

Investigating the Memory of Operation Spring

The Inquiry into the Black Watch and the Battle of St. André-sur-Orne, 1944-46

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"In memory of the men of the Black Watch of Canada and their comrades who fought for the liberation of Europe and the hope of a better world." – Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) of Canada Association plaque, Point 67

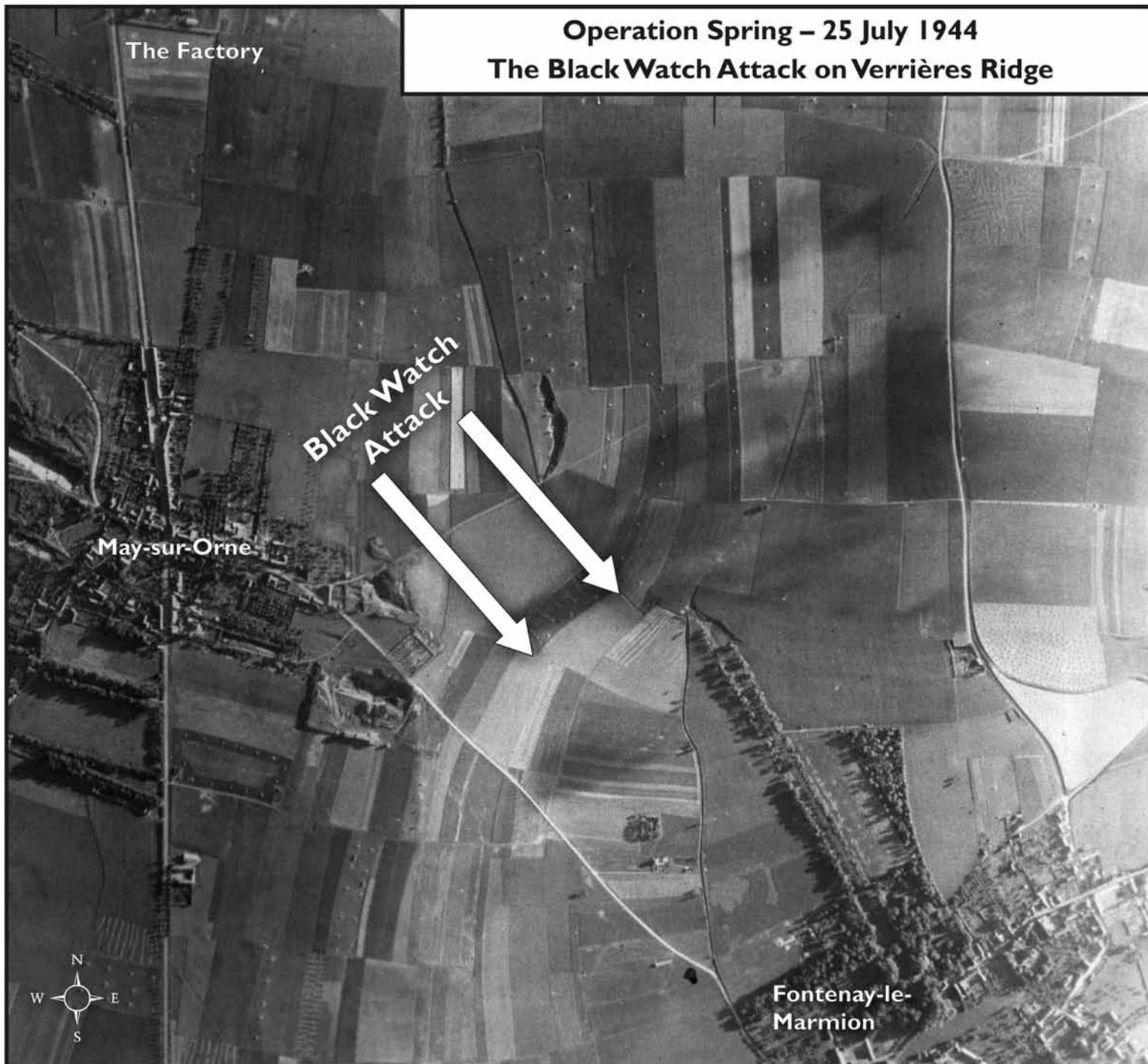
Operation Spring, the ill-fated 25 July 1944 attack by II Canadian Corps against German defences on Verrières Ridge, has become "one of the most controversial military operations in all of Canadian history."¹ At the centre of this controversy is the fate of the Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) of Canada and Major Frederick Philip Griffin, the young officer who took command that day after the death of the battalion's commanding officer. The principal source of the controversy is how survivors remembered these catastrophic events.²

Memory is a powerful but flawed part of the human psyche. Memories are intensely personal, impressionistic, always susceptible to the present, and in constant danger of being lost. Fear of this loss is one of the reasons why we establish sites of memory, what Pierre Nora refers to as *lieux de memoire*.³ A visit to the Canadian Battlefields Foundation viewing area at Point 67, overlooking Verrières Ridge, will find a plaque dedicated by the Black Watch (RHR) of Canada Association explaining the battalion's role in Operation Spring. This plaque provides one who is

Abstract: The scholarly literature for the Black Watch role in Operation Spring is largely based on survivor testimony compiled by C.P. Stacey's Army Historical Section during and after the war. Stacey and his team faced a significant challenge understanding what happened to the Black Watch on 25 July 1944 using recollections almost exclusively. Did this significant use of memory in the investigation of Operation Spring compromise the scholarly record? This study argues that Stacey and the Army Historical Section, conscious of the limitations of memory, were diligent in gathering and handling this evidence with the goal of determining the fate of Major P.F. Griffin and the Black Watch. Consequently, a clear understanding of how the historical record was created is available to assist future historians in examining the role of memory in writing Canada's military history.

