

# THE GORDON HIGHLANDERS IN THE BATTLE FOR HILL 112 – JUNE – JULY 1944.



The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Gordon Highlanders was part of 15<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Division during the Battle for Normandy and the subsequent advance into Germany. The Division comprised:

## 15th (Scottish) Infantry Division



### 15th Scottish Reconnaissance Regiment

#### 44th (Lowland) Infantry Brigade

- 8th Bn Royal Scots
- 6th Bn Royal Scots Fusiliers
- 6th Bn King's Own Scottish Borderers

#### 46th (Highland) Infantry Brigade

- 9th Bn Cameronians (Scottish Rifles)
- 2nd Bn Glasgow Highlanders
- 7<sup>th</sup> Bn Seaforth Highlanders

#### 227th (Highland) Infantry Brigade:

- 10th Bn Highland Light Infantry (H.L.I.)
- **2nd Bn Gordon Highlanders**
- 2nd Bn Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders (A.&S.H.)

#### Support.

- 102nd (Northumberland Hussars) Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Artillery
- 1st Bn Middlesex Regiment (Machine Gun)

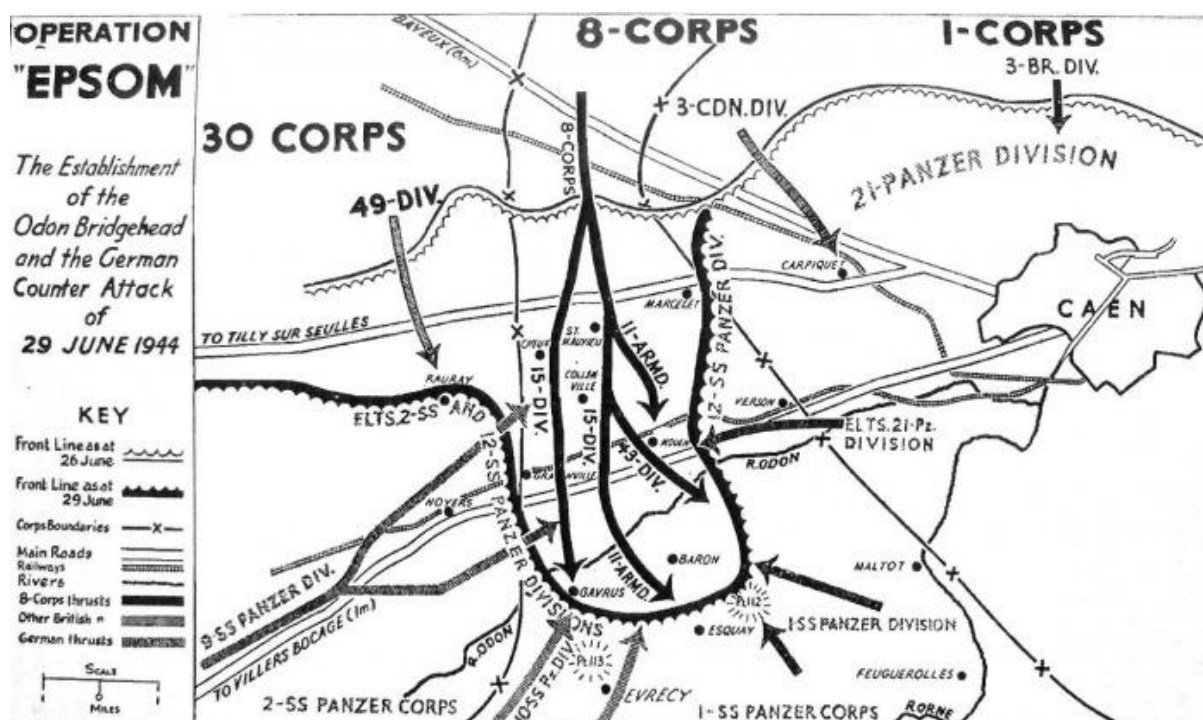
On 18 June 1944, as part of the Divisional deployment, the main body of Battalion (Bn) embarked at NEWHAVEN for France. They left England on a beautiful evening to the sound of the pipes and the cheers of many spectators. Out in the channel, rising seas threatened trouble. The journey was made in very rough weather in a large troop carrying ship. The other portion of the Bn, which was mainly the transport, under the command of the Bn Second in Command (Bn 2 i/c), embarked at

