

**The 59th (Newfoundland) Heavy Regiment, Royal Artillery, in Normandy After D-Day,  
1944**

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Newfoundland is something of a unique case in Canadian history. For most of its existence it was either a fishing station or a crown colony of Britain, and much of its history is often considered to be British history. However, Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949, and when we became part of that country, so did our history. Unfortunately, Canada seems to be selective in what Newfoundland history it wants to claim as its own. Canada, along with Newfoundland, celebrated the 500th anniversary of John Cabot's landing at Bonavista, the 1000th anniversary of the Viking settlement in L' Anse-aux-Meadows, and more recently, the sending of the first wireless transmission from Signal Hill in St. John's by Marconi. But a lot of Newfoundland history is overlooked within the Canadian context. A prime example of this is the story of the 59<sup>th</sup> (Newfoundland) Heavy Regiment, Royal Artillery, which fought alongside the Canadians in Normandy and throughout the campaign to liberate France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Nonetheless, one will not find any mention of this in Canadian military historiography. The argument can be made that the Newfoundland regiment was part of the British Army, and therefore its participation in the Normandy campaign is not technically "Canadian history." However, the same has often been said about the Canadian Army. Yet the activities of the 59<sup>th</sup> (Newfoundland) Heavy Regiment are part of Canada's military heritage and should be recognized as such.

The 59<sup>th</sup> (Newfoundland) Heavy Regiment, Royal Artillery was formed in June 1940 under the command of Lt. Col. J. W. Nelson, and consisted of 728 officers, Warrant Officers,

NCOs and men. The regiment was divided into four batteries; the 20 and 23 manned 4-155mm “Long Toms” which could fire a 43kgs shell 23 kms, and Numbers 21 and 22 Batteries formed around 4-7.2 inch Howitzers that could hurl a 90kg projectile 17.9 kms. Up until they landed in France, the 59<sup>th</sup>, along with its sister regiment the 166<sup>th</sup> (Newfoundland) Field Regiment, had been in England providing coastal defence and live fire for various training exercises, suffering several casualties as a result.<sup>1</sup> However, having seen their sister regiment ship off to North Africa in January 1943, the 59<sup>th</sup> was becoming restless for real action. The successful assault on Fortress Europe on June 6, 1944, gave the regiment its opportunity.

The 59<sup>th</sup> landed on Juno Beach around noon on July 5, 1944, at Courselles-sur-Mer, on the spot where just a month before the 7<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade had stormed ashore on D-Day.<sup>2</sup> The Newfoundlanders were ‘late’ in arriving because their fire support role was handled in the early stages by battleships and cruisers lying just offshore. Although records establish July 5 as their official arrival, members of the 59<sup>th</sup> had actually been in France since D-Day. One member of the regiment, John Finn, had trained as a driver for a Forward Observation Officer of the British 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Regiment after attending a FOO course. A signaller, Finn was the only one of nineteen men taking the course that was picked to train with the 6<sup>th</sup> in preparation for their pre-invasion assault. For three months he trained with the 6<sup>th</sup> and shortly after midnight on June 6, Finn, plus another driver, two Forward Observation Officers, and their jeep landed by glider near Ranville. Mr. Finn witnessed the ferocious battle for the Pegasus Bridge from his Observation Post in a near-by church tower.<sup>3</sup> He did not rejoin the 59<sup>th</sup> until after they had advanced into Holland.<sup>4</sup>

Another group from the 59<sup>th</sup> had been with the No. 4 Reinforcement Holding Unit when they crossed over from England shortly after the D-day landings.<sup>5</sup> The only officer of the group, Lt. Rupert Jackson, found himself seconded as a FOO to an armoured battery supporting the 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne. He spent the next six weeks atop a 250-foot smoke stack overlooking the Bois de Bavent, near Ranville before rejoining the 59<sup>th</sup>. The rest of the unit was re-united with their fellow Newfoundlanders when the Regiment reached Bayeux in early July.<sup>6</sup>

