

= Battle of Verrières Ridge =

The Battle of Verrières Ridge was a series of engagements fought as part of the Battle of Normandy, in western France, during the Second World War. The main combatants were two Canadian infantry divisions, with additional support from the Canadian 2nd Armoured Brigade, against elements of three German SS Panzer divisions. The battle was part of the British and Canadian attempts to break out of Caen, and took place from 19 to 25 July 1944, being part of both Operation Atlantic (18 to 21 July) and Operation Spring (25 to 27 July).

The immediate Allied objective was Verrières Ridge, a belt of high ground which dominates the route from Caen to Falaise. The ridge was invested by battle-hardened German veterans, who had fallen back from Caen and entrenched to form a strong defensive position. Over the course of six days, substantial Canadian and British forces made repeated attempts to capture the ridge. Strict German adherence to defensive doctrine, as well as strong and effective counterattacks by Panzer formations, resulted in heavy Allied casualties for little strategic gain.

From the perspective of the Canadian 1st Army, the battle is remembered for its tactical and strategic miscalculations, the most notable being a highly controversial attack by the Royal Highland Regiment (Black Watch) of Canada on 25 July. This attack, the costliest single day for a Canadian battalion since the 1942 Dieppe Raid, has become one of the most contentious and critically analysed events in Canadian military history.

= Background =

Verrières Ridge lies 8 km (5 to 10 mi) south of the city of Caen, overlooking broad plains and dominating the countryside between Caen and Falaise. Although a major D-Day objective for Commonwealth forces, the Allied push inland was halted short of Caen and positional warfare ensued until the first week of July. On 9 July, Operation Charnwood succeeded in taking the northern half of the city, but the I SS Panzer Corps, under the command of SS Oberstgruppenführer Josef Dietrich, thwarted British ambitions. A week later, Operation Goodwood renewed the British offensive, and Caen finally fell on 19 July, although by this time the city had been largely devastated. The next Anglo-Canadian goal was the town of Falaise, but Verrières Ridge, now strongly defended by the I SS Panzer Corps, stood in their path. Elements of the British 2nd Army secured part of the adjacent Bourguébus Ridge and managed to gain a foothold on Verrières Ridge but were unable to dislodge its German defenders.

= Forces involved =

The Canadian II Corps, commanded by Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds, initially assigned two infantry divisions and one armoured brigade to the assault on the German positions around Verrières. The Canadian 3rd Infantry Division, having taken heavy casualties during the first six weeks of the Normandy campaign, was given a supporting role. The onus of the task therefore fell on the fresh, though relatively inexperienced, Canadian 2nd Infantry Division, along with the tanks of the Canadian 2nd Armoured Brigade. Additional forces were later made available in the shape of three divisions from the British I Corps: the 51st (Highland) Division, the Guards Armoured Division, and the British 7th Armoured Division. Despite having significantly more combat experience than their Canadian counterparts, the British units played a minor part in the battle.

While British forces had been battling for Caen, elements of Dietrich's I SS Panzer Corps, part of Generalfeldmarshall Günther von Kluge's Army Group B, had turned Verrières Ridge into their main defensive position along the Anglo-Canadian front. Although not particularly high, the ridge's topography meant that advancing forces would be exposed to fire from German positions across the River Orne, from the ridge and from the nearby German-held industrial hamlet of St. Martin. Two powerful formations, the 12th SS and 1st SS Panzer Divisions, held the ridge supported by artillery, dug in Tiger tanks and mortar emplacements. A third, the 9th SS Panzer Division, was held in reserve. Further support was available from the 272nd Grenadier

Infantry Division (a force composed mainly of Russian and Polish combatants that had been raised in 1943) , the 116th Panzer Division and a battalion of Tiger tanks .

= = Battle = =

= = = Attack of Calgary Highlanders = = =

In a follow @-@ up to Operation Goodwood on 19 July , the Calgary Highlanders attempted to take the northern spur of Verrières Ridge but German mortar fire limited their progress . Tanks from the Sherbrooke Fusiliers were sent to support the battalion and eliminated several machine @-@ gun positions on either side of Point 67 . The Highlanders eventually managed to dig in , despite accurate return fire . Over the next few hours , they strengthened their position and the 5th and 6th Canadian Infantry Brigades made repeated attempts to exploit the gains . Against a tenacious German defense and minor infantry and tank counterattacks , the Canadians were broadly repulsed with heavy casualties . Simonds rapidly prepared a new offensive for the following day , with the goals of capturing both the eastern side of the Orne river and the main slopes of Verrières Ridge .