TILBURY on the ship EMPIRE FALSTAFF. On 19<sup>th</sup> June, the Bn was off the coast of France. The weather was extremely bad and landing was considered out of the question and the Gordons spent the day tossing about some distance off the French coast.

On 20 June, the Bn disembarked at **ARROMANCHES** along a half mile walk on one of the 'Mulberry' pre-fabricated harbours (concrete-filled vessels and steel and concrete jetties which had been towed across from England) and marched in detachments to a concentration area near **VAUX-SUR-SEULLES**. Having dug their trenches, the night was enlivened by a German bomber which crashed in flames about 100 yards from one of the companies.

Between 21- 25 June, the rest of the battalion landed in France in small lots. The transport party under the Bn 2 i/c, disembarked at **COURSEULLES** between 23 - 25 June and moved to the concentration area.

During the 25<sup>th</sup>, plans were completed for the first action of 15 (Scottish) Div - **Operation Epsom**. This intended for the British VIII Corps to attack to the west of CAEN, cross the Odon and Orne rivers, capture an area of high ground near BRETEVILLE-SUR-LAIZE and thereby encircle the city. The operation would be the 15<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Infantry Division's baptism of fire and with a key role in the opening phases. It was to clear several villages that stood between them and the R. Odon, capture bridges to allow the 11<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division to cross and race for BRETTEVILLE -sur-LAIZE, and then the 15<sup>th</sup> Div would clear the Odon river valley.



The plan was for 44 and 46 Bdes to advance through the Canadian line about LE MESNIL PATRY (approx. 3-4km north of CHEUX) and to capture a line through CHEUX (approx. 1km north of GRAINVILLE-SUR-ODON). 227 Bde was then to pass through (heading south) with 10<sup>th</sup> H.L.I. on the right to take GRAINVILLE-SUR-ODON; 2<sup>nd</sup> GORDONS on left to take COLEVILLE (approx. 1km east of Grainville-sur-Odon) and TOURVILLE (about 700m further south), 2<sup>nd</sup> A. & S.H. were then to pass through 2<sup>nd</sup> GORDONS and make a bridgehead over the River Odon at TOURMAUVILLE a further 1km south. 2<sup>nd</sup> GORDONS would then take over the bridgehead and 2<sup>nd</sup> A. & S.H. would hold the next crossing over the R.Odon to the west. The way would then be clear for the armour to go through and a complete breakthrough was expected.

During the night of 25 - 26 Jun, the Bn moved from the old concentration area near VAUX-SUR-SEULLES to a forward concentration area and all day moved slowly up to the forming up place for the attack, just north of CHEUX. The attack by 44 and 46 Bdes on the 26<sup>th</sup> began at 0730hrs behind a rolling barrage. German mortar fire responded immediately. Despite delays caused by minefields and German holdouts in the forward area, the brigades had taken most of their Phase I objectives before noon: LA GAULE, LE HAUT, and CHEUX. An effort by the 46<sup>th</sup> Bde to advance 1,800m to the southeast of CHEUX to capture a hill was partially successful, with the northern slope taken although the Germans retained the southern. Elements of the 44<sup>th</sup> Bde were engaged in an all-day struggle to capture and hold ST MAUVIEU-NORREY, which they did after fending off several counterattacks. Both brigades suffered mounting losses. The 46<sup>th</sup> Bde's 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn, Glasgow Highlanders, suffered around 200 casualties including 12 officers, which represented 24% of the bn's officers and nearly 25% of the entire rifle battalion.

