



BCMh Battlefield Tour 2005 Normandy 1942-44

Report by Andy Grainger

Presenters

Dieppe:	Graham Dunlop Colin Hook Laurie Milner
Strongpoint Hillman:	Jack "Capt Concrete" Livesey Michael Chilcott
21 Pz Div on D-Day:	Michael Orr Laurie Milner
Villers Bocage:	Laurie Milner
Op EPSOM:	Michael Chilcott
Op GOODWOOD:	Michael Orr
Americans in the Bocage:	Dianne Smith
Op BLUECOAT:	Michael Orr
Op TOTALIZE:	Andy Grainger

The list of operations covered by this year's tour reveals an ambitious itinerary. The hours were certainly long and the list does not include our first real battle, as opposed to a tour of one, which took place at the former Command Post of the German 571 Infantry Regiment high above the seafront at Dieppe against a collection of local drunks aggressively seeking their 15 minutes of fame.

All this implies an even greater level of organisation than usual from leaders Michael and Jane Orr and so it was particularly heartening to see a larger group of participants than usual including several new faces.

A recurrent theme of the Tour, which aimed to look at the Breakout Battles from Normandy rather than the landings themselves, was the learning experience of the armies concerned. The allied armies, it seemed to me, were less experienced at virtually all levels of command and their long years in training did not always seem to have brought them commensurate benefits. The training of the Canadian 2nd Infantry Division at Dieppe, for example, counted for nothing when shockingly bad planning dumped the infantry, entirely unsupported, on a beach swept by machine gun fire. The Western Front in WW1 would at least have offered some craters for cover. Two years later, on 8th August 1944, the 1st Polish Armoured Division lost 25% of its tanks when advancing unsupported against a relatively few but well-posted German anti-tank guns. Even the battle experienced 7th Armoured Division conducted a remarkably sloppy advance to contact at Villers Bocage on a one tank front with few security precautions and inadequate infantry tank co-operation.



The Germans did not always fare very much better. Counterattacks *brusquées* by 21 Pz Div on D-Day and Pz Lehr on 11 July both came to grief in terrain which gave the defenders maximum concealment and channelled the movement of vehicles. It did not help the Germans, of course, that they were desperately outnumbered.

German units reacted to the invasion in different ways. After Jack Livesey had talked about the extensive concrete strongpoints at MORRIS and HILLMAN behind SWORD beach, Mike Chilcott revealed that the garrison of MORRIS had surrendered with suitcases packed. This was not entirely surprising after he explained that for years the defenders had been running a calvados distillery and sausagemeat factory rather than troubling themselves with the intricacies of drill on their four 10.5cm guns. This was a fascinating talk straight out of the Gunner Asch stories by H H Kirst and was based on his discussions with Raimund Steiner, formerly posted to MORRIS and later the commander of the MERVILLE battery.

As is well known, the Germans could not agree on a defensive strategy. Should they keep the Panzer Divisions back to launch a conventional counterstroke, as was traditional in Russia, or commit them forward to prevent the Allies breaking out. Allied pressure obliged them to submit to the latter policy for several weeks and so they were never able to concentrate them as much as they would have wished. But a succession of battles – GOODWOOD, BLUECOAT, TOTALIZE – revealed that their infantry divisions simply did not have the combat power to hold the allied offensives on their own. In each case the ill-equipped and sometimes poorly trained infantry simply acted as tripwires. Only the much better equipped mobile troops possessed sufficient anti-armour capability to give a chance of stopping the allied attacks. One infers also that the air interdiction campaign may have played a significant part in denying the German formations adequate stocks of defensive stores and ammunition.

Leadership and morale counted for a great deal, however. The untried British divisions that launched Op EPSOM in late June suffered appalling casualties but defeated the toughest troops the Germans had and gained most of their objectives. Their own experiences on Hill 112 may even have rivalled our own for unpleasantness. Frank Gibbs, the Signals Sjt of 5 DCL1 whom I met in the bar of our hotel, confirmed that they had not had to put up with drenching sleet, snow and a biting north wind.

