



3rd Canadian Division



The formation of the Canadian 3rd Infantry Division was authorized on 17 May 1940. There was then a considerable delay until the brigade and divisional headquarters were formed on September 5, and the first divisional commander was appointed on October 26.

While the division's components were forming, The Cameron Highlanders were detached and transferred to Iceland as part of Z Force. The battalion spent the winter of 1940–41 there before moving to the UK. The division's 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade and 9th Canadian Infantry Brigades began embarking as early as July 1, 1941 and arrived in the UK at the end of that month. The 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade embarked in August and arrived at the beginning of September. After its arrival, the division spent three uneventful years in garrison and training duties prior to the assault landing on Juno Beach in Normandy, as part of the British 2nd Army, later joining the newly-formed 1st Canadian Army. Battle honours include Caen, Falaise, capturing the Channel ports, the Breskens pocket, and the final offensives of 1945. During the Battle of the Scheldt, the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division had the nickname of "Water Rats" bestowed upon them by General Bernard Montgomery, for their skilled amphibious abilities.

CARPIQUET

On July 4, as the Americans celebrated Independence Day as best they could in the bocage country on the Allied right flank, Montgomery ordered the Canadians to take Carpiquet, an airfield on the outskirts of Caen defended by the 25th SS Panzer Division and Standartenführer Kurt Meyer's 12th SS, made up of fanatical Hitlerjugend and seasoned veterans of the Russian Front. General Rod Keller, the commander of the 3rd Canadian Division, sent in four battalions of infantry; the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment, The Royal Winnipeg Rifles, Le Regiment de la Chaudiere, the Queen's Own Rifles, and the Fort Garry Horse, and all the artillery he could muster. It was not enough.

The Canadians had to cross more than a mile of open wheat fields to reach Carpiquet, every square yard of which the Germans had plotted for artillery and mortar fire. The Germans shelled the startline and continued to rain down high explosives as the men struggled forward through the waist-high wheat. The North Shore regimental history calls Carpiquet "the graveyard of the regiment" because the battalion sustained the heaviest casualties of the war in the course of the attack. The Royal Winnipegs, the Chaudieres, and the Queen's Own fared no better. Major J.E. Anderson of the North Shores spoke for most when he wrote:

"I am sure that at some time during the attack every man felt he could not go on. Men were being killed or wounded on all sides and the advance seemed pointless as well as hopeless. I never realized until the attack on Carpiquet how far discipline, pride of unit, and above all, pride in oneself and family, can carry a man even when each step forward meant possible death."

But, the Canadians did move forward. The North Shores and Chaudieres occupied the village of Carpiquet, while the Queen's Own pressed on to the airport. Here the Germans were waiting in concrete pillboxes to add heavy machine gun fire to the torrent of mortar and artillery shells crashing into the wheat fields. In the meantime, the Royal Winnipegs had been unable to take their objective, the hangars on the south side of the runways. A second attack with tanks and flame-throwing Crocodiles also failed. Exposed in a finger-like salient, the Canadians who got the farthest, had to

fight off continuous German counterattacks. A company of Chaudieres was overrun and some were bound and shot.

In Carpiquet, the survivors from the North Shores and the Chaudieres waged pitiless warfare in the ruins. "That first night alone," the padre of the North Shores wrote, "we buried 40 of our boys. You could fancy the wheat field had once been just like any wheat field back home. Now it was torn with shell holes and everywhere you could see the pale upturned faces of the dead." Of the 2,000 Canadians engaged in the attack, 371 were casualties, and more than a hundred were dead.

As the Canadians grimly held on to the hard-won ground around the hangars at Carpiquet airport, Montgomery launched "Charnwood," the final assault on Caen. At 10:30 p.m. on July 7, the RAF dropped 2,561 tons of bombs on the stricken city, killing four hundred civilians, but few Germans as fear of hitting their own troops led Bomber Command to select a "bombline" well behind the fortified positions around the city. If not many Germans were killed, the raid was at least a spectacular morale-booster. "We watched waves of bombers come in from England," an officer wrote, "pouring out of the setting sun like a gigantic swarm of bees about to take over the world; passing overhead with a beat of thunder that shook the ground." All the bombers accomplished though, was to fill the streets of Caen with rubble, slowing the advance and providing excellent defensive positions for the Germans.