227<sup>th</sup> Bde were delayed by traffic congestion at CHEUX and 2<sup>nd</sup> GORDONS was not able to form up with the supporting Churchill tanks from 31<sup>st</sup> Armoured Bde until the evening. The Bn attack started at about 1830hrs with "A" and "B" Companies (Coys) leading, with "C" and "D" Coys in the rear. A very heavy storm broke just as the Coys started and it was obvious that there would be no opportunity for the promised air support. The attack met with strong opposition from the enemy who had well placed machine guns (M.Gs) and several dug in tanks and Anti Tank (A. Tk) guns well positioned. Several of the supporting tanks had been knocked out. Met by a withering fire, the Gordons struggled on in the fading light. To their credit "B" Coy got through to Coleville, but "A" were caught in the middle of an open cornfield by mortar fire which inflicted considerable casualties. "C" & "D" Coys had been held up short of the village due to mortar fire and German tanks. All coys had heavy casualties particularly "A" Coy. The C.O. Lt Col Colville, then decided on reorganising what could be collected of the Bn and a small defensive position was made beside the CHEUX - COLLVILLE road about 1 mile south of CHEUX. Majors Soutar, Aitchison, and Capt Wishart, and Lts Niven and Kiddie were killed in this action. During this very bloody action the work of our Medical Officer, Capt MacPhail, and his stretcher bearers was magnificent and won the admiration of all.



Churchill tanks moving to attack on Hill 112

When dawn broke on 27<sup>th</sup> June the Bn position was still secure. During the morning the supporting tanks moved up on the left and the A. & S.H. passed through the Bn, making for the bridge at TOURMAUVILLE and the Bn received orders to move on to COLLVILLE. Soon after first light, "B" Coy's remnants joined from the enemy lines where they had been cut off. The Bn took up a position in COLLVILLE in an orchard. "Sniper fever" was bad among the troops and it was several days before this could be stopped by practice of controlled fire. That afternoon the Bn moved to TOURVILLE after having been relieved by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Glasgow Highlanders (46 Bde). The Bn advance was held up by a German tank which had got into position and was knocking out some of the supporting tanks. The road was also being mortared. This was soon overcome and Bn moved into position in an orchard area south of the village. The 28<sup>th</sup> was spent in TOURVILLE where the Bn was slightly mortared and had some trouble from a tank on the main road behind to the rear. During this time the armour was passing through to cross the R. Odon at TOURMAUVILLE. It was however unable to make much progress and later had to withdraw.



A British ammunition truck explodes after being hit by German Artillery fire, Op Epsom, June 1944

The Germans counter attacked strongly on the 29<sup>th</sup> and fierce fighting took place on the western face of the salient at GRAINVILLE and LE VALTRU. At GARVUS the Argylls defended their bridgehead. During the afternoon, the Bn received orders to move back to COLLVILLE and be prepared to carry out a counter attack on the 9<sup>th</sup> Cameronian position at GRAINVILLE-sur-ODON at dawn the next morning, should the enemy take it. During the move several casualties were sustained by enemy shelling of the road. COLLEVILLE was reached about 0100hrs on the 30<sup>th</sup> and positions were taken up near the railway crossing.

The proposed counter attack by the Bn was not required and on the 30<sup>th</sup> the Bn was then ordered forward across the river at TOURMAUVILLE to hold a bridgehead at MONCEAUX, about a mile upstream from GAVRUS. The leading coys got to the steeply sloping road running to the river at TOURMAUVILLE but came under heavy mortar fire from German positions south of the river. There were many casualties. The Bde Major, Major J. Lochore, was among those killed.

The Bn, as a result was ordered to withdraw to its old location in TOURVILLE. Between 2315 hrs on 30<sup>th</sup> June and 0530 hrs 1<sup>st</sup> July, the Bn was subjected to a very severe mortar and shell barrage. Casualties were not heavy as troops were well dug in. During the mortaring one of the casualties killed was the Bn Regimental Sergeant Major, R.S.M. Black.



The 28/32 cm Nebelwerfer 41(NbW 41)was a six-barrelled rocket launcher mounted on a two-wheeled carriage.