The 59<sup>th</sup> (Newfoundland) Heavy Regiment was met shortly after landing in France by the regiment's Second-in Command, Lt-Col. R.C.R. Forsyth, and the four battery commanders.<sup>7</sup> They then moved to an area not far from St. Gabriel, a few kilometres inland, where they spent the night. All that night, they were subject to enemy shell fire, and many of the regiment were forced to take refuge under their trucks.<sup>8</sup> On the morning of July 6, the 59<sup>th</sup> moved to a cornfield on the reverse slope of a hill out of view of the enemy, and started preparing their gun positions.<sup>9</sup> At 8:15 that night, July 6, exactly a month from the D-day attack, and only a day after landing, the 59<sup>th</sup> (Newfoundland) Heavy Regiment fired its guns in anger for the first time. Batteries 21 and 22 fired their 7.2-inch howitzers at enemy tank concentrations near the Caen-Bayeux Road.<sup>10</sup> The four guns of these two batteries were the heaviest pieces in Normandy at this time.<sup>11</sup>

The 59<sup>th</sup>'s arrival in France was the last phase of the No. 3 Army Group's order of battle.<sup>12</sup> During the fighting of the previous month, Allied forces had secured a bridgehead extending 30 kilometres in from the coast at its deepest penetration. It was from here that General Bernard Montgomery hoped to launch his long-planned breakout.<sup>13</sup> First Caen, at the eastern end of the bridgehead, had to be taken. This operation, code-named Charnwood, would be undertaken by the 1st British Corps which included the Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, plus artillery

support from the British 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Groups, Royal Artillery, which included the 59<sup>th</sup> (Newfoundland) Heavy Regiment.<sup>14</sup>

The attack on Caen was to commence at 10:30 P.M. on the night of July 7/8 with an air strike by RAF bombers.<sup>15</sup> The artillery bombardment would begin shortly before dawn.<sup>16</sup> The 59<sup>th</sup>'s 21 and 22 Batteries were to target enemy positions in villages around the northern perimeter of Caen where the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division was to attack on the Corps' right.<sup>17</sup> The 155-mm guns of 20 and 23 Batteries were to target hostile batteries seen to be active during the assault.<sup>18</sup> It was while watching the air raid that the commanding officer of 20 Battery, Major G F Edwards, shared his observation post atop a church tower with Gen. H D G Crerar, C-in-C of the First Canadian Army.<sup>19</sup>

The attack commenced as planned with wave after wave of Lancaster and Halifax bombers hitting Caen, followed per order by the artillery bombardment. The ground assault started at 7:30 A.M. and fierce fighting continued throughout the day.<sup>20</sup> Major Douglas Stone, commanding 23 Battery, was able to watch the battle from his observation post in a church belfry. He witnessed the Highland Light Infantry of Canada, with the tanks of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers, re-take the town of Buron which had been captured then abandoned in the early days of the invasion.<sup>21</sup> Caen was in Anglo-Canadian hands by the morning of July 9<sup>th</sup>, and the 59<sup>th</sup> was moved to a position six miles west of Caen at Norrey-en-Bessin. The regiment was to remain at Norrey for the next four weeks.<sup>22</sup>

During most of their stay at Norrey-en Bessin, the 59<sup>th</sup> was engaged in counter-battery and counter-mortar fire.<sup>23</sup> Batteries 20 and 23 fired their Long Toms at hostile gun positions in the area, and Batteries 21 and 22 bombarded troublesome enemy mortars. These bombardments

had to be very accurate as daily expenditures were restricted to 15 rounds per day per gun, and many were carried out under the direction of air observation posts. The 21 and 22 Batteries' counter-mortar work was particularly successful. Word would come back from a forward infantry battalion that they were being held down by enemy mortar. Based on the map reference provided, the 7.2 inch howitzers would fire an "air burst" catching the enemy mortar crews out in the open. Estimates are that some infantry units noticed a fifty percent reduction in mortar fire thanks the efforts of these two batteries.<sup>24</sup> However, the 59<sup>th</sup> paid for their success.

German Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel's grenadiers had a special dislike for British artillery, which fired so rapidly and accurately that the Germans thought they had an automatic loading system.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, on the night of July 17 the Luftwaffe launched a bombing raid against the 59<sup>th</sup>'s position.<sup>26</sup> The first bombs hit the 22 Battery's ammunition dump and, over the next half hour, the battery was subjected to 18 bomb hits. Neighbouring 20 Battery's Number 1 gun suffered a direct hit which seriously injured the whole gun crew. As a result of the efforts of two members of the gun crew, 20 Battery's Number 1 gun and much of its ammunition was saved, and the two men won British Empire Medals for their actions that night.<sup>27</sup> Fortunately, no one was killed in the raid, although one officer and eleven other ranks were wounded, one losing a leg.<sup>28</sup> However, a few days later, the 59<sup>th</sup> suffered its first fatality since landing in France. The area occupied by the 59<sup>th</sup> had previously been an enemy position, and on July 22, a man detonated a German grenade.<sup>29</sup> Two guns had been put out of action in the air raid but this did not stop the 59<sup>th</sup> from participating in operations Goodwood and Spring, both major Canadian offensives. Spring was especially costly for Canada. While these two operations did push the front several kilometres south of Caen by July 25, they were not the breakout Montgomery was

