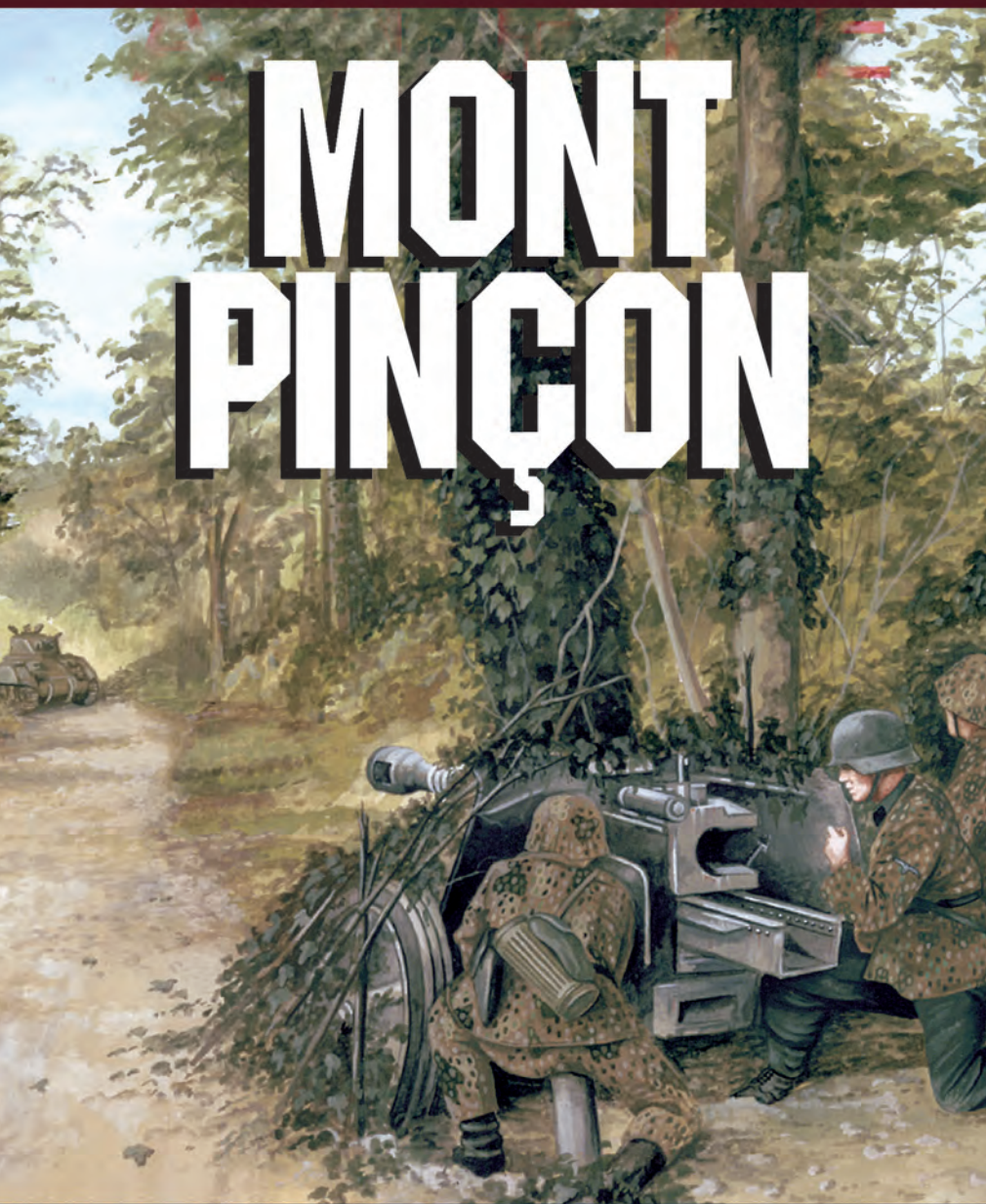


NORMANDY

MONT PINÇON



Eric Hunt

**BATTLEGROUND
EUROPE**

Battleground Europe

NORMANDY

MONT PINÇON

AUGUST 1944



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Cover painting by Adrian George depicts action in the bocage in August 1944. info@adrianart.co.uk