It was with relief that news was received that the Bn was to be relieved and on the night of 2<sup>nd</sup> July, the Bn was able to hand over to a battalion from the 53<sup>rd</sup> (Welsh) Division. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn succeeded in pulling out of TOURVILLE in the dark without attracting the enemy's attention and 7 hours later they arrived in BRETTEVILLE L'ORGEUILLEUSE where they took up a defensive position and prepared to re-equip and re-organise.

A week had elapsed since the Bn entered their first battle. Six officers had been killed, 8 others wounded and 1 missing. Of the other ranks, 48 were killed, 195 wounded and 11 missing.

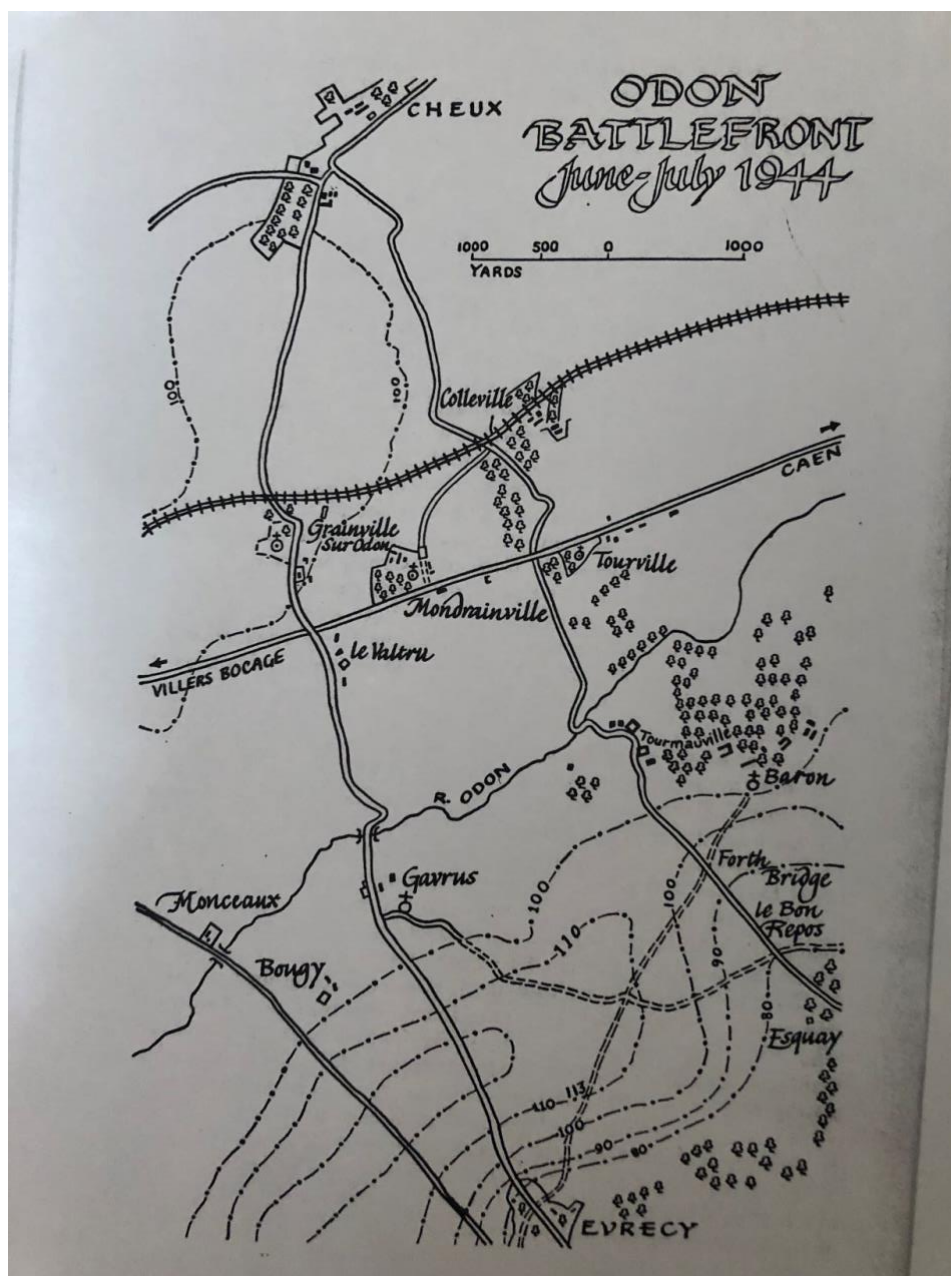
The 15<sup>th</sup> Division history described Op Epsom as the "fiercest fighting that the Division was to know in the whole war", which captured 10 square miles of territory, and resulted in "one-quarter" of all casualties suffered by the division through the entire campaign. The division suffered 288 men killed, 1,638 wounded, and 794 men missing. The number of riflemen in a division was around 4,600, and the losses suffered by the division represented "in excess of 50%" of the division's infantry.