looking for.<sup>30</sup> With the badly mauled British and Canadian forces licking their wounds and rebuilding their strength, the rest of the month passed fairly quietly for the 59th.

The 59th's next big action was Operation Totalize - the thrust by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Corps designed to punch through the German lines and take Falaise. The operation began on the night of August 6/7 with an intense air raid by the RAF, and introduced, for the first time, infantry transported by armoured personnel carriers - Priest 105-mm self-propelled guns "defrocked" of their armament<sup>31</sup>. The 59<sup>th</sup> had moved forward on the August 6 to Ste. Honorine du Fay and when the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Division attacked Falaise the next day, the four batteries provided fire support along their assault route. As the Canadian front advanced southeastward, so did the 59<sup>th</sup> (Newfoundland) Heavy Regiment in five or six kilometre increments. The battle became more confused, and the Newfoundland batteries were often ordered not to fire into the battle zone for fear of hitting Allied troops along with the enemy. Totalize concluded after a week of intense fighting which failed to reach its objective but came to within sixteen kilometres of Falaise. Lieutenant-General Guy Simmonds, believing the operation had failed to succeed because his two armoured divisions had not exploited the opportunities presented to them, prepared another "set piece" attack which he hoped would secure the objectives of Totalize.<sup>32</sup> Operation Tractable was successful, but not without heavy cost. The 59<sup>th</sup> kept up with the Canadian advance every step of the way, moving forward as the front did. On August 15, they crossed the Orne at Thury Harcourt and set up at Fresnay-le-Vieux, sixteen kilometres northwest of Falaise.<sup>33</sup> The Canadians entered the city the next day. The 59<sup>th</sup> continued to advance, finally settling on August 18 outside Noron l'Abbaye, just west of Falaise.<sup>34</sup>

By this time, the German forces were in retreat, having been encircled by the Americans to the south, and the Canadians, British, and the Polish to the north. The Germans made one last push to break out of the noose that was steadily tightening around them. Through a narrow corridor between Trun in the north and Chambois in the south, tens of thousands of troops, tanks, horses and equipment surged through a five-kilometre gap. It became a shooting gallery. The area was code named “Serpent” and all Allied troops were excluded. Commencing in the early morning of August 20, the 59<sup>th</sup> joined the massed guns of the British 12<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> Corps and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Corps to close the Falaise Gap.<sup>35</sup> By August 21, Allied forces had closed the gap, inflicting on the Germans slaughter and destruction “so great that it cannot be described.”<sup>36</sup>

Even before the gap at Falaise had been closed, Allied armoured columns were racing for the Seine. On August 26, the 59<sup>th</sup> left its camp near Falaise and headed eastward.<sup>37</sup> The route went through Vimoutiers, Le Sap, and Broglie to an area between Louviers and Evreux within five kilometres of the Seine. The batteries were quickly put at the ready to cover river crossings being used by the Second British Army. However, there was no action as the Germans were rapidly falling back towards Belgium, and on the last day of August, the regiment moved to Cailly.<sup>38</sup> The bulk of the 59<sup>th</sup> stayed there for the next three weeks while 23 Battery continued on into Northern France and Belgium. However, the Battle for Normandy was over. Hitler’s *Festung Europa* had been breached and his 1000-year Reich had only eight months to live. The 59<sup>th</sup> went on into Belgium and finally Germany itself. When the war ended, the 59<sup>th</sup> Newfoundland Heavy Regiment was on the Elbe shelling Hamburg.