familiar with the controversy some insight into how *lieux de memoire* are constructed by taking into account, in this case, the work of historians as well as the oral traditions created in the years and decades after the event by those who lived it. The first paragraph of the plaque reports the basic evidence historians have relied

upon: the battalion "was ordered to begin Phase 2 of Operation 'Spring,' the advance to Fontenay-le-Marmion. Believing that Phase 1, the capture of May-sur-Orne was partially successful, higher command pressed the Black Watch to 'go ahead.'" This explains why the unit was ordered to continue with the operation even though hindsight tells us that by that point there was little hope for success in the second phase. The second paragraph reads "Major Philip Griffin, who assumed command of the battalion when Lieutenant-Colonel S.S.T. Cantlie was killed in action earlier that morning, received orders to advance directly from St. Martin-de-Fontenay over the crest of the ridge to the objective." This statement represents the collective memory of the Black Watch that Major Griffin was pressured by higher authorities into making what turned out to be a tragic tactical error. Historical accounts confirm that senior commanders were naturally anxious to achieve as many objectives of the plan as possible, but have uncovered evidence, again based on personal recollection and therefore not conclusive, that Griffin made the



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ultimate decision to attack directly from St. Martin.⁴

Whichever version is closest to the truth, the result was the destruction of the attacking companies: a total of 307 casualties including 123 dead, 101 wounded and 83 prisoners of war.⁵ The purpose of this article is to examine how memory has been used by historians, the regiment, and others to piece together what occurred on that fateful day. In the

fall of 1945 the minister of national defence tasked Colonel C.P. Stacey, director of the Army Historical Section in Ottawa (just promoted from his wartime position as historical officer for the overseas army at Canadian Military Headquarters in London), to investigate the Black Watch's action of 25 July 1944, which had already become the subject of controversy. This is an unusual case of nearly forensic historical analysis

of a battalion-size engagement, and the comprehensive documentation created by the investigators allows us to trace how the historical record was assembled. The fact that the historical staff had to depend heavily on the testimony of survivors of the battle provides an unusual opportunity to assess the possibilities and limits of memory as a source. It makes for a significant case study because the survivor testimony which the

Army Historical Section assembled continues to serve as the basis for scholarly research. This is also a field of contested memory, for the traditions of the regiment, which draw upon the memory of at least one officer whose early recollections were gathered by Stacey's team, have diverged from the conclusions reached by the official historians.

Because human memory of specific events, especially in the trauma of battle, is so selective and malleable,⁶ Stacey generally did not rely on the recollections of individuals. The important exceptions were the disasters at Hong Kong (1941), Dieppe (1942), and Operation Spring where the chaotic circumstances prevented the keeping of written message logs and other dependable records. Tim Cook, in *Clio's Warriors*, refers to "the hidden history of war – that which was not documented in the official records."⁷ During the interwar period, when Colonel A.F. Duguid was working on the first volume of the official history of the Canadians in the First World War, he attempted to include this hidden history in his work by drawing on the memories of the fighting soldier – or at least the views of the higher ranks. He quickly realized that interviewing and corresponding with these officers "often left him susceptible to overt pressure to conform his judgements to an individual's point of view. As a result, Duguid was always forced to judge critically everything that was presented for the possibility of enhancing reputations."⁸ He also acknowledged a need to be conscious of contradictions within those accounts and between memories and the written record. Stacey and his team encountered both of these challenges in their work on Operation Spring.

In the completed official history *The Victory Campaign*, published in 1959, Stacey relied upon the evidence gathered in 1945-6, and distilled for

the minister's office in Canadian Military Headquarters (CMHQ) Report No.150 of February 1946. The account of the Black Watch's attack in *The Victory Campaign* cites 31 interviews done with survivors for the 1946 report, mainly other ranks, about what happened once the assaulting companies were cut off:

It appears that on or just beyond the crest they ran into a well-camouflaged enemy position strengthened with dug-in tanks. What remained of the battalion was now "pinned down" by intense close-range fire. Further advance being out of the question, Griffin ordered his men to make their way back individually as best they could.⁹

The figures in Stacey's conclusion in *The Victory Campaign* that 60 men made it over the crest of the ridge, of whom 15 returned, was based on a memorandum drafted for Stacey's investigators in December 1945 by Lieutenant-Colonel Eric Motzfeldt, who set down his own memory of the action together with the recollections of four other officers who had served that day and survived the war. *The Victory Campaign* recorded the "impression" on the part of the officers and the other ranks "that the tank and artillery support planned for their attack did not materialize," but then reported, on the basis of further interviews in 1945-6 among the gunners and armoured personnel who had participated in the action, that every effort had in fact been made to deliver the support. The artillery had fired as planned, but the rounds had landed too far in advance of the bogged down infantry to help – or even be noticed – by them. The tanks' push on the right flank had been stopped, with heavy casualties, by sustained fire from German armour and anti-tank guns.¹⁰

Subsequent published studies of the Black Watch attack have relied on the survivors' memories gathered by

the historical section. Reginald Roy, while a member of the section in the early 1950s, had used the interviews from the 1945-6 investigation to draft the extended "narrative" on Operation Spring¹¹ upon which Stacey based the shorter account in *The Victory Campaign*. When Roy published his own important book, 1944: *The Canadians in Normandy* (1984), the chapter "Storm of Steel on Verrières Ridge" made still fuller use of the material gathered in 1945-6. There are passages quoted from the transcripts of interviews with five survivors of the attack to offer a "glimpse of their situation once they were up the slope and about to move over the slight crest down to Fontenay-le-Marmion."¹² Roy also used the account of Captain R.E. Bennett, which is unique in that the testimony was recorded on 1 August 1944, within a week of the battle. In fact, Bennett had discussed his experiences with Ralph Allen, war correspondent for the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, on 27 July and supplied many of the same details he later recorded on 1 August, confirmation that the information was fresh from the battlefield. Bennett did not participate in the attack on Fontenay – his platoon was at that time engaged with German troops that infiltrated back into the Black Watch's assembly area – but he had been present when early on the morning of 25 July Griffin regrouped the battalion, and arranged for the artillery and tank support originally planned for the dawn attack to be laid on later in the morning. Bennett, who did not survive the war, was inspired by Griffin's calm and confidence, and the effective control he exerted. Bennett's accounts, both as reported in the press and in his own memorandum, strongly suggest that Griffin made his own decisions to carry on with the attack, and to strike directly for Fontenay on the reverse slope, rather than first dealing with May-sur-Orne on the flank of the forward slope.¹³