Whilst the offensive known as Op Epsom had not accomplished all that had been hoped for, the basic aim had been achieved. 2<sup>nd</sup> GORDONS had found war, in the words of Montgomery, 'a rough and dirty business' and this was no surprise. The VIII Corps Commander praised the fighting qualities of the division and the Divisional Commander, Maj Gen GHA MacMillan writing to the Colonel of the Regiment said; *'the Battalion is out of the line and having a well earned rest. Our first introduction to battle has been a very hard test. We had a week of hell from the multiple mortars ... the one thing we can say is the battalion did all they were told to do ... the Jocks behaved in their usual grand way ...'*.

Re-organization and re-equipping continued throughout the period 3<sup>rd</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> July. Due to losses, the Bn had to reduce from 4 to 3 Coys ('B' Coy commanded by Capt HT Slight, 'C' by Maj CH Hutchinson and 'D' by Maj RMM Tindall), but before they went into battle again, enough reinforcements had arrived for the 4<sup>th</sup> Coy to be reconstituted and commanded by Maj Duke from the West Yorkshire Regiment. On the 14<sup>th</sup> the Bn moved by a night march from Bretteville L'Orgueilleuse to a forward concentration area near Verson, about 2 miles east of Tourville where they remained until the afternoon of the 15<sup>th</sup> when they crossed the R. Odon and came to Baron. Their orders were to

deliver a silent night attack to secure the high ground above EVRECY and in the orchards around Baron they waited under a hail of shells and mortar bombs.

About 2300 hrs the Gordons moved forward to the attack through BARON. 'C' & 'D' Coys were leading followed by Bn HQ with 'A' & 'B' Coys follow up coys. The first objective, the track between LE BON REPOS and GARVUS, was taken and held by 'C' & 'D' Coys and they started to dig in. Whilst this action was in progress Brig Mackintosh-Walker, M.C. (Two Bars) commanding 227 Bde was killed in his forward HQ in BARON. Lt. Col Colville took over command of 227 Bde and Major Sinclair took command of 2nd Bn The Gordon Highlanders.



The battle continued and "A" & "B" Coys on moving forward to pass through "C" & "D" Coys came under very heavy and accurate machine gun fire on fixed lines. Casualties were heavy and when first light came they were still some 400 - 500 yds behind "C" & "D" Coys. The order was then given to dig in in these positions.



British troops attack Hill 112

In the early morning of the 16<sup>th</sup>, 'A' & 'B' Coys and Bn HQ were on an exposed ridge just south of 'Forth Bridge', the name given to the point where the BARON-EVRECY track crosses the ESQUAY – TOURMAUVILLE road. The enemy attacked at several points in the Bn front but was driven off by Bn weapons and the excellent shooting of the supporting battery of the 131 Fd Regt. The battalion was under heavy enemy mortar and artillery bombardment all day. The Commanding Officer, Major Sinclair and his Adjutant, Capt Irvine, had been trying to get forward to 'C' & 'D' Coys, but the ground was under heavy fire from a high velocity gun and several machine guns from the direction of Le Bon Repos. Attempts had been made to send up 2 of the 6lb anti-tank guns, but this failed due to the towing vehicles being too badly damaged.