We covered a lot of miles on this tour, much of it on minor roads, and although the bocage may not be as dense now as it was in 1944 we did see an awful lot of hedgerows and woods in the areas around CARENTAN, VILLERS-BOCAGE and CAUMONT. The spring foliage gave us a sense of the jungle in which the troops fought and yet allowed us good fields of view.

Dianne Smith explained how the Americans broke through the bocage with all-arms tactics, explosives and bulldozers. Battle tended to be particularly confused in this environment and few of us will forget the vigorous debate between Colonel Dunlop and Captain Brodhurst at “Purple Heart Draw” as to exactly what had happened there sixty years ago.

Michael Orr then explained how the Churchill tanks of 6 Guards Tank Brigade supporting 15th (Scottish) Div were able to cross the hedgerows in Op BLUECOAT. By coincidence I



was reading the memoirs of BCMH member Charles Farrell at this point. BLUECOAT was perhaps the British Army's finest operation in Normandy, but the cost to one of the squadrons in Charles' Battalion (3rd Scots Guards) was 12 of its 16 tanks. But BLUECOAT was successful not just because the infantry broke through the first German defensive zone very quickly but because the armoured cars found a route across a bridge on the German inter-army boundary which the 11th Armoured Division then exploited to the limit. As we followed the route across Dickie's Bridge there were times when I felt that John Hayward's coach would decide it was not a Staghound armoured car but on second thoughts I guess the silhouette and manoeuvrability are not dissimilar. Moving on several parallel routes through the bocage, in four armour-infantry battle groups, 11th Armoured Div occupied a succession of ridges and drew onto themselves the whole of IJSS Panzer Corps, diverted from MORTAIN. In difficult hilly and wooded terrain we saw that 11th Armoured Div did not need lessons in manoeuvre warfare from anyone.

Op TOTALIZE was also an example of a successful breakthrough, this time under Canadian command. General Simmonds' plan combined armour battlegrouped with infantry in APCs, massed on a very narrow front with Red Army scales of artillery and Hamburg levels of support from Bomber Command. Ironically the blow fell not on IJSS Pz Div but an unfortunate infantry division from Norway that had just relieved it. Perhaps if the second echelon had been composed of more experienced formations the German front might have been ruptured à la BLUECOAT. But such formations were not available. It was the turn of 4th Canadian and 1st Polish Armoured Divisions to enter the battle. Reports indicate that the Canadians were cautious and the Poles, as ever, reckless, the latter losing 25% of their tanks against relatively few German anti-tank guns on the ROBERTMESNIL ridge. The landscape here appears little changed from 1944 and the actions so vividly described in Ken Tout's books "Tank"¹ and "A Fine Night for Tanks"² can be followed relatively easily.

It is frequently remarked that the allies were unprepared for fighting in the bocage. I think that is understandable; the commanders were more concerned about getting them ashore. But I think one cannot help thinking that some of the basic lessons were learnt at tremendous cost. The war had been going for five years but it was only six weeks into the campaign that proper co-operation between armour and infantry was arranged or, indeed, with the Tactical Air Forces.

Yet such lessons had been learnt in the Mediterranean. Why did they have to be relearnt? I was recently re-reading that so thought-provoking book "Firepower"³ by Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham, both wartime officers, who conclude "*[The German Army] is a professional body, not a number of loosely co-ordinated social groups... despite its achievements and reforms since 1906, the [British] Army remains what it was then, sans doctrine and an unprofessional coalition of arms and services.*"

In best Gunner fashion, having lit the blue touch-paper, I shall now retire.

This article first appeared in Newsletter 13. **Keywords:** Dieppe Normandy

¹ Tank, 40 hours of battle, August 1944 by Ken Tout, Robert Hale 1985, ISBN 0 7090 2277 8

² A Fine Night for Tanks, the Road to Falaise by Ken Tout, Sutton 1998 ISBN 0 7509 3189 2

³ Firepower, British Army Weapons and Theories of War 1904-1945 by Shelford & Bidwell and Dominick Graham, Allen & Unwin 1982 ISBN 0 04 942176 X