Battleground Europe
NORMANDY

MONT PINÇON

AUGUST 1944

Eric Hunt



LEO COOPER

In memory of Pat Hennessey, the 'young Man in a Tank'

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 1995 I was asked to help with the setting up of a memorial to commemorate all those who served in the 13th/18th Royal Hussars (Queen Mary's Own), from its creation in 1922 to its amalgamation in 1992 with the 15th/19th The King's Royal Hussars – to form The Light Dragoons. The previous year had been the fiftieth anniversary of the D Day landings in Normandy, and an obvious site for the memorial was Mont Pinçon. In August 1944 the Regiment had played a signal part in the capture of this important feature. The preparations for the memorial and its dedication led me to research the details of the operation and from that developed a range of happy contacts with a number of people, both from the other units that took part and the local village of le Plessis Grimoult.

The *Journal of The Society for Army Historical Research* subsequently published an article by me on *The Battle for Mont Pinçon* and in 1998 Adrian Gregory, who had also served in the 13th/18th, produced the video *Battle for Mont Pinçon 5th, 6th and 7th August 1944*. That included a number of interviews with veterans of the 43rd Division and the 13/18 Hussars as well as inhabitants of le Plessis Grimoult and Adrian has kindly allowed me to make use of them. I am also most grateful to those he interviewed; they are listed below (under regiments and ranks at the time of the battle). Several of them, alas, have since died (marked†).

13th/18th Royal Hussars: Cpl Roy Cadogan, Lt Hugh Elliot, Capt Julius Neave, Major Sir Delaval Cottert, Lt Hugh Franks, Tpr George Treloar, Lt Brian Edwards, L/Cpl Pat Hennessey†, Tpr Douglas Wileman.

Royal Artillery: Capt David Hadow, Sgt Jim Parkins.

Royal Hampshire Regiment: L/Cpl Ken Baker, CSM Laurie Symes.

Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry: Sgt Fred Bolt, Pte James Gregory†.

Wiltshire Regiment: L/Cpl Ron Garner, Pte Will Hanson, Capt Tom Powell, Capt Harry Peace†, Major 'Dim' Robbins, Cpl Neville Trim.

Somerset Light Infantry: Lt Sydney Jary, Cpl Douglas Proctor†.

Inhabitants of le Plessis Grimoult: Mme Jeanne Groult, M. le Marchand, Mme Madeleine Restout†.

