

# Panzermeier Attacks!

Allied Artillery and the 9th CIB vs the 25th SS-PGR Kampfgruppe during the D+1  
Advance on Carpiquet

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On the morning of the 7<sup>th</sup> of June, 1944, the 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade (9th CIB) stepped off the line of march at Villons-les-Buissons, located in the Normandy region of northwestern France, surging forward to meet their D-Day objective of the German airfield at Carpiquet. The vanguard force consisted of the battalion of North Nova Scotia Highlanders, along with tanks of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers, supported by a troop of Anti-Tank destroyers and the guns of 14th Field Regiment, RCA (14th Fd Regt).<sup>1</sup> Upon reaching the commune of Authie at noon, the Canadians were unaware that they were under the direct observation of Colonel Kurt Meyer, the Commander of the 25th SS Panzer-Grenadier Regiment (25th SS-PGR), who spied them from a church tower at the Abbey d'Ardennes. Within hours, this holy place, and the ground around it, would be profaned with Canadian blood, as the Highlanders captured during a ferocious German attack would be murdered by the Hitler Youth they so bravely fought against. At the centre of this firestorm was Meyer, whose determined counter-attack against the 9th CIB ground the Canadian advance on Carpiquet to a halt, where they inflicted heavy casualties, during an engagement where a lack of Canadian artillery support proved to be a critical shortcoming. To understand how this battle unfolded, this essay will describe the situation surrounding the German counterattack against the 9th CIB, and the impact of Allied artillery throughout this D+1 clash between the Allies and the Axis.

Operation Overlord clearly caught the German military off-guard – while significant defences and operational planning had taken place to counter such an invasion, the actual response following the airborne landings and subsequent establishment of a beachhead were largely uncoordinated during the first critical hours.<sup>2</sup> 12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Corps, commanded by General Sepp Dietrich, was subordinated, attached and ordered to move in a variety of confusing

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<sup>1</sup> Milner, Marc, *Stopping the Panzers: The Untold Story of D-Day* (Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 2014), 138.

<sup>2</sup> Reynolds, Michael, *Steel Inferno: I SS Panzer Corps in Normandy* (Kent: Spellmount Ltd, 1997), 54.

directions, before finally receiving a clear mission, at approximately 1500 hours on the 6<sup>th</sup> of June, to “drive the enemy...back into the sea and destroy him.”<sup>3</sup> Dietrich, now commanding the 716th Infantry (716th Inf Div) and 21st Panzer Divisions (21st Pz Div), in addition to his own, rapidly issued orders to Major-General Fritz Witt, the Commander of the 12th SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend (“Hitler Youth” or “HJ”), to prepare for a divisional counter-attack in the vicinity of Evrecy.<sup>4</sup> Meyer’s 25th SS-PGR was the first element of the 12th SS Panzer Division (HJ) to reach the invasion area, due to the disordered German response to the Normandy landings, as units were harried by terrific Allied airpower on the march, and beset with a lack of fuel, making the concentration of men and equipment a costly and time-consuming matter.<sup>5</sup> On the 6<sup>th</sup> of June, Meyer proceeded to the headquarters (HQ) of 716th Inf Div to the North of Caen, to discuss a three Panzer Division counter-attack for the next day. It is important to understand the mindset and background of Colonel Meyer, known as “Panzermeyer” to his men, to contextualize his battlefield actions. An archetypal SS commander, Meyer possessed a beguiling mixture of admirable and loathsome traits, and was beloved by his soldiers for his leadership, toughness, aggression, and combat experience. Highly decorated for his bravery, historian Michael Reynolds described Meyer as a: “natural and brilliant soldier...destined to become Nazi Germany’s youngest general at the age of 34,” as well as an ardent National Socialist, who, following the cessation of hostilities, would be convicted as a war criminal.<sup>6</sup> Meyer, manoeuvring forward to receive orders, was a leader eager and able to successfully utilize opportunity, intuition, and mission command, in an attempt to meet his higher commander’s intent of driving the Allies into the sea.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 18.