Early in the afternoon, a message was received from 'C' Coy to say that German tanks were approaching from the direction of Le Bon Repos. The CO saw 5 PZKW Mark IV tanks that seemed to be making directly for his Headquarters, with the leading tank only 150 yards away. One of the tanks opened fire killing the 'B' Coy Commander, Captain Slight, but the enemy seemed unaware of the proximity of the Battalion Headquarters and the anti-tank guns, which had not been able to be sent forward. The action is recorded in the Battalion's War Diary and the Regimental history and states: "Few men of the anti-tank platoon were left, but Captain Parish and his Sergeant man-handled one of the anti-tank guns into position and opened fire. In succession all 5 tanks were hit and burst into flames; and of the Germans who baled out a few managed to escape, but most were accounted for by 'B' Company". Captain Parish was awarded the Military Cross for his part in this action.

At 2358 hrs, the Bn came under command 44 Bde and were ordered to hold their positions pending relief. The A. & S.H. and H.L.I. had been withdrawn earlier in the day. 158 Bde, 53<sup>rd</sup> (Welsh) Division, were to pass through the Gordons positions that night and resume the attack upon EVRECY. At about 11.30pm the Welsh battalions passed through 'C' & 'D' Coys. During the night, "C" & "D" Coys were ordered to withdraw to positions behind "A" & "B" Coys. Unfortunately the attack of 158<sup>th</sup> Bde had failed and soon after dawn on the 17<sup>th</sup>, the Welshmen were withdrawn through the GORDONS at Forth Bridge. The Bn remained holding a defensive position throughout the day; spasmodic attacks were made by the enemy but were broken up by artillery fire. The Bn was again subjected to severe mortar and shell fire during the evening. Several casualties were sustained. During the late evening, the enemy attacked behind the lines with several fighters and bombers; many flares were dropped and A.A. defences along whole sector were kept busy for some time. One enemy plane was definitely shot down. A successful attack by a squadron of Typhoons was carried out on enemy tank concentrations south of the Bn sector. Great fires were seen burning in the EVRECY area after this

attack. About 2130 hrs the Welsh Bde again moved through the Bn positions to press the attack on EVRECY and to attack the high ground and the FERME DE MONDRAINVILLE sector. After heavy fighting the Welsh Bde were again obliged to break off the action and withdraw.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> the Bn held positions throughout day until relieved by the 7<sup>th</sup> Bn The WELCH Regiment in the late afternoon. The relief was completed by 1930 hrs. The Bn moved back by march route to the area of a farm and orchard, North West of GRAINVILLE-SUR-ODON to reorganise and rest. Casualties from the 14<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> Jul were: Officers 1 Killed; 3 Wounded; Nil Missing; Other Ranks 11 Killed, 107 Wounded; 7 Missing. A draft of reinforcements was very welcome, particularly as the men came from the London Scottish. Major Sinclair was confirmed in his appointment as battalion commander and promoted to Lt Col and OC 'D' Coy, Maj Tindall was also awarded the MC for his part in the actions.

The period from 19-23 July, was spent re-organising and re-equipping. Capt E.R. Macdonald rejoined Bn and took over command of "B" Coy. Major Henderson became Bn 2 i/c. A reconnaissance (recce) party left the Bn under the Intelligence Officer (I.O) Capt R.G. Hogg to make recce of the area north of CAUMONT (about 40km to the west) with view to the relief of 1st Bn of 2nd Regt of the 5 U.S. Div. On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, the Bn left area of GRAINVILLE-SUR-ODON and moved to CAUMONT to take up defensive positions as the reserve Bn of 227 Bde. The Bn's role was to counter-attack on CAUMONT should 10 H.L.I. be driven from the town by the enemy.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> the Bn completed preparations for defence; "A" Coy forward on left; "C" Coy in position on the left forward flank by 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn A. & S.H. "B" Coy were in position on left rear with "D" Coy on right rear of Bn HQ. One of the A. Tk guns and a jeep on the road were attacked by a plane. Casualties were 1 killed and 7 injured, including Capt A.W. Parish MC who remained on duty. A recce patrol was sent out at 2400 hrs to patrol into enemy lines south and to the east of CAUMONT. The patrol returned with some information at 0230 hrs but failed to reach the main objective. No casualties.