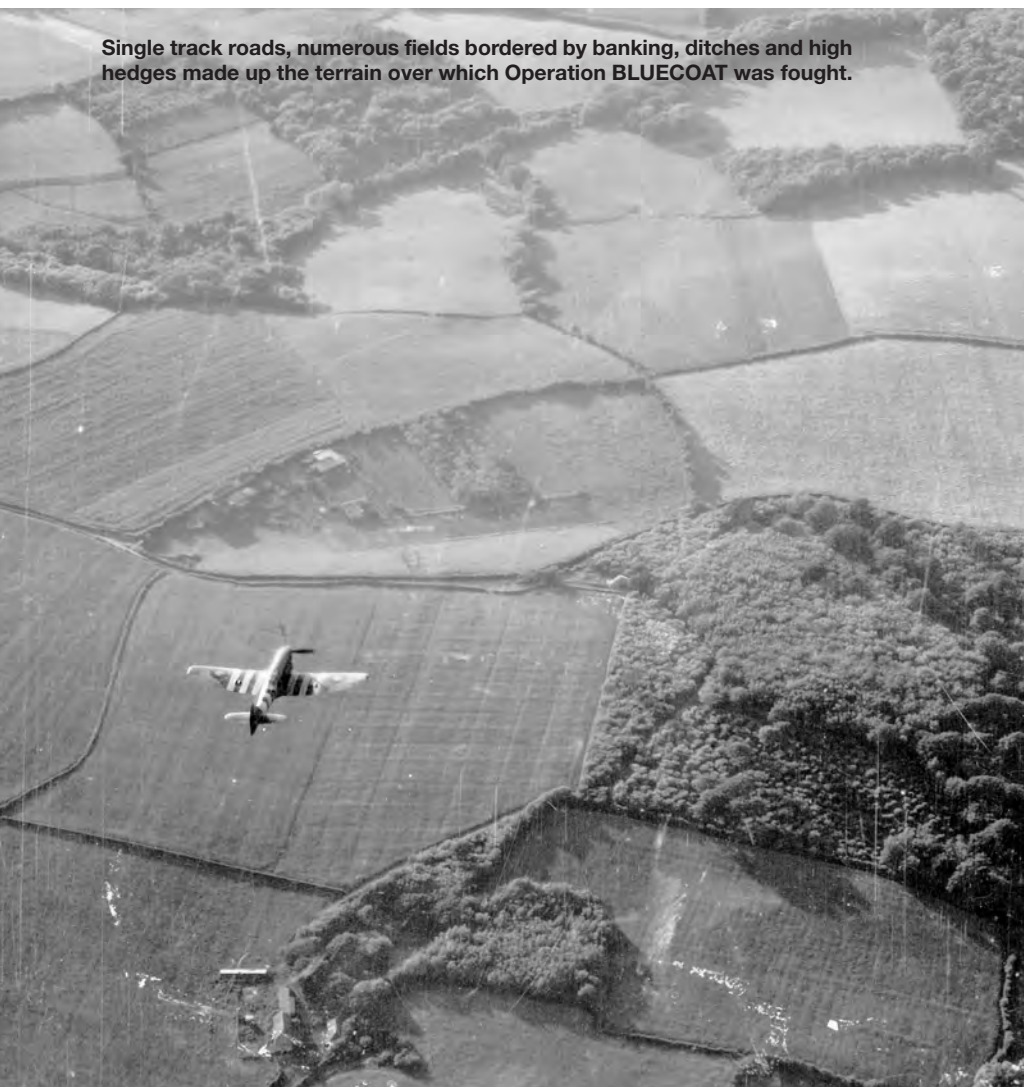
My other sources for this short book range from Chester Wilmot's *The Struggle for Europe*, through formation and regimental histories and war diaries, to personal accounts by 'those who were there'. Of these last, some date from after the events described to reminiscences fifty years or more on. It may seem that the more immediate the recollection, the more valuable for those of us who want to walk the battlefield. Personally, I think that they all have a place – as have fresh young wines and those of distinguished vintage! I am indebted to all those on whose recollections I have drawn, amongst whom were 'Dim' Robbins and

David Hadow, who were also kind enough to let me have comments on an early draft. So too did the late Pat Hennessey, who must have been one of the youngest British tank commanders in Normandy. Adrian Gregory has not only let me quote liberally from his video, but has provided a mass of supporting material from his own researches.

Thanks are also due to: David Fletcher, The Tank Museum; The Air Photo Library, University of Keele; The National Army Museum, Imperial War Museum, Robert Hale Ltd (*Normandy Diary* Lord Methuen); Harper Collins Publishers Ltd (*Struggle for Europe* Chester Wilmot). Ralph Dodds and my wife Gill have undertaken the scanning of various drafts and, finally, Roni Wilkinson of Pen & Sword Books has worked wonders in finding pictures and matching them to text.

EEH, *Mappowder*, July 2003

Single track roads, numerous fields bordered by banking, ditches and high hedges made up the terrain over which Operation BLUECOAT was fought.



INTRODUCTION

Of all the local actions which shaped the pattern of the break-out battle, the attack upon Mont Pinçon was one of the most significant, not merely on account of its tactical consequences, but because of the qualities which it called forth in the men concerned.

STRUGGLE FOR EUROPE

One hundred days after D Day – on Thursday 14 September 1944 – the main story on the front page of the *Daily Mail* had news of sweeping successes by the Allied armies which were ‘closing in’ on Germany. American troops had captured their first German village and the British Second Army had pushed the Germans off their line on the Albert Canal. On the same page a ‘local action’ was reported from some six weeks earlier:

***This Was the Epic of Mont Pinçon
‘Red Rose’ Colonel and His Heroes***

Mont Pinçon, 1,200ft, highest point in Normandy, lay between Caen and the British advance on the Seine. It was in German hands, and from it enemy fire paralysed all movement over miles of country.