Nevertheless, the quite different view that grew in the regiment in postwar decades – that Griffin had been compelled by higher levels of command to undertake the attack – became the focus of a major controversy in the early 1990s. The regimental traditions featured in the docudrama entitled “In Desperate Battle: Normandy 1944,” part of *The Valour and the Horror* series televised by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in early 1992. At issue in the ensuing controversy was a meeting between Brigadier W.J. Megill, commanding the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade of which the battalion was a part, and Griffin shortly before the Black Watch attack. Megill recalled that he suggested that the Black Watch should secure May before moving on to Fontenay. The production discounted Megill’s version. In a subsequent article in *Maclean’s* magazine, the docudrama’s producer Brian McKenna cited the memory of Captain Campbell Stuart, the battalion’s adjutant on 25 July 1944, who “hotly disputed” Megill’s recollection. Responsible for wireless communications between Griffin and brigade, Stuart remembered constant pressure to attack. Griffin’s replies “stress[ed] the foolhardiness to attack” but the meeting with Megill – which Stuart was not present for – convinced the major that “the honour of the regiment was at stake and [he] ordered the attack to go forward.”¹⁴ Stuart was one of the officers who had assisted Motzfeldt in the preparation of the memorandum for the official historians in December 1945. That memorandum noted his recollection of the wireless messages from higher authorities urging that attack take place, but did not draw the larger conclusions of Stuart’s later reflections, which, the *Maclean’s* article suggests, strongly influenced the television production.

The meeting between Griffin and Megill had already figured in studies

of the Normandy campaign that began to appear in the 1980s. It must be noted that Megill’s recollection, decades after the event, is the only record of the conversation. Stacey’s report on the investigation of 1945-6 mentions that the meeting took place, but does not describe what was discussed.¹⁵ Historians have assumed that Megill’s later recollections about the details of the meeting are correct. For instance John A. English wrote that Megill “reluctantly acquiesced in this decision [to bypass May] largely because of Griffin’s enthusiasm and the promise it held for success.”¹⁶ English believed that Griffin, having recently taken command of the battalion, should have been directed by Megill to change his plan to take account of enemy resistance that was stronger than expected.¹⁷ Roy, in his 1984 book, took a slightly different view. He noted that both routes to Fontenay – direct or through May – would have met stiff resistance,¹⁸ and thus underscored the focus of both commanders on the seizure of Fontenay. Terry Copp, who interviewed Megill, has echoed this view. By bypassing points of enemy resistance and heading straight for the final objective Griffin was proposing the aggressive action senior commanders demanded. Copp acknowledged that it was most unfortunate that Megill did not intervene if his recollection is correct. Copp did, however, question the tendency to inject hindsight into the analysis of the action of the Black Watch as everyone can agree, with hindsight, that the battalion should have focused first on securing its start line in St. Martin against the enemy troops who had infiltrated into the area, and then taken May before attempting the final phase against Fontenay.¹⁹ Bill McAndrew emphasized the imperative for caution in an article that responded to the controversy over the CBC docudrama:

It is exceedingly doubtful that we will ever know the precise content and tone of that fateful conversation. Megill may have simply accepted Griffin’s view; he may have urged or insisted that Griffin go because his superior commanders were pressing him to hurry; or the two inexperienced battle commanders may have agreed they had a chance. Rather than pronounce a fatuous categorical judgment on that human dilemma, we would be better advised to consider its nuances and hope that none of us has to experience what these men faced that early morning.²⁰

Such caution, the present paper argues, has in fact always characterized the historiography of Operation Spring, in large part because of the care with which the official history team in 1945-6 approached the challenge of capturing and assessing the memories of participants. This conclusion is based on an examination of records that show how the official team carried out its task, a subject not directly treated in the published literature. Rather ironically, in view of the controversy over contested memories following broadcast of *the Valour and the Horror* in the early 1990s, the investigation of 1945-6 began as an exercise in political damage control because of disquiet in Montreal over the disaster that had befallen the city’s most prominent regiment.

In order to understand why an investigation into Operation Spring took place it is necessary to review contemporary newspapers, which provide insight into what the general public knew about the battle. A flurry of articles by Ross Munro, lead war correspondent for the Canadian Press, and Ralph Allen, war correspondent for the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, were published on 26 and 27 July 1944. On 26 July Munro described an “All-Day Uphill Battle Fought by Canadians” in which he



Lieutenant-Colonel C.P. Stacey and the staff of the Canadian Army Historical Section in London, 19 April 1944. From l. to r.: William Ogilvie, O.N. Fisher, Captain Heathcote, L. Wrinch, C.P. Stacey, J. Engler, A.T. Sesia, G.C. Pepper, G.R. Martin.

reported that "British staff officers said the Canadians face the strongest opposition to appear on any one sector of the Normandy front and that the fighting has been extremely heavy."²¹ Allen's 27 July article in the *Globe* compared the fighting to that of the First World War²² while on the same day Ross Munro noted that an officer had described the operation as "disappointing."²³ That same day in the *Toronto Star* the front-page headline was "Canadian Drive Ties Up Half Nazi Normandy Armour,"²⁴ reflecting how the operation was already being rationalized as a holding attack. On 2 August Allen emphasized the territorial gain of the operation, specifically, how two Ontario battalions (both veterans of the Dieppe raid) fought off fierce German counterattacks to hold Verrières village.²⁵ While there were some reports of disappointments, in

the immediate aftermath of the battle the successes were highlighted.

Wartime censorship delayed the brutal truth only for seventeen days. On 27 July Allen of the *Globe and Mail* had filed a 1,000-word account that made the front pages of several newspapers in Canada on 12 August, with the original filing date and the notation publication had been "delayed" at the head of the piece. "Black Watch Units Died Alone in Trap," the headline in the *Globe*, left no doubt there had been a disaster.

Here is the epitaph of a regiment. Three words only: "Don't Send Reinforcements."

From the four rifle companies that comprised almost the full fighting strength of the Black Watch (Royal Highlander of Canada), the rest was silence. Trapped on a barren ridge just

above May-Sur-Orne on July 25, in the heart of a powerful German tank, gun and infantry position, all that was left of their gallant spearhead was swallowed up, platoon by platoon, section by section, finally man by man.

Their ammunition ran out as a ring of Germany heavy guns and lighter automatic weapons went about its deadly work with the calculated precision of a firing squad. Finally, even the thin trickle of wounded, half-walking, half-crawling to the rear, came to an end. As a desperate little party of headquarters and support personnel prepared to fight its way forward in the forlorn hope of making a partial rescue, the last man out...bore this message from the battalion's 24-year-old acting commanding officer: "don't send reinforcements...."



