



Breaking the Panzers, the Bloody Battle for Rauray, Normandy 1 July 1944 by Kevin Baverstock published by Sutton ISBN 0-7509-2895-6; pp192 £25.00 (£17.50 from Amazon).

Review by Andy Grainger

Due to an unusual combination of circumstances this book is perhaps the most detailed account of a tactical action in Normandy, or maybe anywhere else, in WW2. The author has intended that the action be described by the participants, which has been done before. But Kevin Baverstock has been able to link their accounts to the Battalion Signals Log and then to illustrate the action with coloured overlays on a series of contemporary air photographs. “*As well describe a battle as describe a ball,*” said the Iron Duke. Well, one cannot follow all the steps but one can certainly follow the dances, of which the author has identified twelve.

In doing so, we not only discover a remarkable story epitomising the British infantryman in defence but learn a lot about the parts played by the different elements of the battalion and their supporting arms.

“Breaking the Panzers” concerns the 1st Battalion Tyneside Scottish (ITS) of 70 Inf Bde, 49 (West Riding) Inf Div in a single day of battle when the IISS Panzer Corps tried to cut off the Scottish Corridor formed by Operation Epsom a few days before.

That the author is able to write such a detailed and comprehensible account of a battle is due to three factors. First, immediately after the battle, the Battalion Signals Log was preserved and the Intelligence Officer compiled a special report whilst another was prepared by the Division. Secondly, in the 1980’s, a retired officer issued questionnaires about the battle to all the survivors whom he could trace although he died before being able to pursue his project further. And thirdly, the author, whose father served in ITS and took part in the battle, is a professional cartographer and was persuaded to write this account.

Those who have trawled through battalion war diaries at the Public Record Office will know that it is unusual for any of these three sources to be present at all; for all three to be at hand may indeed, as the author suggests, be unique. To amplify the story he has conducted some further interviews and consulted the war diaries of the supporting arms such as the 2nd Kensingtons (Machine Gun) Battalion, 24th Lancers (Sherman tanks) and the various Regiments comprising the Divisional Artillery. He has been especially fortunate in the witnesses available from the Support Company in ITS and so we get a very good idea of what the Carrier Platoon actually did and how the Anti-tank platoon deployed their guns. Indeed, he reveals not only where each of the six 6pdrs was on the ground but how they were fought, with the benefit of the new Discarding Sabot round. (Excellent round – shame no-one told the gunners they needed to adjust their sights).

The author uses the 100 messages in the Battalion Signals Log as the skeleton on which to hang his personal accounts. Then he plots the positions of the sub-units and the incidents onto a series of contemporary air photographs with coloured graphics. These are augmented where possible by photographs. In this way it is possible to follow the fighting almost from platoon position to position, hedgerow to hedgerow and field to field. There are, of course, a few inconsistencies. For example, on page 98, I simply could not understand how 18 Platoon



could be working with No.5 Detachment of the anti-tanks but even in this book, the fog of war must perhaps be allowed to descend occasionally.

The outline of the battle is perhaps not dissimilar to a score of others over those few days as the Germans hurled their tanks at the Scottish Corridor. Two companies are driven back, one holds its ground. Artillery fire falls from both sides, casualties mount, there is much heroism in battle, in supplying ammunition, in rescuing wounded and then, finally, counterattacks restore the position. Some men make their excuses, officers and Military Police rally stragglers, even the cooks and clerks are brought up at the end. But here, 60 years on, when few of us have much concept of the underlying, and unspoken, niceties of battle in general war, we get a little closer to understanding the real thing. A Company commander reports the diminution of fire from one of his platoons when its leader is evacuated; later he assembles 30 men from two platoons which have supposedly been completely overrun. We see the MP's in action manning their Straggler Collection Point. Towards the end we read of the concern at B Echelon when a 3 tonner arrives to collect the lightly wounded, the cooks, bottlewashers and 40 entirely unprepared replacements for defence at the last ditch. It really does not get much more dramatic.

We also see the flow of the battle over twenty two hours from 0005 to 2210 on 1 July. Short periods of incredibly intense activity are followed by much longer periods when men are just waiting, brewing up or eating a meal. It is almost as if the attacking soldiers need to be wound up tight like rubber bands over an hour or two and their energy and courage is then hurled in, to be consumed within minutes.