= = = Operation Atlantic = = =

The next attack took place on 20 July as part of Operation Atlantic . It was led by the South Saskatchewan Regiment , with supporting units from the Cameron Highlanders . In the early hours of 20 July , the Highlanders secured a position in St André @-@ sur @-@ Orne but were quickly pinned down by German infantry and tanks . At the same time , the South Saskatchewan Regiment moved directly up the slopes of Verrières Ridge , supported by tanks and Hawker Typhoon ground attack aircraft . The Canadian attack faltered in torrential rain , which rendered air support useless and turned the ground into mud . Counterattacks by two Panzer divisions threw the South Saskatchewan back past their support lines and their supporting battalion ? the Essex Scottish ? came under attack . The Essex Scottish lost over 300 men as it tried to hold back the advance of the 12th SS Panzer Division , while to the east the remainder of I SS Panzer Corps engaged British forces in the Operation Goodwood , the largest armoured battle of the campaign . By the end of the day , the South Saskatchewan had taken 282 casualties and the ridge was still in enemy hands .

Despite these setbacks , Simonds was adamant that Verrières Ridge should be taken and sent in the Black Watch and the Calgary Highlanders to stabilise the precarious Allied position . Minor counterattacks by both battalions on 21 July managed to contain Dietrich 's armoured formations and by the time the operation was called off , Canadian forces held several footholds on the ridge , including a now secure position on Point 67 . Four German divisions still held the ridge . In all , the actions around Verrières Ridge during Operation Atlantic accounted for over 1 @,@ 300 Allied casualties .

= = = Operation Spring = = =

With the capture of Caen on 19 July , an Anglo @-@ Canadian breakout had become strategically feasible . In the American sector , Lieutenant General Omar Bradley ? commander of the U.S. 1st Army ? had been planning his own breakout (codenamed Operation Cobra) and Simonds too began preparing a new offensive , codenamed Operation Spring . Spring was originally conceived by Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery as a " holding attack " , designed to tie down German forces while Cobra was under way . On 22 July , however , with Operation Atlantic having failed to achieve its aims , Simonds changed the objective of Operation Spring to a breakout offensive . With Verrières Ridge taken , Simonds could launch armour and artillery attacks from its southern flank to push the Germans further back . This would clear the Caen @-@ Falaise road , and his two British armoured divisions could then advance south to Falaise .

Operation Spring was scheduled in four tightly timed phases . The Calgary Highlanders would

attack Bourguébus Ridge and May @-@ sur @-@ Orne to secure the flanks of the main thrust , which was to be a move on Verrières Ridge by the Black Watch , along with armoured support from the British 7th Armoured Division and the 4th Canadian (Armoured) Division . The plan called for the offensive to start on 23 July but poor weather led to a postponement for 48 hours . Taking advantage of this respite , the I SS Panzer Corps reinforced the ridge with an additional four battalions , 480 tanks and 500 guns . Allied Intelligence learned of this reinforcement through Ultra signals intercepts and advised Simonds 's headquarters .

On 25 July , two days later than originally planned , Operation Spring was launched . The Black Watch were scheduled to begin their attack at about 05 : 30 from an assembly area at St Martin , 6 km (3 @.@ 7 mi) south of Caen . The Canadians ran into heavy German resistance on the St Martin road and did not arrive at their assembly area until close to 08 : 00 . By that time , the Black Watch 's two highest @-@ ranking officers had been killed and command fell to Major Phil Griffin . At 08 : 30 , he met with 5th Brigade commander , Brigadier General W. J. Megilland . Despite the non @-@ arrival of most of their promised armoured support , the decision was taken for the attack to proceed .

At 09 : 30 , as the Canadian infantry regiments advanced up the ridge , they were easy targets for the well @-@ entrenched German machine gun nests and mortar pits , supported by tanks , 88 mm (3 @.@ 46 in) anti @-@ tank guns , and Nebelwerfer rocket artillery . To make matters worse , the Black Watch communications were knocked out within minutes of the start of their assault . Very few members of the Black Watch Regiment managed to make it to the crest of the ridge and those who did were subjected to an even heavier bombardment as they ran into the counterattacking forces of the 272nd Infantry Division and the 9th SS Kampfgruppe Sterz . Of the 325 men that left the assembly area , 315 were killed , wounded or captured . The Black Watch lost all its senior commanders , including Major Phil Griffin , with two companies virtually annihilated . This marked the costliest day for a Canadian battalion since the Dieppe Raid of 1942 .