Officers of The First Battalion, The Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) of Canada, 24 September 1943

Front Row: *Captain R.E. Bennett, Captain E. Motzfeldt, Captain J.P.W. Taylor, Captain V.E. Traversy, Lieutenant-Colonel S.S.T. Cantlie, Field Marshal Lord Wavell, Major B.R. Ritchie, Major A.G. Stevenson, Captain F.P. Griffin, Captain J.L. Duchastel de Montrouge, Captain J.P.G. Kemp.*

Middle Row: *Lieutenant R.A. Horwood, Captain G.A. Demers (RCAPC), Lieutenant R.D. Yuile, Lieutenant E.S. Duffield, Captain A.P. Bates, Lieutenant J.P. Cowans, Lieutenant A.R.W. Robinson, Lieutenant M.H. Cassils, Lieutenant G. Birks, Lieutenant I.H. Louson.*

Back row: *Lieutenant J.G. Smith (RCCS), Lieutenant J.E. Fox, Lieutenant F.A. Heubach, Lieutenant C.G. Bourne, Lieutenant S.E. Griffin, Lieutenant F.T. Rea, Lieutenant D.A. McAlpine, Lieutenant G.S. MacInnes, Lieutenant J.K. Neil.* (Names of officers mentioned in text are italicized.)

The inspirational part of the story reported in detail Captain R.E. Bennett's account of Griffin's leadership when he took command in the early morning amidst the heavy fighting with the German forces that had infiltrated behind the Black Watch's start line:

Major Griffin set the whole battalion an example I can't describe. He got men under cover in St. André while he arranged for a new artillery program, and if he ever thought twice about the possibility that the attack would have to be cancelled, he never showed it. His orders were to go ahead, and as he moved among the companies under constant fire from machine guns and mortars, giving his last orders, we were all infected by his coolness and his air of absolute confidence.²⁶

Interestingly, the Canadian public had the news before either Canadian Military Headquarters in London

or National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa. On 14 August, Stacey, at CMHQ, received a request from Ottawa "for infm re experience of RHC [Royal Highlanders of Canada] on 25 Jul; newspaper reports indicate that this unit was almost wiped out in the MAY-SUR-ORNE area." Stacey had to ask his officer in charge of the war diaries section, Major C.J. Lynn-Grant, if he had any information about what had happened at the front. The daily war diaries for all formations and units were dispatched to CMHQ at the end of each month, but, in the midst of the intense large-scale operations, no one in the combat formations had drawn the attention of the historical officers attached to II Canadian Corps and each of the divisions to this particular battalion level action. Lynn-Grant reported "that 5 Cdn Inf Bde War Diary largely supported" the press account, and Stacey had him quickly prepare a short report of the basic facts in the war diaries for NDHQ.²⁷

The regiment was well connected in Montreal. Demands from its "friends" for a fuller account of the disaster became effective with the end of the war in Europe and when in August 1945²⁸ Douglas Abbott, who represented St. Antoine-Westmount, a Montreal riding, became minister of national defence. Pressure from Abbott's constituents led the minister to order the preparation of an account that he could, if necessary, release as a ministerial statement.²⁹ Early in October 1945 Stacey arrived in Ottawa from London to make arrangements to take over as director of history at National Defence Headquarters. He had an interview with the chief of the general staff, General Charles Foulkes who had commanded the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, of which the Black Watch was a part, in Operation Spring, and Foulkes made it clear that investigation of the battalion's action was a priority. He concurred in Stacey's suggestion that the historical section should find and

interview former prisoners of war who had been captured during the operation. The chief of the general staff also agreed that the historical section should take the time needed for thorough research; Stacey's hope was that the Spring investigation would move in tandem with work already in progress at CMHQ on the narrative account of operations in Normandy during July 1944, one of a series of detailed studies intended to serve as the basic reference for the published official history. Clearly Stacey was concerned that a rush job on Spring might result in the release of information that his section's own wider research might prove to be incomplete in facts or analysis. Foulkes' cooperative attitude, Stacey wrote to Lieutenant-Colonel Sam Hughes, acting head of the London section, was a good reason to expedite work on the general narrative as well as the Spring investigation.³⁰

Thus began an intensive four months of work on both sides of the Atlantic. The section in London launched a search in the operational files that had been gathered from First Canadian Army, II Corps and the divisions under its command, and consulted the overseas personnel authorities to find survivors of the operation who might be able to provide evidence. Most of the participants in the battle, it turned out, had already returned home, and thus the task of making contact and gathering testimony fell largely to the Army Historical Section in Ottawa. Stacey returned to London in December 1945 to supervise the ongoing work in organizing records and drafting the basic narratives, and to ensure a minimum of interference in these essential tasks by the release of wartime personnel and first stages in the transfer of people and files back to Ottawa. Lieutenant-Colonel G.F.G. Stanley, who had been Stacey's wartime deputy at CMHQ, moved to Ottawa and administered the Army Historical Section, including the main

work in interviewing survivors of Operation Spring.

Stacey's initial hope was that officers who had survived Operation Spring could supply the information needed to flesh out the documentary record. Initial inquiries in London and Ottawa turned up the names of Lieutenant-Colonel Eric Motzfeldt, and Major J.P.G. Kemp, who had been company commanders at the time of the attack. Both had returned to civilian life in Montreal; Stacey sent them the key documents the researchers at CMHQ had located to help them produce a report.³¹ Motzfeldt completed the report only on 12 December; it was based on his own recollections, and those of Kemp, Captain Campbell Stuart, who had been the adjutant, and Major E.C. Duffield, who had been the battalion intelligence officer.³²

The information provided in the report matched Bennett's account on most points for the period leading up to the attack. The main possible difference concerned Griffin's willingness to attack. Motzfeldt's report, almost certainly on the basis of Stuart's memory, stated that Griffin had "repeatedly received orders by wireless from Bde that in spite of the start line NOT being secure, 1 RHC MUST proceed with phase III."³³ The officers' joint report, as already noted, was particularly useful in its estimate that 60 troops reached the crest of the ridge, and that 15 returned from the attack. There seems to have been some confusion on this second point as Stacey enquired whether those 15 survivors had been taken prisoner.³⁴ Motzfeldt, in a second letter dated 11 January 1946, confirmed that the 15 had indeed returned to Canadian lines, and also confirmed Stacey's information that Griffin was the only officer who had not become a casualty before the attack crossed the crest of the ridge.³⁵ Kemp, who had been taken as a prisoner of war, was the possible exception; however, it seemed to Stacey that