During the period 25<sup>th</sup> - 29<sup>th</sup>, the Bn spent a quiet time in their new defensive positions. Recces were made and plans tied up for counter attacks on LA REPAS and CAUMONT if either should be attacked and overrun by the enemy. Patrols were sent out including a fighting patrol which contacted the enemy and killed 3 of them. They did not succeed in taking a prisoner. The patrol lost one man killed and two were wounded.

On 29<sup>th</sup> July, preparation for new task began. The plan was for the Div to attack South of CAUMONT. Loading and forming up arranged and recces were carried out. On the 30<sup>th</sup> the Bn left their positions at 0215 hrs and moved into a Forming Up Point (FUP). This was completed by 0315 hrs. The attack began at 0655 hrs. 2<sup>nd</sup> GORDONS objective was LUTAIN WOOD to the east of CAUMONT near the hamlet of LE REPAS. The attack was put in in two phases. "A" Coy right with 1 troop of tanks from 4 GREN GDS. "B" Coy left with 1 troop of tanks; "D" Coy with objective LIEU MONDANT (south east of CAUMONT) in left rear. "C" Coy in reserve behind "D". "A" and "B" Coys met opposition by M.M.Gs and mortars but eventually managed to push onto the objective with help of tanks. The second phase began after "D" Coy had cleared LIEU MONDANT and "C" and "D" Coy on its left supported by "crocodiles" started to sweep the wood. The coys got through the wood but "D" Coy was forced to withdraw due to heavy casualties from enemy mortars firing into the trees. The outskirts of the wood were held by three coys up and "D" Coy was put in reserve at the north side of the wood. The Bn dug in and the other big phases began. As a direct result this initial drive the armoured drive south was allowed to begin. By the morning of the 31<sup>st</sup> the high ground in a line from St Martin de Besaces to Hill 309, near and to the east of the hamlet of La Butte, was strongly held by 15 (Scottish)



Division.

In the early morning of the 31<sup>st</sup> the Bn was subjected to some long range shelling and some bombing south east of the area. No casualties were sustained. The Bn left this area at 1200 hrs and moved forward as reserve Bn into a Bde area. The A. & S.H. were the left forward Bn and the H.L.I. were in position on the right forward flank. 2 Gordons took up a position in farm west of LA TEINTURIERE.

For much of early August the Bn was involved in operations to the south west of Caen

British forces were unable to take the summit of Hill 112 and the attacks were finally halted on July 22<sup>nd</sup>. In the twelve days of **Operation Jupiter** the 43rd Wessex Division had suffered 7,000 casualties out of a total strength of 16,000, over 40% of the Division.

It was only finally on the night of August 4<sup>th</sup> that a patrol from the 53rd Welsh Division discovered that with Caen no longer in their control, Hill 112 had lost it's importance for the German defenders and they had withdrawn, allowing the 53rd Division to finally occupy the high ground without a shot being fired.



A monument commemorating all those allied forces who took part in the fighting that took place for Hill 112 in June and July 1944.



This Churchill tank was acquired and restored by C and C Military Services of Aylesbury England for Mr Albert Figg and has been restored to represent one of the many tanks lost during the battle of Hill 112.'



**To the memory of all ranks of the 43rd (Wessex) Division who laid down their lives in the cause of freedom June 1944 to May 1945. This memorial is erected on the site of the first major battle in which the Division took part July 10th to July 29th 1944 when this ridge, Château de Fontaine, Éterville and Maltot were captured and held.**