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Blown out of the turret at Falaise

Bob Osborne's story fills me with sadness. Peace in War, his unpublished manuscript, failed to be printed because of his untimely death due to cancer less than a year after he retired from teaching Divinity at Carleton University. Bob's book "began from a packet of letters that [his] mother gave [him] one Christmas before she died". The preface described Peace in War as "the very stuff of which history is made". Bob's last four days of active service were the 7th to the 10th of August, 1944, when his regiment, the Canadian Grenadier Guards, took part in Phase 2 of Operation Totalize in Normandy.

Bob's narrative for 7 August is what one would expect from the wireless operator and gun loader of the Troop Commander's tank. "The tank has been gassed up and the ammunition carefully stowed in the racks. We are all thinking the same thing. Will I be alive to see the sunset tomorrow?" The padre, John Anderson, visited the tank, and the four crew members took communion. Reflecting on the 23rd Psalm's "I will fear no evil," Bob commented that the author of that Psalm had not seen "what a German 88 anti-tank gun could do to a Sherman tank". Throughout the night the tanks rumbled forward as bombers and artillery shells hit the enemy positions. Toward dawn the unit paused and the officer left for more instructions. Bob looked out at the wide plain before them: "Tanks were fanned out everywhere, but there was no enemy shooting at us." Suddenly, as the first rays of light broke over the horizon, the American aircraft started bombing. In The Victory Campaign, C.P. Stacey explains the appalling results. There were "gross errors on the part of two twelve-plane groups.... The areas struck, far behind the fighting line, were packed with Allied troops moving up or waiting to move up." Wrote Bob, "If they're bombing the enemy positions, then we're half way to Berlin." When the troop officer arrived back at his tank, he reported gravely, "There has been a terrible mistake; bombs have fallen among our echelons." (B vehicles used to bring forward supplies.)

It was a long day, filled with tension, but when night finally came Bob's tank crew had lived to see the sunset. At 0330 hours on 9 August, Number 2 Squadron -- the one Bob belonged to -- was on the march again, this time with a company of the Lake Superior Regiment. The attack went in and yet another French village was cleared. Night fell again, and all too soon dawn arrived on the 10th, a day Bob was never to forget.

The Squadron commander had joined Bob's tank, meaning that they were controlling the actions of Number 2 Squadron. "The most nerve-wracking encounter that a tank man has to face is a frontal assault on a prepared [strongly defended] position." The advance began as the squadron moved out, one tank behind the other. "The early morning mist was just beginning to

lift." Filled with tension, Bob grew increasingly certain of impending danger. Without warning, the leading tank was hit:

There we stalled. What were we waiting for? Nobody seemed to know what to do next. Suddenly we were in trouble. We began to get shot at from a screen of anti-tank guns and Tiger tanks lurking in the heavily wooded area to our front. The CO called an O Group [passing of verbal orders]. The major left the tank and I got up on the commander's seat.

The enemy had watched the Grenadiers move over the crest of the hill, and then they started to destroy them one by one.

The battle-experienced officers [ones who had fought in North Africa and Italy] now began to show their worth. Capt Curt Greenleaf was calmly walking about regrouping Number 2 Squadron to fight back. Majors Ned Amy of Number 1 Squadron and "Snuffy" Smith of Number 3 were a great steadying influence when near panic was gripping the regiment They went from tank to tank encouraging the crews.

Bob was still commanding the lead tank, and he and his gunner were trying to locate the Tiger tank that was cutting the Grenadiers to pieces. "I can see him!" called out the gunner. Bob looked through the binoculars, and there it was, "a big 62-ton monster. He was moving his gun, swinging on us." (The German tank had a hand-operated traverse, not a powered one like the Sherman.) Bob gave the fire order: "Gunner, traverse left --steady on, thirteen hundred [feet to the target] -- enemy tank -- FIRE!" As the round left the 17-pounder tank gun, Bob says, "In the same instant I could hear a noise like an express train -- then a sickening, rending crash as the Tiger's shell smashed into our turret."

Covered in flames, Bob was blown out of the turret. (Sherman tanks were nicknamed "Ronsons" because they flared up so easily.) Bob's words make one cringe:

I was on fire -- my clothes were almost gone -- my hair was alight. I tried to crawl away from the burning tank -- which was going up like fireworks on the 1st of July -- the grenades, phosphorous bombs, tank gun and machine-gun ammunition. What an inferno!... This was the end. I felt like I was going down a long dark tunnel. So this was what death was like -- not too bad, I thought.

Joe Arnold, the driver of another knocked-out Sherman, ran over and beat out the flames. Then he picked up the unconscious Bob and carried him from the battlefield, away from the war. The regiment lost a third of its tanks that day, and 59 crewmen were killed or wounded.

[Due to his injuries and morphine, Bob believed it was Joe Arnold who carried him across the field when it was in fact Lieutenant Donald Armitage Ross, C.G.G. who performed this selfless and heroic act and never felt it necessary to correct him about it. This came up during an informal reunion where Beverley Osborne was present and had a private conversation with Lt Donald Ross.]

Bob Osborne was taken to Number 11 Canadian General Hospital, where the treatment for his burns and wounds lasted until November. He arrived back in Halifax on 1 December 1944. Many years later Doctor Bob Osborne and I became friends when he was teaching at Carleton University. He was a wonderful man, a great human being. I believe I am a better person because I knew him.