Kemp had already contributed as much information as he could to Motzfeldt's report.³⁶ The delay in Motzfeldt's submission of his original report had already led the historians to suspect that the officers had no desire to revisit that terrible day. Stanley had confirmation when Motzfeldt visited the historical section office in Ottawa on 9 January 1946: "He admitted that he was very reluctant to commit himself on paper on anything relating to the unfortunate experience of the Black Watch. His general attitude was the sooner this episode is forgotten the better. In brief, he was not very cooperative although he appears willing, within limits, to give off the record statements."³⁷

Stacey had realized on reading Motzfeldt's report of 12 December that the officers could not give much help on events that transpired over the crest of the ridge – the virtual ambush of the remnants of the companies by the unexpectedly large, well emplaced and camouflaged German forces that lay in wait. His disappointment in the failure of his original hope to wrap up the main elements of the investigation through consultation with the officers in Montreal, and the need for a much greater effort than planned to locate and interview other survivors of the action, was reflected in an apologetic note to Stanley: "I am afraid we have stuck you with rather a dirty job in the matter of the Black Watch, but the Motzfeldt memorandum did not help with the final phase of the action and the Minister will presumably expect some information on that. The names we sent you as prospects for interrogation were really shots in the dark...."³⁸ Consequently, the historical section began an urgent search for survivors that had been with the battalion throughout the attack; many of these men had been prisoners of war and had only recently become accessible upon their return from Europe.³⁹

This was the origin of the interviews with 31 survivors. Stacey sent the guidelines about the information required to Stanley in Ottawa in a message dated 27 December 1945: "(a) about what hour were survivors overwhelmed and roughly how many survivors remained at that hour (b) did bn dig in (c) was any actual attempt made to withdraw (d) nature of German counter-attacks and any additional infm on German posns etc."⁴⁰ Major C.E. Brissette of the Ottawa office carried out most of the interviews, and, in addition to responses to the specific questions, he recorded any personal information or comments by the survivors. Not surprisingly there are contradictions among the various accounts, and Brissette diligently noted his assessment of the reliability of each witness. As one would expect the answers to "a" varied both in the times given for the round up of prisoners by the Germans, and estimates of the number of prisoners taken. For "c," some recalled an order to withdraw coming from Major Griffin, but many others did not remember such an order and remarked that an attempt to withdraw would have been useless as the battalion was cut off. In answering "d" some survivors indicated that the Germans counterattacked, but many others indicated that the Germans had no need to; they simply kept up their fire from their well prepared positions and then ordered the isolated pockets of survivors to surrender.⁴¹ Some of these differences reflect how the battalion had been scattered and different groups of men had different experiences. Overall, however, the accounts were mutually supporting, and allowed the investigators to come up with a reasonable estimate of what happened to the battalion once it crossed the crest of the ridge.

One thing on which all the survivors agreed was that there had been no artillery or armoured support



From top to bottom:

**Major F.P. Griffin, Brigadier W.J. Megill,
Lieutenant-General G.G. Simonds.**

during the Black Watch's attack. In the words of Motzfeldt's report: "0910 hrs Bn moved off and reached start line at 0925 to find Artillery support had NOT materialized and tanks had NOT arrived."⁴² The investigators took this charge very seriously; on 11 January 1946 Stacey dispatched a message with detailed instructions for follow up to Stanley in Ottawa. Stacey himself interviewed one armoured officer, Lieutenant-Colonel J.W. Powell, who was still in England. At the time of the battle Powell had been the second-in-command of "B" Squadron of the 1st Hussars and following Major Griffin's orders group prior to the attack had taken over command of the unit from Major W. Harris who had been wounded. Powell recalled that the plan was for the tanks to provide fire support from May-sur-Orne, on the Black Watch's right flank. The tanks were late in arriving at their meeting point with the infantry but continued into May and attempted to provide support, but suffered heavy losses from German anti-tank guns.⁴³ The investigators also contacted Harris who had been at Griffin's orders group,⁴⁴ but Harris, now a member of parliament, was unable to provide them with anything of value because his tank had been put out of action early in the day.⁴⁵

Powell identified the two troop commanders who were in May, Captain Williamson and Lieutenant Rawson, who were back in Canada. Stanley contacted them, and their recollections supported Powell's account of the heavy enemy opposition in May. In Rawson's words: "[m]y troop was belting away with machine guns at anything that looked like a Gerry position but I'm afraid it was mostly blind shooting as Gerry had turned out his usual efficient job at camouflaging."⁴⁶ Williamson's recollection of events in May was equally harrowing: "Rawson's troop was wiped out on the left...My troop went through the

Black Watch Archives

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main street of May-sur-Orne drawing some fire from upstairs windows. As my tank passed the last house it was hit by a panther [tank] twice from fifty yards killing my co-driver and fatally wounded my loading operator."⁴⁷

Rawson was captured while Williamson managed to make his way back across Canadian lines.

Stacey also instructed Stanley to follow up with two artillery officers, Captain G.D. Powis and Lieutenant G.H. Van Vliet, who were believed to have been forward observation officers (FOOs) for the Black Watch on 25 July 1944, and Lieutenant-Colonel E.D. Nighswander, the former commanding officer of the 5th Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery, which had been slated to fire in support of the Black Watch. Nighswander responded he could only remember that the regiment fired heavily that day, and not the specific missions for the Black Watch. He did, however, note that he could "see no reason why the concentrations would not be fired if required."⁴⁸ Van Vliet replied that he could be of little help as his radio broke down but Powis provided a detailed statement.⁴⁹ "It was decided to refire the original fire plan less targets on or behind May-sur-Orne" as it was believed that the Calgary Highlanders were still advancing on May and Black Watch scouts had reported little enemy activity in the area. Powis' job that day had been to arrange the fire plan to coincide with the advance and then join the advance with the left forward company. He noted that the two other FOOs with the battalion did not advance. One lost his carrier to enemy fire and received permission from Griffin to return to his unit, while Van Vliet remained in St. André to repair his wireless communications. At 0900 hours Powis received word from 5th Field Regiment that the fire plan was in progress and he advanced with the infantry. During the advance he

attempted to bring high explosive and smoke down in support but his signaller had been wounded and the No.38 wireless set lost. Powis was then faced with the choice to either return to the carrier which had been given orders to follow the advance to keep in wireless contact, or make use of two less powerful No.18 wireless sets used by the infantry. Powis decided on the second option but failed to make contact on either set. He and the men he was with were cut off and taken prisoner later in the day.⁵⁰