The 43rd Wessex Division, pinned down for seven hours on end, were given the order to attack.

A colonel, wearing a red rose on his battledress and swinging a cane, led his men forward, strolling casually over a bridge under heavy machine gun fire.

His men, spurred on, took the bridge and the hill. The full story of the action – one of the most crucial of the Normandy battle – is told today.

Throughout the whole advance in the west it has been the lot of our Allies to sweep across three countries, dragging the headlines with them. This story tells of the men who made those headlines possible ...

The men who made that particular headline possible came from 43rd Wessex Division and 8 Independent Armoured Brigade, together with those fighting alongside them from the other formations of XXX Corps – 50th Northumbrian and 7th Armoured Divisions – and those of VIII Corps – Guards and 11th Armoured Divisions, 15th Scottish Division and 6 Guards

Independent Tank Brigade. They were all taking part in Operation BLUECOAT, launched on 30 July 1944, which saw some of the fiercest fighting of the Normandy campaign over an area some ten miles wide and twelve miles deep.

This guide is concerned principally with the capture of the key feature of Mont Pinçon; it therefore follows 43rd Division and 8 Armoured Brigade, from their assembly area near Caumont-l'Éventé, into the *bocage* and up the slopes of Mont Pinçon. But the stories of the other formations are also outlined, as the Mont Pinçon story is best understood by keeping track of the other actions of BLUECOAT.

OUTLINE OF GUIDE

Chapter 1 – Operations COBRA and BLUECOAT

The break out from the bridgehead begins with the successful launch of the American Operation COBRA and plans for a supporting offensive by British Second Army are brought forward. Three armoured and two infantry divisions, with additional armoured and infantry brigades, are to be launched in Operation BLUECOAT. There has to be speedy and complex regrouping in the British sector of the bridgehead.

Chapter 2 – 30 & 31 July: XXX Corps

43rd and 50th Divisions encounter tough resistance and make slow progress through the *bocage*, but eventually 43rd Division reach St Pierre-du-Fresne after taking Briquessard and Cahagnes and 50th Division reach the Launay feature.

Chapter 3 – 30 & 31 July: VIII Corps

15th Division get on much better than 43rd and 50th, but find themselves in a very exposed position, as XXX Corps cannot cover their left flank at Quarry Hill. 11th Armoured do well on the right, reaching the outskirts of St Martin-des-Besaces and taking an unobserved bridge over the River Soulevvre. First news arrives of German panzer reinforcements as Guards Armoured Division moves forward.

Chapter 4 – 1 & 2 August: XXX Corps

7th Armoured Division is brought in on the left flank, heading for Aunay-s-Odon, while the two infantry divisions

slog on towards Villers-Bocage and Ondefontaine. 43rd Division reaches the Bois du Homme and takes Jurques and le Bigne. 50th Division secures the Launay feature and takes Amayé-sur-Seulles and la Bruyère. The lack of progress by the Corps is unacceptable and a number of senior officers are replaced.

Chapter 5 – 1 & 2 August: VIII Corps

German counter-attacks are launched against 15th Division and Guards Armoured Division, moving up through them, meets heavy opposition. However, 11th Armoured forges on beyond the Caen-Vire road. 3rd Division joins the Corps to help hold on to the ground won and maintain the forward impetus.

Chapter 6 – 3 & 4 August: XXX Corps

43rd Division clears Jurques on the 3rd and Ondefontaine on the 4th. Counter attacks hold up 7th Armoured, but they bypass Aunay-sur-Odon and secure the high ground beyond, while their armoured cars reach the outskirts of Villers-Bocage, occupied by 50th Division on the 4th.

Chapter 7 – 3 & 4 August: VIII Corps

Both 11th Armoured and Guards Armoured Divisions are being subjected to heavy German counter-attacks by the panzer divisions brought across from the eastern sector of the Normandy battlefields. 15th Division is able to advance eastward to clear the ridge towards Montchauvet.