Once arriving at the 716 Inf Div HQ, Meyer, within his autobiography “Grenadiers,” recounts the orders of his divisional commander:

The situational necessitates speedy action. First of all, the enemy has to be denied Caen and the Carpiquet airfield...we can only consider a coordinated attack with the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division. So the division is to attack the enemy along with the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division and throw them into the sea. H-Hour for the attack is 7<sup>th</sup> June at midday.<sup>7</sup>

During this meeting, Meyer infamously referred to the Canadians as *kleine fische* (little fish)<sup>8</sup> and appeared very confident in his soldiers’ ability to repel the landing force.<sup>9</sup> Following the orders group, Meyer then received further instructions from General Witt over the telephone, who delayed the combined counter-attack with 21st Pz Div to 1600 hours, due to the slow movement of German forces, especially tanks, who were still completing road movements to their assigned positions. Meyer then returned to his Command Post at the Abbey d’Ardennes, where he spotted the Canadians manoeuvring towards Carpiquet. Keenly aware of both the friendly and enemy situation, Meyer quickly relayed plans to attack in advance of the planned counter-attack, in favour of seizing the short-notice opportunity, in accordance with his superior commander’s intent, as the German airfield at Carpiquet was about to fall to the Canadian advance. The 9th CIB faced a significant force, as Meyer formed a combined arms team known as a Kampfgruppe, consisting of his 25th SS-PGR, a battalion of guns from the 12th SS Artillery Regiment, and approximately 50 Mark IV tanks from the 2nd Battalion of the 12th SS Panzer Regiment. All in all, the vanguard of the 9th CIB would be struck by a German force approximately equal in terms of tanks and artillery, while the 25th SS-PGR Kampfgruppe possessed a marked advantage in the numbers of infantrymen.

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<sup>7</sup> Meyer, Kurt, *Grenadiers* (USA, Publishers Press, 1994), 120.

<sup>8</sup> Jarymowycz, Roman. *The Quest for Operational Maneuver in the Normandy Campaign* (Montreal, McGill University, 1997), 73.

<sup>9</sup> Reynolds, Michael, *Steel Inferno: I SS Panzer Corps in Normandy* (Kent: Spellmount Ltd, 1997), 60.

After observing the vanguard of the 9 CIB apparently oblivious to the presence of 25th SS-PGR, Meyer recounted the moment in his memoirs as: “My God! What an opportunity! The tanks are driving right across II Battalion’s front! The Unit is showing us its unprotected flank.” At this moment, he rightfully used the initiative, and seized a fleeting opportunity, ordering his Kampfgruppe to attack, recounting:

I am thinking of Guderian’s principle and the divisional attack orders, but in this situation, I must use my own initiative. The 26<sup>th</sup> Regiment is still east of Orne and I/12<sup>th</sup> Panzer Regiment cannot move because of the lack of fuel and is 30 kilometres east of the Orne...Decision: When the leading enemy tanks pass Franqueville the II/25<sup>th</sup> will attack with the tank company waiting on the reverse slope. Once the battalion has reached Authie the other battalion will then join the battle. Objective: The coast.<sup>10</sup>

The German counter-attack caught the strung-out vanguard of the 9th CIB by surprise, and within moments Sherman tanks from the Fusiliers were on fire, and the Hitler Youth surged forward, supported by the weight of over 50 guns. During ferocious fighting over the course of many hours, often conducted hand-to-hand, the Canadian advance on Carpiquet was halted. As the shells of battered tanks burned over the French countryside, the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> of June saw the Germans back in possession of Buron, and hundreds of men on both sides had been killed, including Canadian prisoners of war, who were murdered by their captors within the grounds of the Abbey.<sup>11</sup> While Meyer’s counter-attack against the Canadian vanguard failed to push the Allies into the sea, his force denied the 9th CIB their objective of Carpiquet. A key element of Meyer’s success on the battlefield that day was the lack of Canadian artillery fire support throughout the majority of the German counter-attack, which forced the brave soldiers of the 9th CIB to a desperate attempt to repel their attackers with their direct fire weapons.

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<sup>10</sup> Meyer, Kurt, *Grenadiers* (USA, Publishers Press, 1994), 122.

<sup>11</sup> Milner, Marc, *Stopping the Panzers: The Untold Story of D-Day* (Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 2014), 188.