In a response to a draft of CMHQ Report No.150, Megill insisted that "the fire plan was fired on time exactly as arranged. It is quite apparent however that, due to enemy fire, the adv[ance] of the battalion was too slow to take full advantage of it."⁵¹ The original fire plan brought down shells far beyond where the Black Watch began their advance and it is therefore possible that the infantry were not aware of the fire. No on-call fire support had been available to the troops due to the FOOs' equipment failures. Megill recalled that later in the day "tasks that were felt to be safe (i.e. not likely to hit our own troops) were fired over and above the original plan."⁵² Interestingly, some survivors who had or would be taken as prisoners of war recalled friendly fire landing near their positions around the time they were captured. With the information from the armour and artillery officers, the investigators were able to conclude that the armour and artillery had done their utmost to provide the planned support to the Black Watch, but those efforts had largely failed because of the very heavy enemy resistance.

Stacey had meanwhile completed a draft of the report summarizing the results of the investigation and sent it to Lieutenant-General G.G. Simonds, who had commanded II Canadian Corps during the operation. Simonds said he had no changes for the draft,⁵³ but he wrote

his own report dated 31 January 1946 which was "not for publication but for historical record."⁵⁴ In the report he emphasized that Spring had been intended as a holding operation. His own assessment of the operation indicated that "eleventh hour reinforcement of German positions east of the ORNE"⁵⁵ made the original objectives more difficult to achieve.⁵⁶ Simonds emphasised the success at Verrières village and his decision to send in the British 7th Armoured Division to secure these gains from further German counterattacks. Simonds believed that "the capture of the ridge in Operation 'SPRING' established the firm base which later made possible the mounting of Operation 'TOTALIZE' under much more favourable conditions."⁵⁷ He argued that in spite of German reinforcement his forces should have been able to complete phase I – the capture of May-sur-Orne, Verrières, and Tilly-la-Campagne – without heavy casualties: "that we failed to capture and hold MAY-SUR-ORNE and TILLY-LA-CAMPAGNE and that we suffered what were, in my opinion, excessive casualties was due to a series of mistakes and errors of judgement in minor tactics."⁵⁸ Simonds listed four tactical failures by his junior commanders. These included ensuring the security of start lines, advancing closely behind supporting artillery fire, and the importance of ensuring the enemy was cleared out of areas that were deemed secure. He did not mention how the careful timing of his plan gave the officers tasked with carrying out the operation very little flexibility to deal with unexpected events.

Interestingly, these points mainly referred to failures on the right flank near May while the left flank was hardly mentioned. Here Simonds tailored his explanations to fit the parameters of the investigation. The close focus on the action of the Black Watch led him to conclude "that the losses were unnecessarily

heavy and the results achieved disappointing. Such heavy losses were not inherent in the plan nor in its intended execution. The action of the Black Watch was most gallant but was tactically unsound in its detailed execution."⁵⁹ For McKenna, the producer of *The Valour and the Horror*, this statement was evidence that the military high command conspired to blame Griffin for the casualties the Black Watch suffered. It was, however, only Simonds' personal view. Stacey noted in his memoirs that Foulkes, who as commander of 2nd Canadian Infantry Division had served under Simonds during Spring, "resented Simonds' tendency to blame the inefficiency of our troops for our misfortunes."⁶⁰ Foulkes also disputed Simonds' contention that the operation had been planned as a holding attack. He had not been informed of this "and he doubted whether Simonds had been told either."⁶¹ Foulkes had by the time of the investigation surpassed his former corps commander to become chief of the general staff. McKenna postulated that Simonds, no longer able to blame his one-time subordinate as a result of Foulkes' new appointment, therefore blamed Major Griffin who was not able to defend his actions.⁶² We cannot know Simonds' motivations for certain, but the historiography shows that Simonds, brilliant and driven, conceived his plans with little input from subordinates, whose mission he saw as being to execute the plan with as little deviation as possible. In this light it is possible that Simonds was defending his plan, rather than consciously attacking a junior subordinate.

The battle between the reputations of Foulkes and Simonds, as historian Tim Cook has argued, was a difficult one for Stacey, who was in the process of trying to secure academic freedom for the official historians. While he had received full access to military records, the

army retained editorial control over everything he wrote. Stacey had originally refused the position as official historian on these terms.⁶³ Just as he refused to surrender his academic freedom, Stacey did not bend to Simonds' pressure to blame the regimental officers, Major Griffin included, who had been tasked with carrying out the operation.⁶⁴ Stacey did, however, accept Simonds' position that the battle had been a holding attack and, as David O'Keefe points out, also accepted Simonds' appraisal of the effects of the last minute German reinforcement.⁶⁵ This was not really meant to appease Simonds but rather was based upon the only information available to him at the time: "having had little access to strategic records, Stacey was... desperate to understand the context of Canadian operations."⁶⁶ This is why the director of the historical section had to turn to the recollections of the generals. In doing so, Stacey was conscious of Simonds' desire to uphold or secure his reputation and did not allow the way the general recalled the operation to manipulate the handling of what he already understood about what had happened.

Admittedly, at the request of Simonds, Stacey had omitted his emphasis on the losses sustained in Operation Spring and comparisons to the casualties sustained at Hong Kong and Dieppe in his preliminary study, *Canada's Battle in Normandy*. However, these phrases reappeared in *The Victory Campaign*⁶⁷ as, by the time it was published, Stacey had secured academic freedom for the writing of the official histories. When Foulkes and Simonds decided to destroy the conflicting reports they had prepared for the Historical Section, Stacey ensured that a copy of Simonds' report survived in the archives.⁶⁸ Therefore, throughout the investigation of Operation Spring, Stacey remained diligent

in his handling of the generals' recollections of the battle and ensured that Simonds' distinct perspective survived for subsequent generations of historians.