Chapter 8 – 5 August: 'Converging on Mont Pinçon'

The first assault on the defences of Mont Pinçon itself, by 129 Brigade and two squadrons of the 13/18 Hussars, is held up at St Jean-le-Blanc and la Varinière.

Chapters 9 – 6 August: 'A footing'

129 Brigade's second assault, together with a feint attack by 130 Brigade gains the lower slopes of Mont Pinçon.

Chapters 10 – Evening of 6 August: The Assault

In the early evening, two troops of the 13/18 Hussars find an unwatched track up the hill and reach the summit. The remainder of A Squadron join them together with Regimental Headquarters and then B Squadron. Two of the exhausted battalions of the Brigade, 4 Som LI and 4 Wiltshire, follow them up as a heavy mist and darkness fall.

Chapter 11 – Elsewhere on 5 & 6 August

7th Armoured Division enters Aunay-sur-Odon and pushes on towards Thury Harcourt. VIII Corps spends much of 5 August mopping up enemy pockets and preparing for renewed counter-attacks. They arrive with great intensity on 6 August from Vire to Mont Pinçon.

Chapter 12 – 6/7 August: Night on Mont Pinçon and in la Varinière

The much-depleted 5 Wiltshire, with C Squadron 13th/18th, hold on to la Varinière while British and German troops share the summit of Mont Pinçon. 214 Brigade is ordered forward to clear the Mont Pinçon feature and capture le Plessis Grimoult. French civilians are caught up in the battle.

Chapter 13 – 7 August: Capture of le Plessis Grimoult

5 DCLI and B Squadron 4/7 Dragoon Guards capture le Plessis Grimoult.

Chapter 14 – After the capture of Mont Pinçon:

The next few days – A month later – Battle Honours

Mont Pinçon

Mont Pinçon, the highest feature in Normandy, rises some 1,200 feet from the *pré-bocage* on the edge of the *bocage* proper. In 1939 the French positioned on it a navigation aid (*station de radionavigation*, predecessor to radar), which was subsequently taken over by the Luftwaffe and used in directing air raids on England.

The Germans also identified Mont Pinçon as a main feature

Mount Pinçon in 2003.



of an inland defence line early in the Normandy campaign. At that stage, Allied deception plans had convinced the enemy that further landings were possible and a strong probability was the coast north of the Seine. Eleven days after D Day, at a briefing at Hitler's French command post, the Commander-in-Chief West, Field Marshal von Rundstedt, had warned that Allied air power and naval artillery were such that he was unable to attack the Normandy bridgehead with any hope of success. With him was Commander Army Group B, Field Marshal Rommel, and he proposed a gradual withdrawal to a defensive line, beyond the reach of the naval guns, from which the panzer formations would be free to operate against either any breakout from the bridgehead or a fresh landing. The new line would follow the River Orne south to Thury-Harcourt and then turn west to Mont Pinçon and follow the range of hills westward to the coast near Granville.

Hitler rejected Rommel's proposal and it was several weeks before Mont Pinçon featured in the campaign.

The Bocage

Operation BLUECOAT was fought in progressively more hilly country, broken by streams flowing through steep-sided valleys. The hills were covered with thick woodland while the characteristic dairy farms and orchards of the region occupied the valleys and slopes. The small fields and innumerable, often sunken, side-roads were lined with banked hedgerows and ditches. Stone walls enclosed the orchards and the stone buildings and narrow streets of the villages completed a countryside ideal for the defenders. For their infantry there were any number of natural anti-tank obstacles while their tanks found ample cover in the thick woods and copses. But the attacker:

...was forced to follow by-ways which straggle up and down against the contours. These by-ways were mostly sunken lanes, so narrow that a tank could not traverse its gun, still less turn round. There was no observation beyond the next field and the armour was seldom able to manoeuvre across country, for the hedgerows were effective barriers and any gaps could easily be closed with mines and fire. The bocage was made for the sniper and the man who lay in wait beside the road with a panzerfaust.