When Meyer's bold strike against the flank of the Canadian vanguard at Authie caught both the Fusiliers and Highlanders in a desperate situation, the inability of the Forward Observation Officers (FOOs) from the 14th Fd Regt to provide timely fire support magnified the initial impact of the German onslaught.<sup>12</sup> As Meyer's 25th SS-PGR Kampfgruppe called in the withering barrage of over 50 guns on the Highlanders, while the Canadians were told that "no friendly artillery support could be had."<sup>13</sup> Meyer was likely aware of this situation, and exploited it, as he was at the front for the majority of the operation – indeed, he noted within his memoirs that the Canadian guns failed to fire during the initial assault on the 9th CIB vanguard.<sup>14</sup> While Meyer took advantage of the lack of defensive Canadian artillery fire, his early successes were not exploited by the resources of the 21st Pz Div, who remained in place until their original 1600 hours timing before they committed to the counter-attack.<sup>15</sup> In this, both Milner and Reynolds rightfully criticized Meyer's command and control during the battlefield, as he (Meyer) was often away from his headquarters, with minimal communications – Meyer himself even recounts being stuck in a shell hole during a key moment in the battle.<sup>16</sup> By the time the 21st Pz Div joined the fight, the Canadians had sorted out their artillery issues, and brought thunderous fire down on the Germans, which quickly ground their counter-attack to a standstill. Therefore, it is reasonable to postulate that had Meyer demurred from attacking the Canadian advance on Carpiquet, that his force may have been devastated by the same artillery fire that stopped the 21st Pz Div in its tracks. This, in part, justifies the rightfulness of Meyer's actions – his bold, aggressive attack, which was a product of his intuition as an experienced battlefield commander,

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<sup>12</sup> War Diary - 27 Canadian Armoured Regiment (Sher Fus R), June 1944, sheet 4.

<sup>13</sup> Bird, Will, *No Retreating Footsteps: The History of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders* (Kentville, NS: The Regiment, circa 1955), 86.

<sup>14</sup> Meyer, Kurt, *Grenadiers* (USA, Publishers Press, 1994), 123.

<sup>15</sup> Reynolds, Michael, *Steel Inferno: I SS Panzer Corps in Normandy* (Kent: Spellmount Ltd, 1997), 69.

<sup>16</sup> Meyer, Kurt, *Grenadiers* (USA, Publishers Press, 1994), 123.

combined with his forward positioning, allowed him to exploit the initial failures of the guns to provide a wall of steel between the 9th CIB and the 25th SS-PGR Kampfgruppe.

The issues surrounding Allied fire support during D+1 are well documented throughout the primary source material, as well as within the historical analysis of Reynolds, Jarymowycz, Milner (especially the latter). Both in theory and practice, the vanguard of the 9th CIB should have had immediate access to the substantial fire of the 21 surviving M7 105mm self-propelled guns 14th Fd Regt, along with that of the 9 six-inch guns of the cruiser HMS Belfast.<sup>17</sup> In addition to these fire support elements tasked in direct support of the 9th CIB, it is important to note that the command and control of British Commonwealth artillery system would have enabled the FOOs of the 14th Fd Regt access to guns from across the theatre. Milner, within his history of the 13th Field Regiment, RCA, spoke to the effectiveness of Commonwealth artillery doctrine, as:

The FOO, his battery and regiment, therefore, served as the conduit through which forward infantry units could access fire support on a vast scale...it was possible for any FOO or even a “gunner” – an artillery private – to deliver the fire of everything from his own battery to that of all guns of the Corps onto a single grid reference in a matter of minutes. Under the British system you fired first and asked questions later...this very powerful system...was intended to and actually did crush the anticipated German Panzer assault on the beachhead in the days after 6 June 1944.<sup>18</sup>

However, during the critical moments of the 9th CIB advance into Authie, when the Canadians received heavy German artillery fire, followed by a frenetic attack by Meyer’s 25th SS-PGR Kampfgruppe, Allied fire support was silent. Indeed, when the commander of the Canadian vanguard ordered his FOO to call in defensive fire, he was told that the guns were “out of range,”

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<sup>17</sup> Milner, Marc, “No Ambush, No Defeat: The Advance of the Vanguard of the 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade, 7 June 1944,” in Geoffrey Hayes, Mike Bechthold and Matt Symes, eds., *Canada and the Second World War: Essays in Honour of Terry Copp*. (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), 347.

<sup>18</sup> Milner, Marc, *The Guns of Bretteville: 13th Field Regiment, RCA, and the Defence of Bretteville-l’Orgueilleuse, 7-10 June 1944* (Canadian Military History 16, No. 4 (Autumn 2007)) 9.

and would need some time to be moved up.<sup>19</sup> This situation was further compounded by communications issues that prevented the Naval FOO from calling in the flat-shooting guns of the HMS Belfast. Simply put, as Meyer's men assaulted forward, they did so under a significant umbrella of fire support coverage – while the Canadians were initially left unprotected, and out in the open. What happened?