There is another point worth making on the subject of historical evidence. The reason that the questionnaires were issued by that retired officer in the 1980's was because a prominent book, published in about 1984, quoted an eyewitness from a neighbouring battalion as saying that the Tynesiders just ran away. Clearly they did not. Equally, however, there was enough rearward movement (and almost certainly some in the neighbouring battalion) to allow such an impression to be formed. It is, of course, from such impressions that commanders on the spot, indeed all of us, make their judgements on units, people and life generally. Food for thought.

“Breaking the Panzers” is a striking book in a big, almost A4 format. There is a lot of colour, Sutton Publishing have certainly done their author proud. Even at the full price of £25 it is very good value. For the student of WW2 tactics or anyone interested in the campaign in Normandy it is very highly recommended.

Supplemental Notes on The Gunner Arrangements

A Gunner reading the story, however, will be very conscious that we are not getting a full picture. It is not that the role of the artillery is underplayed; indeed its critical importance is emphasised. It is simply that whereas the positions of the rifle companies, tank squadrons and machine gun platoons are depicted on the maps, there is no explanation of the gunner arrangements. For example, it is not explained where the Forward Observation Officers (FOOs) or Mortar Fire Controllers (or whatever they were called then) were deployed or where they might have plotted their Defensive Fire tasks (DFs).



For the purposes of this review, I made notes about the gunner arrangements as I read through the book. 1 TS was part of 70 Inf Bde which, it would seem, was supported by 185 Fd Regt. 185 Regt was commanded by Lt Col Mackay-Lewis who seems to have moved forward to Rauray village close to Battalion HQ although it is not clear whether he moved up his Tactical HQ or simply posted himself with the Battery Commander (BC) supporting 1 TS. Major Frank Lucas was, I infer, BC of this battery. We don't know which one it was but we know that he located himself in Rauray village, close to Bn HQ 1 TS. One would expect two FOOs to be available and, from the Signals Log, it seems that one of them was located with B Company which was located in the centre, around Ring Contour 110, with excellent visibility onto the enemy Forming Up Pints (FUPs).

We see that although both flanking companies of the battalion gave way, B Company held on to its exposed position. That it was able to do so was almost certainly due to its ability to call down fire onto those FUPs and the delivery (somehow) of spare radio batteries by a carrier during the afternoon.

Around midday, Victor targets (ie the FOO called for fire from Corps assets) from both 30 and 8 Corps seriously disrupted the enemy attacks leading to the famous midday sitrep to HQ 9SS Pz Div "*Abandon hope all ye who enter here*".

Details of the fire control arrangements for the Battalion Mortar platoon are also absent although there are some graphic accounts of life at the baseplate where 600 bombs per tube were fired during the day.

We also find that 217 Bty of 55th A/Tk Regt was in support and in action but their gun positions are not identified. Indeed it is not clear if the guns were 6 or 17pdrs. There is also an interesting story from an anti-tank gunner of 1TS who wandered into the neighbouring battalion (6 KOSB) when his own gun had to be abandoned and was prevailed upon to take over a gun there. He concluded afterwards that he must have been mad!

It was only when I thought back to my own trawls through Royal Artillery war diaries that I realised that much of the information about FOO deployment or DF's is probably just not there. Rauray was seen as an unusual battle that day because the Germans got to close quarters with tanks and infantry. Most of the other attacks by IISS Pz Corps were broken up by the artillery before they did so. For the Gunners, though, one senses that it was nearer to "Business as Usual". There was perhaps not the same incentive to preserve the fireplans and DF lists.

Notwithstanding my comments on the gunner aspects, however, this is an excellent book on a battalion battle in Normandy – unless, perhaps, you were there, in which case it may bring back highly unpleasant memories.

A Battlefield Tour Supplement

I visited the battlefield on a hot day in June 2006. Some of the hedgerows and banks have been removed but other areas feel so little changed that the hair stands on the back of your neck. The battlefield is very small and by modern standards the troops seem very crowded but although we can no longer get the feel of the bocage terrain in the 1TS sector, it is very much present in that of its neighbour. It is certainly worth a visit with this book to hand.