One area in which the investigators were not dependent on memory was the crucial question of casualties. On 4 January 1946 Lieutenant-Colonel H.M. Jackson, in charge of the Records Office at Canadian Military Headquarters in London, responded to Stacey's queries with the nominal rolls of casualties suffered by the Black Watch between 24 and 27 July 1944. Jackson believed that "it is extremely likely that all of the casualties shown actually took place on the date in question."⁶⁹ In support of this he cited and attached extracts of the unit's war diary which proved that the Black Watch were not likely to have suffered casualties after 25 July as the unit was withdrawn for the remainder of July to "re-group, re-equip and be brought back up to strength."⁷⁰ Jackson concluded that because the Black Watch was only significantly engaged on 25 July in the course of the week beginning 22 July, the 23 officers and 350 other ranks struck off strength could be assumed to be the battalion's total losses sustained during Operation Spring.⁷¹

On 9 January Stacey replied to Jackson with a draft of the casualties paragraph for the minister's statement. Stacey had scaled Jackson's figure back to "an aggregate of 16 officers and 308 other ranks"⁷² by identifying and removing casualties from the days before 25 July, as these undoubtedly resulted from operations prior to Spring. The memo also included a request for Jackson to determine how many of the wounded were also taken prisoner in order to avoid double counting. "Arriving at the precise truth of this matter is a most complicated task," Stacey confided to

his diary, his sentiment about many aspects of the investigation.⁷³ On 14 January Jackson sent a new nominal roll. He proposed three specific amendments to the text, the first two amendments essentially transferred a single other rank casualty from the wounded total to the prisoner of war total. The third was to indicate that 11 of the prisoners of war are also known to have been wounded.⁷⁴ Stacey made these amendments in his second draft, while adding that "it appears certain that some of those listed merely as 'wounded' were also prisoners for a time, and that some listed merely as 'prisoners' were also wounded."⁷⁵ The totals of 16 officers and 308 other ranks were the figures included in the final draft of the statement. (With further research by Reginald Roy in the early 1950s the figures were revised yet again to a total of 307 casualties, the number published in *The Victory Campaign* in 1959 and cited at the beginning of the present paper.)⁷⁶

It was because the attack had been such a disaster that the investigation needed to go beyond existing wartime records that could not provide essential facts since many survivors had been captured and the battalion had lost all wireless communication shortly after the advance began. Consequently, the recollections of participants had to be relied upon to fill the gaps in the documentation. The records of the investigation show that Stacey and the historical personnel who assisted him in both London and Ottawa were acutely aware of the limitations of memory. Hence their efforts to gather the recollections of as many participants as possible, assess the credibility of witnesses, and wherever possible test survivor accounts against the written records. One notable result was to demonstrate that, despite the unanimous memory of the infantry that there had been no armour and artillery support,

those arms had in fact made vigorous efforts that had had little effect in the face of the unexpectedly strong enemy resistance. Rather ironically, in view of the controversy over responsibility for the disaster that burst forth with the broadcast of *The Valour and the Horror* in 1992, Stacey skilfully put to one side the question of blame despite the strong views of Lieutenant-General Simonds. The investigation remained true to its focus, which was understanding what had happened, while assuring the full range of evidence, including Simonds' reflections, would be available to future scholars. In the end the minister's office did not issue the statement, the intention always having been to hold it in reserve in case of continued or renewed pressure on the department. Yet it certainly fulfilled Stacey's determination that the investigation should support the research for the published official history. As he noted with more than a hint of satisfaction in his covering letter for the minister "it may almost be doubted whether any single battalion operation has ever been more thoroughly investigated than this one."⁷⁷ The plaque at Point 67 sets out the regiment's memory that Major Griffin was compelled by senior authorities to bypass May and proceed directly to the final objective, a matter on which the historiography, built on the careful work of the official historians, has concluded there can be no definitive answer. The achievement of the official historians in preserving and analyzing the accounts of participants within eighteen months of the event was to uncover the "hidden history of war"; to establish what was known, and also what could only be guessed at. In this sense the plaque is part of a continuing dialogue between past and present, a dialogue whose very existence prevents memory being lost.

Notes

1. Terry Copp, "Operation 'Spring,'" in *A Nation at War: Essays from Legion Magazine* (Waterloo: Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies, 2004), p.107.
2. The Black Watch regimental history refers to 25 July 1944 as the Battle of St. André, reflecting how veterans of the battalion remember the battle. See Paul P. Hutchinson, *Canada's Black Watch: The First Hundred Years, 1862-1962* (Bloomfield, Ontario: Museum Restoration Service, 1987), pp.222-4.
3. See Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* no.26 (Spring 1989), pp.7-24.
4. For instance, see Terry Copp "Operation 'Spring': An Historian's View," *Canadian Military History* 12, nos.1-2 (Winter 2003), pp.63-70.
5. C.P. Stacey, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War*, vol.3, *The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945* (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer and Controller of Stationary), p.194.
6. Tim Cook, *Clio's Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), p.51.
7. *Ibid*, p.84.
8. *Ibid*.
9. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, pp.191-2.
10. *Ibid*.
11. [Reginald Roy], "Canadian Participation in the Operations in North-West Europe, 1944; Part II: Canadian Operations in July," 15 February 1953, Army Headquarters Historical Report No. 58 [AHQ 58], <<http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/his/rep-rap/doc/ahqr-rqga/ahq058.pdf>>, pp.131-3.
12. Reginald Roy, 1944: *The Canadians in Normandy* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1984), p.127.
13. Roy, 1944: *The Canadians in Normandy*, p.123.
14. Brian McKenna, "Heroism on Verrières Ridge: Brian McKenna recounts the worst Canadian disaster after Dieppe," *Macleans*, 11 November 2002, p.72. It is prudent to note here that McKenna is using Stuart's recollections from the early 1990s instead of 1946.
15. C.P. Stacey, "The Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) of Canada in Operation 'SPRING,' 25 July 1944," 12 February 1946, Canadian Military Headquarters Report No.150 [CMHQ 150], 12 February 1946, <<http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/his/rep-rap/doc/cmhq/CMHQ-150.pdf>> (accessed 3 August 2011), p.9 ; see also AHQ 58, p.132
16. John A. English, *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign: A Study of Failure in High Command* (New York: Praeger, 1991), p.247.