While the failure of the guns to repel the German assault on the 9th CIB vanguard is well known, there is little first-hand evidence to explain what precisely had gone wrong. It is widely (and rightfully) assumed that Meyer's force would have been “shattered had it [9<sup>th</sup> CIB] supporting artillery been on line at 1300 hours,” which Milner describes as “one of the great unsolved mysteries of the early days in Normandy.”<sup>20</sup> The war diary of 14th Fd Regt provides scant details within this regard – that they moved positions at approximately 1100 hours<sup>21</sup> before the 9th CIB attack on Authie is well documented, but the war diary of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders very much refutes the 14th Fd Regt entry that “Btys provided continuous support and stepped up to new regt'l position,”<sup>22</sup> and both Milner and Bird report the guns as “silent.”<sup>23</sup> <sup>24</sup> While it is understandable that the guns of the 14th Fd Regt were at the maximum extent of their range during the initial action at Authie,<sup>25</sup> there was nothing to stop the FOOs from requesting fire from their Division at minimum – yet they did not. A plausible explanation for these events was the lack of FOOs deployed forward with the North Nova Scotia Highlanders,

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<sup>19</sup> North Nova Scotia Highlanders War Diary, June 1944.

<sup>20</sup> Milner, Marc, *The Guns of Bretteville: 13th Field Regiment, RCA, and the Defence of Bretteville-l'Orgueilleuse, 7-10 June 1944* (Canadian Military History 16, No. 4 (Autumn 2007)) 12.

<sup>21</sup> 14th Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery War Diary, June 1944.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Milner, Marc, *The Guns of Bretteville: 13th Field Regiment, RCA, and the Defence of Bretteville-l'Orgueilleuse, 7-10 June 1944* (Canadian Military History 16, No. 4 (Autumn 2007)) 12.

<sup>24</sup> Bird, Will, *No Retreating Footsteps: The History of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders* (Kentville, NS: The Regiment, circa 1955), 86.

<sup>25</sup> Milner reports that the maximum range of the M7 Priest was 12,500 yards, but that practical ranges were “much less”. 14 Fd Regt war diary, indicated that their new gun position was located at GR 989 815, while that of the North Novas records Authie at GR 985 713. The author calculates that the distance between these positions was approximately 10.2 km (11 150 yards).



and the failure of the vanguard FOOs to find adequate positions of observation from which they could call in and adjust fire.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the war diary of 14th Fd Regt reports that their FOOs moved back from the front line, to find a position within an anti-tank ditch at Buron, far from the battle raging at Authie.<sup>27</sup> Regardless, what is known is that Canadian guns did not fire during the critical moments during Meyer's counter-attack – and that when they finally came back online at 1800 hours,<sup>28</sup> they quickly routed the German assault.<sup>29</sup> Clearly, both the failure and the phoenix of Canadian artillery had a major impact on the success and cessation of the 25th SS-PGR Kampfgruppe's counter-attack.

While Meyer and his men had failed to push the Canadians to the sea, he prevented the Allied seizure of the airfield at Carpiquet, and it would take another month for the Allies to recapture the ground 25th SS-PGR Kampfgruppe had taken.<sup>30</sup> Meyer's "little fish" still had legs in France, but he had inflicted heavy casualties on the Canadians, and achieved one of his higher commander's objectives while German forces to his flanks floundered against the Allied onslaught. The product of limited options and initiative, Meyer's bold counter-attack against the Canadian vanguard was successful, as he utilized the tenants of mission command to seize a fleeting opportunity, where Allied artillery played a decisive role in how the battle fatefully unfolded.

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<sup>26</sup> Milner, Marc, *Stopping the Panzers: The Untold Story of D-Day* (Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 2014), 170.

<sup>27</sup> 14th Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery War Diary, June 1944.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Bird, Will, *No Retreating Footsteps: The History of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders* (Kentville, NS: The Regiment, circa 1955), 100.

<sup>30</sup> Reynolds, Michael, *Steel Inferno: I SS Panzer Corps in Normandy* (Kent: Spellmount Ltd, 1997), 70.