In 1991, Bobby Neave, second-in-command of B Squadron 13/18 Hussars remembered:



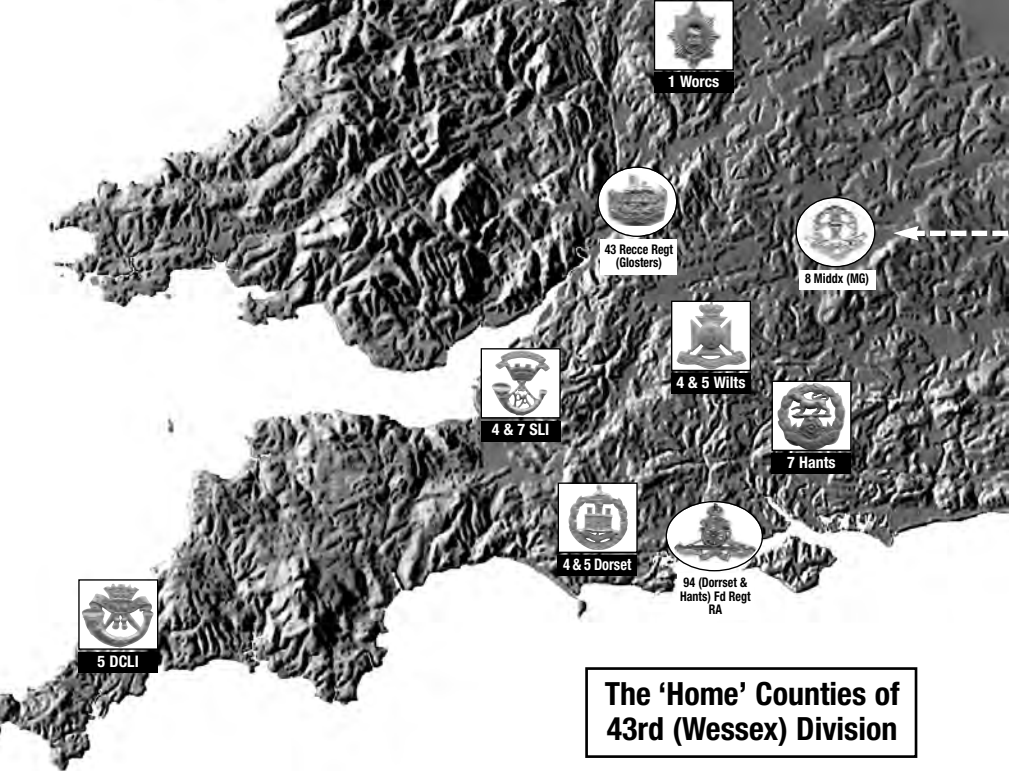
Caught in the open these German Tigers manoeuvre frantically to avoid Allied fighter bombers in the fields and hedges of the *bocage*.

...very enclosed country, leafy hedges, narrow roads, totally unsuitable for tank operations... you advanced across a field and the next thing you knew you were being attacked by panzerfaust from behind; a unit of the other side sitting comfortably in the corner behind a high bank... not easy fighting.

Men of Wessex

The Wyvern, badge of the fighting men of Wessex, had been the formation sign of 43rd (Wessex) Division since 1935. When the division came ashore in Normandy between 23 and 24 June 1944 it was still composed largely of West Country units. They had been commanded since 1942 by Major General G. I. Thomas, 'a very tough and often brutal martinet with a professional, almost Teutonic, attitude to divisional command.' During their training in south-east Kent over three winters:





... the Division grew to accept hardship as the natural order of things. By a lucky chance, also, the enclosed country round Stone Street strikingly resembled the Normandy bocage ... the Division, in contrast to those accustomed only to the limitless open spaces of the Western Desert, became particularly well attuned to the conditions it had to face from the very moment it landed in France.

Two days after landing they were in action outside Caen as part of VIII Corps. Between 25 and 29 June they took part in VIII Corps' Odon offensive, in which 15th (Scottish) Division and they were to seize and secure a bridgehead across the River Odon, from which 11th Armoured Division could attack south-east. This drew the German reserves into the Caen sector and at one stage three panzer divisions were attacking 43rd Division alone. Meanwhile Caen had yet to be captured and I Corps, after a devastating attack by Bomber Command, finally achieved that on 9 July.