17. English, *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign*, p.249.
18. Roy, 1944: *The Canadians in Normandy*, p.125.
19. Terry Copp, *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p.176.
20. Bill McAndrew, "The Canadians on Verrières Ridge: A Historiographical Survey," in David J. Bercuson and S.F. Wise, eds., *The Valour and the Horror Revisited* (McGill-Queens University Press, 1994), pp.140-1.
21. Ross Munro, "All-Day Uphill Battle Fought by Canadians," *Globe and Mail*, 26 July 1944, p.8. For a full account of press coverage of Operation Spring see Timothy Balzer, *The Information Front: The Canadian Army and News Management during the Second World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), pp.154-60.
22. Ralph Allen, "Fighting Below Caen Like First Great War," *Globe and Mail*, 27 July 1944, p.13.
23. Ross Munro, "Action At Caen Described as Disappointing," *Globe and Mail*, 27 July 1944, p.1.
24. "Canadian Drive Ties Up Half Nazi Normandy Armour," *Toronto Daily Star* 27 July 1944, second section headline.
25. At this point most of the credit is given to the Royal Regiment of Canada rather than the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, now credited with holding Verrières. See Ralph Allen, "Royals Revenge Dieppe By Wiping Out Jerries Attacking In Normandy," *Globe and Mail*, 2 August 1944, p.1.
26. *Globe and Mail*, 12 August 1944.
27. Stacey diary, 14-15 August 1944, University of Toronto Archives [UTA], accession B90-0020, box 16, notebook no.32.
28. David R. O'Keefe, "Bitter Harvest: A Case Study of Allied Operational Intelligence for Operation Spring Normandy July 25, 1944" (master's thesis, University of Ottawa, 1996), p.12. See also C.P. Stacey, *A Date with History, Memoirs of a Canadian Historian* (Ottawa: Deneau Publishers, [1983], p.175.
29. Stacey, *A Date with History*, p.177.
30. Stacey to Hughes, 11 and 16 October 1945, Directorate of History And Heritage [DHH] 917.009(D1) pt. 1.
31. Stacey to Stanley, 24 December 1945, *ibid.*
32. Motzfeldt to Stanley, "Report on Battle of ST. ANDRE and MAY-sur-ORNE 25 JUL 1944," 12 December 1945, Library and Archives Canada [LAC], Record Group [RG] 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
33. *Ibid.* Here the Black Watch officers refer to the attack on Fontenay as "phase III" because they include clearing the start line (which was to be completed before the operation but was not) as "phase I".
34. Stacey to Stanley, message, 27 December 1945, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
35. Motzfeldt to Stanley, 11 January 1946, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
36. Stanley to Stacey, "Black Watch Report, Submitted by Lt-Col. E. Motzfeldt," 18 December 1945, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
37. Stanley to Stacey, 10 January 1946, DHH 917.009(D1) pt. 1.
38. Stacey to Stanley, 31 December 1945, *ibid.*
39. Stacey to Stanley, message, 27 December 1945, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Survivor Accounts, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
42. Motzfeldt to Stanley, "Report on Battle of ST. ANDRE and MAY-sur-ORNE 25 JUL 1944," 12 December 1945, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
43. Stacey, "Memorandum of Interview with Lt-Col. J.W. Powell," 10 January 1946, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
44. Stacey to Stanley, message, 11 January 1946, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
45. Stacey, *A Date with History*, p.177.
46. Rawson to Stanley, 24 January 1946, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
47. Williamson to Stanley, 23 January 1946, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
48. Nighswander to Stanley, 29 January 1946, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
49. Stanley to Stacey, "Operation 'Spring,'" 12 February 1946, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
50. G.D. Powis Statement, "MAY-SUR-ORNE. 25 JULY '44," February 1946, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
51. W.J. Megill Commentary, 29 January 1946, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
52. *Ibid.*
53. Stacey diary, 4 February 1946, UTA, B90-0020, box 17, notebook no.38
54. G.G. Simonds, to J.C. Murchie, Chief of Staff CMHQ, "Attack by R.H.C. – Operation "SPRING," 8 February 1946, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6. This report was reproduced in *Canadian Military History* 1, nos.1-2 (Autumn 1992), pp.65-8 <<http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol1/iss1/6/>>.
55. G.G. Simonds, "Operation 'Spring,'" *Canadian Military History* 1, nos.1-2 (Autumn 1992), p.67.
56. O'Keefe's "Bitter Harvest" indicates that due to the late knowledge of these reinforcements, doctrine meant Simonds' only option was to cancel the operation. It is likely that this would not have been permitted by high command. See pp.159-160.
57. Simonds, "Operation 'Spring,'" p.67.
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*, p.68.
60. Stacey, *A Date with History*, p.177.
61. *Ibid.*
62. McKenna, "Heroism on Verrières Ridge," pp.73-4.
63. Cook, *Clio's Warriors*, p.135.
64. *Ibid.*, p.137.
65. O'Keefe, "Bitter Harvest," p.28.
66. Cook, *Clio's Warriors*, p.136.
67. Stacey, *A Date with History*, p.176.
68. Cook, *Clio's Warriors*, p.137.
69. Jackson to Stacey, "CASUALTIES TO BLACK WATCH, 25 Jul 1944," 4 January 1946, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
70. "EXTRACT FROM WARDIARY – BLACK WATCH," LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
71. Jackson to Stacey, "CASUALTIES TO BLACK WATCH, 25 Jul 1944," 4 January 1946, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
72. Stacey to Jackson, "Casualties to Black Watch, 25 Jul 1944," 9 January 1946, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
73. Stacey diary, 9 January 1946, UTA, B90-0020, box 17, notebook no.38.
74. Jackson to Stacey, "Casualties to Black Watch, 25 July 1944," 14 January 1946, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
75. Stacey to Jackson, "Casualties to Black Watch 25 Jul 1944," 5 February 1946, LAC, RG 24, vol.12745, file 24 AEF/1/6.
76. AHQ 58, p.132.
77. CHMQ 150, p. 1, para. 2.

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