= = Aftermath = =

All of the gains made by the Black Watch and Calgary Highlanders were lost to German counterattacks , which inflicted heavy losses on the Highlanders and the previously unscathed Black Watch support company . The Black Watch had to be reformed after Verrières Ridge , having sustained more casualties than any Canadian infantry battalion since the disastrous raid on Dieppe .

The central area of the ridge near Verrières Village , was eventually taken and held by the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry . The east side was also taken , but subsequently lost , although two British armoured brigades were able to secure significant footholds near the positions of the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry .

The failure to capture the ridge had little effect on the overall Allied position , as the success of Operation Cobra was so overwhelming that the Germans diverted significant resources , including two Panzer divisions , from the ridge in their attempt to keep Bradley 's forces boxed in . With its defences weakened , subsequent Commonwealth attacks on the ridge were successful ; Operation Totalize finally managed to wrest the position from its SS defenders on 8 August .

= = = Casualties = = =

Allied casualty figures for the battle as a whole were not produced but can be inferred by examining the two operations . The accepted toll for Operation Atlantic is 1 @,@ 349 , with about 300 fatalities . Operation Spring 's losses were about 500 killed with a further 1 @,@ 000 captured or wounded . Working from these figures , historians estimate around 800 Canadian dead and 2 @,@ 000 wounded or captured . The Canadian dead are buried in Bretteville @-@ sur @-@ Laize Canadian War Cemetery , between Caen and Falaise .

The Canadian Official Historian Charles Stacey and military historian Michael Reynolds , wrote that German casualty figures for individual operations are difficult to determine ; Stacey attributes this to

the gradual degradation of the German logistics chain leaving incomplete records and Reynolds wrote that units sometimes over @-@ reported their losses , in the hope of receiving more reinforcements . German losses for the battle were significantly fewer than those suffered by the Canadians . According to Reynolds , between 16 July and 1 August , the 1st SS Panzer Division lost 1 @,@ 092 men killed , wounded or captured ? along with 11 Panzer IV tanks and 10 Sturmgeschütz III self @-@ propelled guns ? in fighting across all its fronts including at Verrières . Over a similar period , he estimates the 12th SS Panzer Division ? in all sectors ? suffered only 134 casualties . Many of the German fallen are buried at La Cambe German war cemetery .

= = Historiography and controversy = =

The Battle of Verrières Ridge ? although given no particular prominence in German military history ? has earned the distinction of being one of the First Canadian Army 's most scrutinised actions . The matter was first brought to public attention by historian C.P. Stacey , who wrestled with the question of how to present the battle to the public in the Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War and was required to make minor changes to the narrative of the battle by Simonds . At the time Stacey was writing the history , as senior historian of the Historical Section of the Canadian Army , Simonds was the Chief of the General Staff of the Canadian Army , or in essence , his boss . The report on Operation Spring by Simonds was released after the war and blamed its failure on " 11th hour reinforcement " of German lines and " strategically unsound execution on the part of Major Phillip Griffin and the Black Watch " .

The battle was brought to greater public attention in 1992 by a CBC television docu @-@ drama , The Valour and the Horror , which made a number of controversial claims about senior leadership in the Second World War and devoted one of its three episodes to the Black Watch attack on Verrières Ridge . The episode raised a spirited debate among the historical and veterans ' communities and led to calls for apologies from the producers and an official investigation by the CBC Ombudsman into the veracity of the claims and the way in which they were presented .

Recently declassified wartime documents show that Simonds , along with several others in the Allied high command , had likely been notified on July 23 of a massive German buildup on the ridge . Some historians , including David O 'Keefe and David Bercuson , accused Simonds of being careless with the lives of his men . Terry Copp and John A. English , wrote that given the amount of pressure that all Allied commanders were under to break out from Normandy , Simonds probably had little choice in the decision he made .

Operation Spring succeeded in its later @-@ defined objective of a " holding attack " and aided the overwhelming success of Operation Cobra , by tying down powerful German formations that might otherwise have been in the American sector , thus precluding any immediate inquiry into its failure . The German commander of the Normandy Sector ? Günther von Kluge ? was at the Canadian front on 25 July , instead of the American front where the eventual breakout occurred . The Battle of Verrières Ridge had little overall effect on British attempts to break out of Caen , as significant resources were transferred to the American front in the aftermath of Cobra , to exploit Bradley 's success and the ridge eventually fell to the general Allied advance .