce B. Captain Highmore (OC D Company) orders Lt Murray (OC 17 Platoon) to advance and join the besieged defenders on ring contour 110.

The first attempt via the left side of the hedgerow is met with stiff opposition and 17 platoon return to their positions. Highmore then sends 17 platoon to try on the right side of the hedgerow, this means that the platoon will advance down the long field. Lt Murray sends one section along the left inside edge, another along the right inside edge and another (with platoon HQ) down the centre. Their advance was not only supported by the artillery and battalion mortars but also by 18 platoon.

By 1044 hrs 17 platoon are still inching forward but progress is slow. The next hour is critical to the defence of Rauray, At 1115 hrs the Germans launch their second attack. Once again tanks and infantry are advancing out of Bretteville and Queudeville. The barrages fired from both sides increase in intensity. B Company reports 7 tanks NE of ring contour 110. As 17 platoon continue to make their way forward these AFVs start to take it under fire, the 24th Lancers move to support them.

At about 1240 hrs as the men of D Company try to filter into the rear of B Company they are taken under fire from the left flank. After a brief delay 17 platoon eventually succeed in reinforcing the remains of B Company.

The now reinforced position report that they can hold if supported by tanks. At 1254 hrs the Germans launch a third attack.

Back in the main D Company position they receive a "good stonking" at about 1338 hrs. This adds to casualties already sustained by the company from earlier barrages.

At 1408 hrs a fourth attack falls on the defenders of ring contour 110 from the south-east and the south-west, and once again a massive barrage holds the enemy at bay.

After a further (fifth) German attack is driven off it is time for the British to counter-attack. After receiving reinforcements D Company is tasked with pushing down and relieving the combined B and D Company. C Company 11 DLI are moved across to operate on the left flank of the long field, they are to push on to the 5-sided field. D Company finds 12 survivors of B Company and the earlier D Company reinforcements.

Stand 5 – DLI Positions

11 DLI were dug in on the west of Rauray and were the right forward battalion of 70th Brigade. They were linked to 4th Lincolns who were left forward battalion of 146th Brigade.

B was the left forward company and D right forward.

You are now stood in the forward positions of D Company. The field and orchards to your left were the DLI front line. The ground to your front (south) leads up to C Company's positions.

To your right are the fields, orchards and hedgerows that the DLI and 4 Lincolns had to clear to prevent the Germans from breaking into the west of Rauray and potentially turning the Brigade's flank. It was along the right hand side of this area that B Company 11 DLI counter-attacked at about 1810 hrs, supported by the remnants of C Company, TS.

Conclusion

The battle of Rauray on the 1st July 1944 was a turning point in the Normandy campaign. It represented the best chance the Germans had of mounting a well supported and powerful attack in the British sector since D-Day itself. Freshly arrived battle hardened troops, with armour to support them were never available again in such numbers. The increasing air superiority of the Allies meant that it would be increasingly difficult for the Germans to mass such formations.

With the increase of troops and supplies into the bridgehead the Allies also gained a material superiority.

If it had not been for the die hard defence of the troops at Rauray, Epsom would have been in vain and the Germans could have broken through and set the liberation back many weeks or endangered it altogether. When you look around the positions of the TS (especially the forward companies) try to imagine the scene of destruction, confusion and fear as for 17 hours a battalion of infantry, bravely supported by artillery, MGs and naval gunfire took on and defeated some of the best troops that the enemy could throw at them.

Rauray may not be one of the most famous actions of the Normandy fighting but it is surely one of the most important.