The Battle for Normandy clearly showed that Canada’s armed forces were as good as any of the Allied nations, and wiped away the bad taste left by the disastrous attack on Dieppe in

August 1942. They had fought against some of Germany's best and had not been found wanting. Members of the 59<sup>th</sup> (Newfoundland) Heavy Regiment had fought right beside Canadians from the opening salvos of D-day to the final gasp of Nazi Germany, suffering 24 fatal casualties and dozens of injured along the way. Canada emerged from World War II a stronger nation both militarily and economically and in 1949, despite a divisive campaign, welcomed Newfoundland into the Canadian federation. Shortly thereafter, the Canadian Army formed Newfoundland units of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery, the Royal Corps of Engineers, and the Royal Canadian Infantry Corps. To this day, Newfoundlanders continue to make up a disproportionate percentage of the Canadian Armed Forces.<sup>39</sup>

Canada does tend to neglect the long, colourful, and sometimes tragic, history of its youngest province. Newfoundlanders are reminded of this every year when the country celebrates Canada Day on a date that also marks one of the greatest tragedies in Newfoundland's history. On July 1, 1916, 811 men of the Newfoundland Regiment "went over the top" to capture the small French village of Beaumont Hamel. Only 65 answered roll call the next morning. Consequently, when the more innocuous Dominion Day - celebrated as Memorial Day in Newfoundland - was changed to Canada Day in 1982, many in Newfoundland were upset.<sup>40</sup>

Newfoundlanders are used to this, though, so it is no surprise that Newfoundland's contribution to the Battle of Normandy is overlooked in Canadian military histories. Yes, Newfoundland was a Dominion of the British Empire, the same as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, etc., and fought as part of the British Army. However, unlike these other dominions, after the war Newfoundland became part of Canada and so did its history. One does not ignore the Metis Rebellion of 1885, just because it occurred before Saskatchewan and

Alberta had joined Confederation.<sup>41</sup> Or the War of 1812. They are an unquestioned part of Canada's military heritage. The 59<sup>th</sup> (Newfoundland) Heavy Regiment, Royal Artillery, which supported Canadian units all during the Normandy campaign, should also be considered part of Canada's military heritage.

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1. Shields, Jim, An Introduction to the Military History of Newfoundland, Mt. Pearl, Newfoundland: Hawk Duplicating Ltd., 1998), p. 62.

2. Nicholson, Col. G. W. L. More Fighting Newfoundlanders ( St. John's: Government of Newfoundland, 1969), p. 254.

3. John Finn. Personal interview August 27, 2001.

4. John Finn

5. Nicholson, Col. G. W. L. More Fighting Newfoundlanders, p. 255.

6. Ibid., p. 256.

7. Ibid., p. 254.

8. Mr. Stephen Tucker. Personal Interview. Sept. 4, 2001

9. Nicholson, p. 255.

10. Ibid.

11. Stephen Tucker.

12. Nicholson, p. 256.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., p. 257.

15. Granastein, J. L., and Desmond Morton. Bloody Victory: Canadians and the D-Day Campaign 1944, p. 112.

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16.Copp, Terry and Robert Vogel Maple Leaf Route: Caen (Alma, Ontario: Maple Leaf Route, 1983), p. 110. The war diary of the Highland Light Infantry notes that the Brigade was awakened at 0500 by “a terrific barrage” all along the front.

17.Nicholson, p. 258.

18.Ibid, p. 257.

19.Ibid.

20.Highland Light Infantry War Diary, Maple Leaf Route: Caen, p. 111.

21.Ibid, p. 258.

22.Ibid, p. 259.

23.Ibid

24.Nicholson, p. 261.

25.E. Bauer, Lt-Colonel, The History of the Second World War, ed. Brigadier Peter Young (Etobecoke: Prospero Books, 2000), p.646.

26.Nicholson, p. 261.

27.Nicholson, p. 262.

28.Ibid.

29.Ibid.

30.Copp, Terry and Robert Vogel Maple Leaf Route: Falaise (Alma, Ontario: Maple Leaf Route, 1983), p. 42.

31.Granastein, J. L., and Desmond Morton. Bloody Victory: Canadians and the D-Day Campaign 1944, p. 167.

32.Terry Copp, A Canadian’s Guide To The Battlefields of Normandy (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University, 1994),p. 129.

33.Nicholson, p. 265.

34.Ibid.

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35. Ibid.

36. E. Bauer, Lt-Colonel, The History of the Second World War, p. 732.

37. Nicholson, p. 266.

38. Ibid., p. 268.

39. Newfoundlanders make up 25% of the Royal Canadian Regiment and 40% of the Canadian Navy.

40. Antle, Rob, "A Celebration on Two Fronts," The Telegram, June 30, 2002, p. B1

41. Saskatchewan and Alberta were not created as provinces until 1905.