Then came the operation to secure the high ground between the rivers Odon and Orne. Two armoured brigades and an extra infantry brigade, together with the guns of two army group RAs

and two other divisions, supported 43rd Division. The ferocious battle over the next two days left the division with over 2,000 casualties and was followed by fourteen days of 'conditions comparable to the bombardment at Passchendaele'. 6 [A full account is in *Hill 112, Battles of the Odon* in the Battleground Europe series.]

The casualties included a high proportion of commanding officers and company commanders. The replacements, officers and men, had only a few days to settle in with the survivors during a brief spell in a rest area at Ducy-Ste-Marguerite, before the division was committed to its next operation. They had hoped to have seven to ten days in reserve, but events were moving too swiftly for that hope to be fulfilled.

Amongst the replacements was Lieutenant Sydney Jary of the Hampshire Regiment. In the event he was posted to 4 Somerset Light Infantry which, in two days, had been almost decimated. Jary was one of fifteen officers and nearly 550 other ranks who joined what had been a close-knit, 'family' unit. He had had previous experience of 6-pounder anti-tank guns and was posted as second-in-command to the battalion's Anti-Tank Platoon.

Amphibious Cavalry

Tanks of eight armoured regiments of the British, American and Canadian assault forces had been equipped for amphibious landing on D Day. Three of the eight were now in 8 Independent Armoured Brigade: the 4/7 Dragoon Guards, the 13/18 Royal Hussars and the Nottinghamshire (Sherwood Rangers) Yeomanry. The 'DD' (= duplex drive) regiments had varied fortunes on D Day, but the 13th/18th had been the most successful in getting tanks of its two DD squadrons ashore. Then in 27 Armoured Brigade, part of I Corps then among the first to land on Sword Beach, the 13th/18th 'swam' their amphibious Sherman tanks nearly five thousand yards in heavy seas. By the second half of July they had had a full share of the subsequent fighting. I Corps was and securing the left flank of VIII Corps during the seven-day battle of Operation GOODWOOD – the attempt by three armoured divisions to break out from the beachhead. On the evening of 26 July, 27 Armoured Brigade was ordered into army reserve at Coulombs, not far from the 43rd Division rest area. There they were



Sherman DD (duplex drive) tank with floatation skirt folded.

dismayed to hear that they were to take down their 'Sea-horse' formation sign. 27 Brigade was being disbanded and the 13th/18th were to replace the 24th Lancers and wear the 'Fox's Mask' of 8 Independent Armoured Brigade.

8 Armoured Brigade had played the same part for XXX Corps during D Day as had 27 Brigade for I Corps, but conditions had not permitted their DD tanks to be launched and they had to be beached from the tank landing craft which had brought them across the Channel. Also in the Brigade were a motor battalion, the 12/60 (Queen's Westminster) King's Royal Rifle Corps and 147 Field Regiment RA (Essex Yeomanry). Earlier in the month they had been supporting 50th (Northumbrian) Division in a bloody attack on Hottot where they had encountered the *bocage* for the first time. They then relieved 2nd (US) Armoured Division north-east of Caumont-l'Eventé and had remained static for the remainder of the month occupying that section of the beachhead perimeter.

Men and Weapons

Veterans of 43rd Division and 8 Armoured Brigade interviewed by Adrian Gregory recalled the quality of the German soldier and the effectiveness of his weapons, compared with their own:

THE WARRANT OFFICERS

Major 'Dim' Robbins, company commander in 4 Wiltshire:

When we captured a German position we frequently found it had been commanded by a warrant officer. When asked why? 'The officers have gone back to reconnoitre the next position and we are quite capable of commanding a company. I thought they were.

SS troops manning a M-42 machine gun.



MACHINE GUNS

Lieutenant Sydney Jary:

The Germans understood the use of suppressive firepower far better than we did. We had been trained on the Bren light machine gun which fired at the rate of about 450 rounds per minute and it was magazine fed. The German MG 42 was belt fed and fired at a rate of 1200 rounds per minute. Many of the German sections were armed with two of these weapons.

Lance Corporal Ken Baker, of 7 Hampshire: