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**«The 'Fightin'est' Canadian General:»  
Brigadier Christopher Vokes and his Approach to Military Command,  
June 1942 – August 1943**

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**“THE ‘FIGHTIN’EST’ CANADIAN GENERAL:”  
BRIGADIER CHRISTOPHER VOKES AND HIS  
APPROACH TO MILITARY COMMAND,  
JUNE 1942 – AUGUST 1943**

By

G. Christopher Case

Thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Studies  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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## **ABSTRACT**

**“THE ‘FIGHTIN’EST’ CANADIAN GENERAL:”**

**BRIGADIER CHRISTOPHER VOKES AND HIS**

**APPROACH TO MILITARY COMMAND, JUNE 1942 – AUGUST 1943**

Gordon Christopher Case  
University of Ottawa, 2008

Supervisor:  
Professor Serge  
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This thesis evaluates the manner in which Brigadier Christopher Vokes dealt with the technical and human aspects of command while commanding the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade from 25 June 1942 until the end of the Sicilian campaign in August 1943. It seeks to promote a greater understanding of brigade-level command and to rehabilitate Vokes’s reputation as a commander, which has largely been based on certain negative personality traits. The author argues that Vokes was a successful commander because he maintained a good balance between technical skills such as planning and directing operations and his ability to understand, motivate, and lead soldiers, and because his actions were guided by a sound philosophy of command based on personal leadership and teamwork. These elements allowed Christopher Vokes to train and lead a highly effective and cohesive fighting force that defeated some of Germany’s best troops in the physically demanding environment of the Sicilian battlefield.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This analysis of Christopher Vokes's performance as the commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade during the Second World War has been produced with a great deal of assistance. Three outstanding military scholars were particularly helpful. Dr. Steve Harris, the senior historian at the Department of National Defence's Directorate of History and Heritage, helped me to choose my topic. He asked me, "Which one grabs you by the gut?" I answered, "Chris Vokes," and the rest, as they say, was history. It was also through Steve that I obtained permission to replicate certain maps found in the official history of the campaign. I was equally inspired by Lieutenant-Colonel Douglas E. Delaney (Chair of War Studies at the Royal Military College of Canada), a superb historian, fellow officer, and a friend who analyzed Major-General Bert Hoffmeister's approach to military command on the basis of examining how that officer handled both the human and technical aspects of the job. With his permission, I borrowed his analytical method, as well as several volumes of material he has gleaned from British and other archival sources. Doug also gave me access to Dr. Bill McAndrew's papers, which are held at RMC, and he offered advice on some of the infantry-specific aspects I came across in the course of writing this account. Thanks for everything, Doug.

Without a doubt, the most important member of the academic side of my team has been my thesis advisor, Dr. Serge Durflinger. A talented operational military historian in his own right, Serge was there from the very beginning. He put me in touch with Steve Harris, and it was Serge who steered me to the Research Centre at the Canadian War Museum, where I found an invaluable four-volume set of unpublished speeches and lectures delivered by Vokes after the war. Serge always challenged me to question the

evidence that I was collecting; he listened patiently when I had problems, and rejoiced with me when I made new discoveries. Most importantly, Dr. Durflinger encouraged me to develop my own thoughts. In my view, I have become a far better historian for it.

There were, of course, many others who have helped me. John Russo, a staff member at Library and Archives Canada, allowed me to photocopy much of Vokes's military personnel file. Catherine Woodcock and Lara Andrews, both archivists at the Canadian War Museum, gave me access to copies of wartime doctrinal manuals. Equally supportive was Terry Tuey at the University of Victoria's Special Collections Section, which has a treasure trove of oral history interviews with some of the main players in Chris Vokes's story. The University of British Columbia Press allowed me to use Doug Delaney's diagram of a reverse slope position. Mark Zuehlke, a popular historian who published a book on the Sicilian campaign in October 2008, provided letters and interview notes from various veterans. A surviving veteran of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, Colonel (retired) Sydney Frost, favoured me with two telephone interviews that shed valuable light on some of the lesser-known aspects of Vokes's personality. Angus Brown, the president of "The Friends of the Canadian War Museum" charity, put me in contact with Mr. John Maclean, who co-authored Vokes's memoirs. A different John Maclean, a brother officer, helped me with editing the maps.

Above all, though, I owe my family a debt that I will never be able to fully repay. For two and a half years, my wife, Natasha, and our two daughters, Annemarie and Sara, have graciously put up with my extended stays at my desk in our basement, endless nights and weekends at the archives, and frequent dinnertime discussions about Chris Vokes. This history would not exist had it not been for their love and encouragement.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	v
List of Maps .....	vi
List of Figures .....	vii
List of Abbreviations.....	viii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1 PRELUDE: SEPTEMBER 1939 – JUNE 1942.....	13
CHAPTER 2 FORGING AN EFFECTIVE TEAM.....	24
CHAPTER 3 PREPARING FOR BATTLE.....	58
CHAPTER 4 LEARNING THE ROPES .....	74
CHAPTER 5 BATTLEWORTHY .....	111
CODA: AFTER SICILY .....	148
CONCLUSION: CHRISTOPHER VOKES AND BRIGADE COMMAND .....	149
Appendices:	
Appendix 1 Canadian Army Organizations and Rank Structure, 1939 – 1945 .....	158
Appendix 2 First Canadian Army Chain of Command, 24 April 1943 .....	159
Appendix 3 The Allied Chain Of Command for Operation HUSKY.....	160
Bibliography.....	161
I. Primary Sources .....	161
II. Secondary Sources .....	164

## LIST OF MAPS

Map 1	The 2 <sup>nd</sup> Brigade's Operational Area, England, June 1942 – April 1943 .....	26
Map 2	Combined Operations Training Centre, Inverary, Scotland .....	53
Map 3	Operation HUSKY: The Allied Campaign in Sicily.....	73
Map 4	The Canadian Landings at Pachino, 10 July 1943 .....	77
Map 5	The Advance Towards Enna, 14-18 July 1943 .....	87
Map 6	The 2 <sup>nd</sup> Brigade's Area of Operations, 18 July - 06 August 1943 .....	89
Map 7	The Leonforte-Assoro Position.....	93
Map 8	The 2 <sup>nd</sup> Brigade's Assault on Leonforte, 20-22 July 1943 .....	99
Map 9	The Battle of Agira .....	115
Map 10	The 2 <sup>nd</sup> Brigade's Operations in the Salso River Valley .....	131

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	1 <sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division, June 1942 .....	15
Figure 2	2 <sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, June 1942.....	17
Figure 3	2 <sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade Headquarters, June 1942 .....	18
Figure 4	2 <sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade Task Organization, Operation HUSKY.....	64
Figure 5	A Reverse Slope Position .....	117

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>Term</b>	<b>Abbreviation</b>
Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General	AA & QMG
Brigade	Bde
Brigade Major	BM
Brigadier	Brig.
Canadian	Cdn
Canadian Military Headquarters	CMHQ
Chief of the Imperial General Staff	CIGS
Commander Royal Artillery	CRA
Commander Royal Engineers	CRE
Commanding Officer	CO
Deputy Assistant Adjutant-General	DAAG
Distinguished Service Order	DSO
Division	Div
Forward Observation Officer	FOO
Forming Up Place	FUP
General Officer Commanding	GOC
General Staff Officer, 1 <sup>st</sup> Grade	GSO 1
Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment	Hast PER
Headquarters	HQ
His Majesty's Transport	HMT
Intelligence Officer	IO
Lieutenant-Colonel	Lt.-Col.
Lieutenant-General	Lt.-Gen.
Major-General	Maj.-Gen.
Non-commissioned officer	NCO
Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry	PPCLI
Royal Canadian Regiment	RCR
Staff Captain	SC
Tactical Exercise Without Troops	TEWT

## INTRODUCTION

If the nature of Canada's senior military leadership during the Second World War is a largely unknown subject to many modern-day Canadians, it would be safe to say that the manner in which officers at the brigade level executed their command responsibilities is even more obscure. This is particularly true in the case of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division's campaign in Sicily during July and August 1943. For, while historians and authors have focused on that formation's dynamic leader, Major-General (Maj.-Gen.) Guy Simonds, the brigade commanders have remained in the shadows.<sup>1</sup> This represents a serious gap in our understanding of the Canadian Army's role in Sicily, because its major battles were fought at the brigade level. In particular, the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade won two of the most significant Canadian victories in Sicily, at Leonforte and Agira. This thesis will examine the leadership and combat performance of that brigade's commander, Christopher Vokes. It is the first full-length scholarly account to do so.

There are good reasons to study Chris Vokes's approach to brigade command. To begin with, he had a remarkable war record. A major when war broke out in September 1939, Vokes was promoted to brigadier just three years later. He led the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade for sixteen months in England, Sicily, and Italy, and won the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) in Sicily for his leadership in battle. Of the three Canadian brigade commanders

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<sup>1</sup> For some earlier treatment, see Lionel Shapiro, *They Left The Back Door Open* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1944); Douglas, W.A.B. and Brereton Greenhous, *Out of the Shadows: Canada in the Second World War* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977); Bill McAndrew, "Fire or Movement? Canadian Tactical Doctrine, Sicily – 1943," *Military Affairs*, Volume 51, No. 3 (July 1987), 140-145; Dominick Graham, *The Price of Command: A Biography of General Guy Simonds* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1993); or Lieutenant-Colonel Mike Cessford, "Hard in the Attack: The Canadian Army in Sicily and Italy, July 1943 – June 1944" (PhD dissertation, Carleton University, 1996).

that fought in Sicily, only Vokes rose to a higher combat command. In November 1943 he succeeded Simonds as the 1<sup>st</sup> Division's commander; the following year he took over the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Division in northwestern Europe, which he led until the war's end.<sup>2</sup> All this was achieved within a harsh military meritocracy, where those who could not perform were replaced. Clearly, Vokes must have been doing something right.

Despite his stellar service record, however, Chris Vokes has thus far not been subjected to critical scholarly analysis. There is nothing on him in the Library and Archives Canada database of theses, nor was his story featured in J.L. Granatstein's collective military biography, *The Generals* (1993). For several years after the war, Vokes was typically mentioned only as part of the overall landscape of the Sicilian campaign. This trend began in C.P. Stacey's *From Pachino to Ortona: The Canadian Campaign in Sicily and Italy, 1943* and Ross Munro's *Gauntlet to Overlord*, both published in 1946. J.B. Conacher, who in 1949 produced his PhD dissertation on the 1<sup>st</sup> Division's actions in Sicily, followed Stacey's lead. So, too, did G.W.L. Nicholson in his official history, *The Canadians in Italy, 1943-1945* (1955), although he did offer a certain amount of praise for Vokes's actions during the battles of Leonforte and Agira.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>2</sup> Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), Military Personnel File of Major-General Christopher Vokes, "Statement of Service, October 15<sup>th</sup> 1958," and Department of National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage (hereafter DHH), Honours and Awards Collection, "DSO citation (Brigadier Christopher Vokes), 24 July 1943."

<sup>3</sup> J.L. Granatstein, *The Generals: The Canadian Army's Senior Commanders in the Second World War* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993); Colonel C.P. Stacey, *From Pachino to Ortona: The Canadian Campaign in Sicily and Italy, 1943* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1946); Ross Munro, *Gauntlet to Overlord: The Story of the Canadian Army* (Toronto: MacMillan Company, 1946); J.B. Conacher, "Canadian Participation in the Sicilian Campaign, 1943: The Role of the First Canadian Infantry Division" (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 1949); and Lieutenant Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, Volume 2, The Canadians in Italy, 1943-1945* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1955), 109 and 134.

regimental histories of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's three infantry battalions, namely the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, and the Loyal Edmonton Regiment, are also generally silent on the activities of the brigade commander, undoubtedly because such actions were not important to the regimental story. Even Howard Mitchell, who as the commander of the mortar company within the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's Support Group was frequently in contact with Vokes in Sicily, barely talked about his brigadier in his memoirs, *My War With the Saskatoon Light Infantry* (n.d.).<sup>4</sup>

In the 1980s, historians began to explore the subject of Canada's senior military leadership during the Second World War. This included matters of personality, and Chris Vokes's larger-than-life character seemed to naturally draw attention. A barrel-chested, red-haired, walrus-mustachioed, Irish-born professional soldier, Vokes was described by Canadian war correspondent Ross Munro as "colourful" in his dispatches from Sicily.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, he could be hot-tempered; the term "abrasive" seemed to suit him. Norman Pope, who served as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's intelligence officer, said that Vokes "tended to be a bit of a bully."<sup>6</sup> His use of coarse language was legendary, as was his fondness for off-colour jokes. Indeed, old soldiers continue to tell stories about Vokes, the most famous probably being his ill-fated attempt to establish a brothel for his troops in Sicily.

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<sup>4</sup> See G.R. Stevens, *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, 1919-1957*, Volume 3 (Montreal: Southam Printing, 1958); G.R. Stevens, *A City Goes to War* (Brampton, Ontario: Charters, 1964); R.H. Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada* (Vancouver: Evergreen Press, 1969); and Howard Mitchell, *"My War" With the Saskatoon Light Infantry (M.G.), 1939-1945* (Rosetown Publishing, n.d.).

<sup>5</sup> Ross Munro, "Nazis Driven Out of Town by PPCLI," *The Globe and Mail*, 30 July 1943, Canadian War Museum (hereafter CWM), "Democracy at War: Canadian Newspapers and the Second World War" (hereafter Democracy at War), [http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/newspapers/intro\\_e.shtml](http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/newspapers/intro_e.shtml).

<sup>6</sup> University of Victoria, Reginald H.R. Roy fonds, Interview with Lieutenant-Colonel Frederick Norman Pope by Chris Bell (hereafter Pope-Bell Interview), Victoria, B.C., 10 June 1982.

Possibly because Chris Vokes was so different from many of his peers, whom C.P. Stacey described as “cold fish,”<sup>7</sup> it is his personality rather than his tactical ability that is best known. This is another reason to study Vokes’s handling of command: to redress the largely one-dimensional manner in which he has often been described. Much of this has stemmed from the nature of his memoirs, *My Story* (1985). Written by his co-author, journalist John P. Maclean, the memoirs represent the only book on the man. Maclean’s approach was to assemble mostly unedited portions of interview transcripts, which featured several tawdry stories, in chronological order. This made Vokes appear unintelligent, and the stories offended veterans who respected him as a commander.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, Canadian historians of the Sicilian campaign have often identified Chris Vokes by referring first to his personality. Daniel Dancocks’s popular history, *The D-Day Dodgers: The Canadians in Italy, 1943-1945* (1993) was one such work. Dancocks introduced Vokes as “blustery,” although he also noted that the 1<sup>st</sup> Division’s senior artillery officer, Brigadier Bruce Matthews, called Vokes “an ideal Brigade Commander [because] his approach was simplicity.”<sup>9</sup> In 1996, historian Bill McAndrew described Vokes in his *Canadians and the Italian Campaign* as “the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade’s tough-talking commander;” unlike Dancocks, he mentioned Vokes’s name only sporadically thereafter.<sup>10</sup> That same year, Michael Cessford’s doctoral dissertation on the Canadian Army’s operations in Sicily and Italy, entitled “Hard in the Attack,”

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<sup>7</sup> C.P. Stacey, *A Date with History: Memoirs of a Canadian Historian* (Ottawa: Deneau Publishers, 1982), 126.

<sup>8</sup> Maclean did not include Vokes’s swearing. For a veteran’s opinion, see C. Sydney Frost, *Once a Patricia* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing Limited, 1988), 532.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel G. Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers: The Canadians in Italy, 1943-1945* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991), 21 and 69.

<sup>10</sup> Bill McAndrew, *Canadians and the Italian Campaign, 1943-1945* (Montreal: Éditions Art Global Inc., 1996), 35-36.

referred to Brigadier Vokes as “forceful and dynamic.”<sup>11</sup> Six years later, in J.L. Granatstein’s *Canada’s Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (2002), he was called “the tough-talking, but not always tough Chris Vokes” in order to distinguish him from his fellow brigadiers, Howard Graham of the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade (“a lawyer”) and Howard Penhale of the 3<sup>rd</sup> (“a portly, slow-moving regular force officer”).<sup>12</sup> In 2005, historian Douglas E. Delaney introduced Vokes as being “gruff and hot-tempered” in his study of military command, *Hoffmeister: The Soldier’s General*, although - like Dancocks – he did mention some of Vokes’s positive attributes, such as his talent for training soldiers.<sup>13</sup>

The work of Dancocks and Delaney in particular suggest that there was more to Chris Vokes than is generally known. Indeed, Vokes’s record shows that he did not have to resort to bluster to make up for a lack of talent: that was just his nature. And while he may not have been the intellectual type, he was far from unintelligent. Vokes passed Britain’s Staff College entrance exam on his first attempt in 1933, a feat that several of his peers failed to replicate.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, his post-war writing on leadership and tactics reveal him to have been a perceptive officer with an immensely practical approach to soldiering.<sup>15</sup> Equally important, Brigadier Vokes was respected professionally by several of his contemporaries. Despite the fact that he was not the senior brigadier in terms of time in rank, Maj.-Gen. Guy Simonds recommended that Vokes succeed him as the 1<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cessford, “Hard in the Attack,” 163.

<sup>12</sup> J.L. Granatstein, *Canada’s Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 219.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas E. Delaney, *The Soldiers’ General: Bert Hoffmeister at War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005), 40-41.

<sup>14</sup> LAC, Military Personnel File of Major-General Christopher Vokes, “Annual Confidential Report, 9 December 1933.” It took one of Vokes’s friends, Harry Foster, five attempts. Tony Foster, *Meeting of Generals* (Toronto: Methuen, 1986), 76-87.

<sup>15</sup> See especially CWM, Rare Books Collection, C. Vokes, *Unpublished Lectures and Speeches*, Volumes 1-4, n.p., n.d.

Canadian Infantry Division's commander, a decision that represented a significant vote of confidence given Simonds's well-deserved reputation for ruthless efficiency in dealing with subordinates.<sup>16</sup> Bert Hoffmeister, a highly talented officer who led the Seaforth Highlanders for most of the period during which Vokes commanded the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade (and subsequently rose to the rank of major-general), was similarly impressed, remarking that, "[Vokes] was a good trainer [who] demanded a pretty high standard in the brigade."<sup>17</sup> And while comments from soldiers at the junior rank levels are less common, it appears that several of Vokes's men admired him too. One such veteran, Richard Allen Parker, later said that, "one of the people that I...would go to hell with was Chris Vokes," a comment which speaks volumes about Vokes's ability to inspire ordinary soldiers.<sup>18</sup>

The contradictions between the manner in which Brigadier Vokes has typically been portrayed and his actual record should provoke the curiosity of historians. Was Vokes's colourful personality so important a factor that it affected his performance as a commander? If it was, why did his superiors allow him to remain in command? Or did they recognize that Vokes displayed certain abilities that explained not only his and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's operational successes, but also the reasons for which he earned the respect of his peers and subordinates? If so, what were these abilities, and how did he apply them? Did Vokes merely copy what others were doing, or were some of his methods the result of his own innovation? Above all, did he have an overarching philosophy of

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<sup>16</sup> Graham, *The Price of Command*, 101, and Chris Vokes with John P. Maclean, *Vokes: My Story* (Ottawa: Gallery Books, 1985), 120-121.

<sup>17</sup> Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, 52.

<sup>18</sup> Mr. Parker had been charged with being absent without leave. After listening to his excuse that the reason he was late in returning to duty was because he had met a woman, Vokes demoted him to private, but restored his former rank later that day. Veterans Affairs Canada, "Canada Remembers – Testimony of Richard Allen Parker," at <http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers>.

command that has thus far escaped notice? That such questions remain unanswered is a good reason to re-evaluate Chris Vokes's performance as a military commander.

If carrying out the responsibilities of command is one of the most complex and demanding tasks a military officer can undertake, studying the manner in which someone from the past dealt with the job is equally difficult for one must find an effective means of analysis that captures the essence of what was involved. How should such a project be pursued? One could follow the example of the classic military theorists Carl von Clausewitz and Baron Antoine Henri de Jomini by identifying the most desirable qualities that a commander should have. Such a simplistic approach, though, has a basic flaw: it can lead to the creation of a highly idealized standard that no human being could ever hope to fully match. Moreover, are some qualities more important than others? Clausewitz believed that moral and physical courage took precedence, while Jomini focused on determination, but who is to say who is correct?<sup>19</sup> One could spend more time defending one's choice of character traits than on analyzing military command.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Bill McAndrew and Mike Cessford argued that tactical doctrine shaped the manner in which Canada's generals saw their battlefields, and that the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division's officers fought in Sicily as they had trained in England because they lacked sufficient operational experience to do otherwise.<sup>20</sup> The available evidence would tend to support such a conclusion to a certain extent. But as historian Dominick Graham pointed out in his biography of Guy Simonds, doctrine is not

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<sup>19</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 116-129. Baron Antoine de Jomini, *The Art of War* (London: Greenhill Books, 1992), 56-58.

<sup>20</sup> These views are clearly expressed throughout McAndrew's article, "Fire or Movement?," and Cessford's PhD thesis, "Hard in the Attack."

a fixed set of ideas, but rather an evolving response to factors such as changes in enemy tactics or the introduction of new technology.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, doctrine does not account for individual differences in command style. Such are the weaknesses of relying solely on doctrinal theory as a means of analyzing how humans deal with military command.

Some analysts have sought to explain the *nature* of command. One such scholar, psychologist Peter Bradley, has postulated that *leadership* (which he defined as “a position or an action involved in motivating people”) and *management* (“goal-directed behaviour that includes planning, directing, or controlling”) are subsets of *command*, and that a commander exercises command by alternatively leading and managing.<sup>22</sup> Defence scientists Dr. Ross Pigeau and Carol McCann, on the other hand, have decried definitions as being too imprecise. Instead, they developed a complex behavioral model to explain the “concept” of command, which they described as “an abstract three-dimensional space formed by the axes of Competency, Authority and Responsibility.”<sup>23</sup> Bradley is right that military commanders execute both leadership and management functions, and Pigeau and McCann make a valid point regarding the imprecision of definitions. Concepts such as command and leadership can mean many things to different people; it is a matter of perspective. Still, behavioural models make unsatisfactory tools with which to analyze *how* and *why* a commander did what he did, largely because they imply predictability and repeatability of behaviour. Human beings are typically *unpredictable*, and because they

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<sup>21</sup> Graham, *The Price of Command*, 282.

<sup>22</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Bradley, “Distinguishing the Concepts of Command, Leadership and Management,” Bernd Horn and Stephen Harris, *Generalship and the Art of the Admiral: Perspectives on Canadian Senior Military Leadership* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell, 2001), 105.

<sup>23</sup> Ross Pigeau and Carol McCann, “What is a Commander?,” Horn and Harris, *Generalship and the Art of the Admiral*, 83.

have unique identities, no two persons do everything precisely the same way. Theoretical models cannot account for such basic human characteristics, a fact that historian Martin van Creveld likely had in mind when he described command as simply “a function that has to be exercised, more or less continually, if the army is to exist and to operate.”<sup>24</sup>

What seems clear from all of this, as military historian Ronald G. Haycock has astutely noted, is that “the concept of generalship is vague enough to leave much room for debate.”<sup>25</sup> What should not be debatable, though, is that command has two equally important aspects. First and foremost, it is a very *human* activity. Armed forces are more than just a collection of weapons systems: they are made up of people, some of whom serve in leadership roles, while most are followers. British Field Marshal Sir Bernard Law Montgomery, a highly successful battlefield commander who studied human nature as carefully as he did strategy and tactics, recognized this reality when he wrote that his own doctrine of command could be summed up in one word – leadership – which he defined as “the capacity and the will to rally men and women to a common purpose, and the character which inspires confidence.” The second important aspect of command involves what Montgomery loosely described as “technical skills,” or the ability to plan, give clear orders, and direct battles.<sup>26</sup> Such skills represent the “tools of the trade,” for they are what commanders use in order to employ their human and material resources to accomplish their mission in the most effective and efficient manner.

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<sup>24</sup> Martin van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 5.

<sup>25</sup> Ronald G. Haycock, “Sir Sam Hughes: A Canadian General – Why Bother!”, Horn and Harris, *Generalship and the Art of the Admiral*, 28.

<sup>26</sup> Viscount (Field Marshal) Montgomery of Alamein, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal Montgomery* (London: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1958), 80. See also Montgomery, *The Path to Leadership* (London: Fontana Books, 1963), and his *Military Leadership* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946).

It would seem reasonable to say that striking a good balance between human and technical skills is largely why command is so difficult a task. Indeed, Field Marshal Montgomery (who understood the business of command exceedingly well) believed that a commander had to have talent in *both* areas in order to be truly successful in battle.<sup>27</sup> The reason he felt this way, as Douglas Delaney has pointed out, is disarmingly simple:

What can be loosely termed the human and technical dimensions of command are not only inter-related, they are inter-dependent. All the charm and influence in the world, for example, cannot guarantee the success of a poorly conceived and inadequately managed plan. Conversely, even the most brilliant of plans flounders if not executed by enthusiastic, willing and well-trained subordinates...<sup>28</sup>

The dual nature of command forms an excellent basis from which to analyze a commander's performance, because it allows one to address the problem in a *balanced* fashion. Doug Delaney pioneered this methodology in his work, *The Soldiers' General*: it is equally useful in this study of Chris Vokes's approach to command. On the human side, one can explore the manner in which he dealt with his superiors and subordinates, and make a reasoned assessment as to whether Vokes's performance in this area helped or hindered his ability to command. His technical abilities can also be scrutinized. Was there anything unique about Vokes's methods, or were they similar to those used by others? If he was good at training men, what techniques did he use? How did Brigadier Vokes plan operations and give orders, and was he better at such tasks than has thus far been presumed? Did Vokes show tactical ability: could he "read" a battle and adjust his plan accordingly? Did he learn from his mistakes? By showing how Vokes dealt with such matters, one can produce a reasonably balanced interpretation of his performance.

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<sup>27</sup> Montgomery, *The Path to Leadership*, 22-23.

<sup>28</sup> Douglas E. Delaney, "Looking Back on Canadian Generalship in the Second World War," *Canadian Army Journal*, Volume 7.1 (Spring 2004), 13-22.

Using this balanced methodology, this thesis will examine how Chris Vokes approached the task of leading the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, from the moment he assumed command on 25 June 1942 until the end of the Sicilian campaign in August 1943. In Chapter 1, the reader will be provided with some necessary background information that summarizes how Vokes's appointment to a brigade command came to pass. Chapter 2 describes the first ten months of Vokes's tenure – that is, up to the end of April 1943 – during which time he demonstrated his ability to forge a cohesive fighting team through personal leadership, promoting teamwork at all levels of command, good planning and organizational skills, and a knack for training soldiers. Chapter 3 describes the brigade's preparations for Sicily, while Chapters 4 and 5 examine Brigadier Vokes's performance in combat. On the technical side, Vokes's actions show that he was a bold, hard-driving commander with a good ability to use ground, make tactical decisions, and learn from his mistakes. At the same time, Vokes took considerable risks to provide personal leadership, and despite the stresses of combat he did not overlook the human element. All this will set the existing historiography on its head, for it will demonstrate that Chris Vokes did indeed possess a sound philosophy of command and that, despite his faults, he displayed the necessary technical and human skills to effectively command an infantry brigade in battle. Indeed, Brigadier Vokes compared very favourably with his peers in the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division, a fact that convinced his division commander, Maj.-Gen. Guy Simonds, to recommend that Vokes succeed him in November 1943.

A wide variety of primary and secondary sources have been consulted in the writing of this thesis. Much of this research has centred on archival material such as the divisional, brigade, and regimental war diaries, after-action reports, combat narratives,

translated German documents, personal papers, and other contemporary records. The secondary sources include full-length books, official and regimental histories, as well as scholarly articles and theses. All of these written records offer insights into how Vokes handled the technical side of command. In order to examine his human skills, however, memoirs, diaries, and interviews with surviving veterans are equally important. Despite the challenges associated with the accuracy of memory that this type of evidence presents for the historian, there is great value in studying such accounts. Individual recollections convey perceptions related to the subtleties of the human side of command, and they can help people who lack similar experience get a better sense of how soldiers related to each other. Official documents alone cannot promote an understanding of this vital element.

Ultimately, this examination of Christopher Vokes's approach to command is intended to achieve two broad, but closely related objectives. Firstly, historians must better understand the immense challenges associated with commanding an infantry brigade in wartime if they are to more fully appreciate how brigade-level battles like Leonforte and Agira were conducted. The story of Chris Vokes and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade will provide a good example of how one individual approached such a demanding task. Secondly, Vokes's reputation as a leader and a military commander, both on and off the battlefield, needs to be rehabilitated. Canadians deserve to have a balanced interpretation of Vokes's human and technical abilities, rather than the almost cartoon-like caricature for which he is often remembered. Achieving these goals will have great historical and practical value, for both average Canadians and especially for the men and women of Canada's armed forces who have dedicated themselves to the profession of arms.

## CHAPTER 1

### PRELUDE: SEPTEMBER 1939 – JUNE 1942

*Lt.-Col Vokes is, without question, the outstanding  
Lt.-Col. in the Division.*

Maj.-Gen. George R. Pearkes, GOC 1 Cdn Inf Div, May 1942<sup>1</sup>

Before examining how Christopher Vokes dealt with the human and technical challenges of commanding the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, one must first set the stage by providing some background information. This brief summary will show that Vokes's appointment resulted from two complementary factors. Firstly, he proved himself worthy to the right people, as the above quotation suggests; and secondly, a combination of converging circumstances created a pressing need for his services. So began a fruitful association between commander and formation that would last for sixteen months.

By June of 1942, the Second World War was well into its third year. Overall, the military situation was dismal for the Allies despite the fact that the Soviet Union and the United States had both entered the war on the Allied side. Most of Europe lay under the Nazi jackboot. In the Soviet Union and in North Africa, German and Italian armies were advancing, while the Japanese had seized control of much of Asia and the south-central Pacific. Aside from the Battles of Britain and Midway, Allied successes had been few. In England, where the threat of a German invasion had greatly diminished since the dark days of 1940, Canada's army was simultaneously training for battle and increasing in strength. Of the two activities, its rate of growth was the more remarkable. From a pre-

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<sup>1</sup> LAC, MG 30, Series E157, H.D.G. Crerar Papers (hereafter Crerar Papers), Vol. 5, File GOC 6-1-1, "Appointments and Promotions Officers, February 1942 to January 1943," Pearkes to Crerar, (undated) May 1942.

war professional core of just 455 officers and 3,714 men (the Permanent Force), an expeditionary force of some 226,000 men had been raised.<sup>2</sup> By 6 April 1942, when the First Canadian Army was formed, three infantry divisions, an independent tank brigade, and a corps headquarters (I Canadian), were overseas. Over the course of the next nine months, two armoured divisions, a second independent tank brigade, and II Canadian Corps Headquarters joined them. Commanded initially by Lieutenant-General (Lt.-Gen.) A.G.L. "Andy" McNaughton, and then by General H.D.G. "Harry" Crerar, the First Canadian Army constituted the largest field formation that Canada has ever created.<sup>3</sup> In the early summer of 1942, though, it was a force that had yet to see combat.

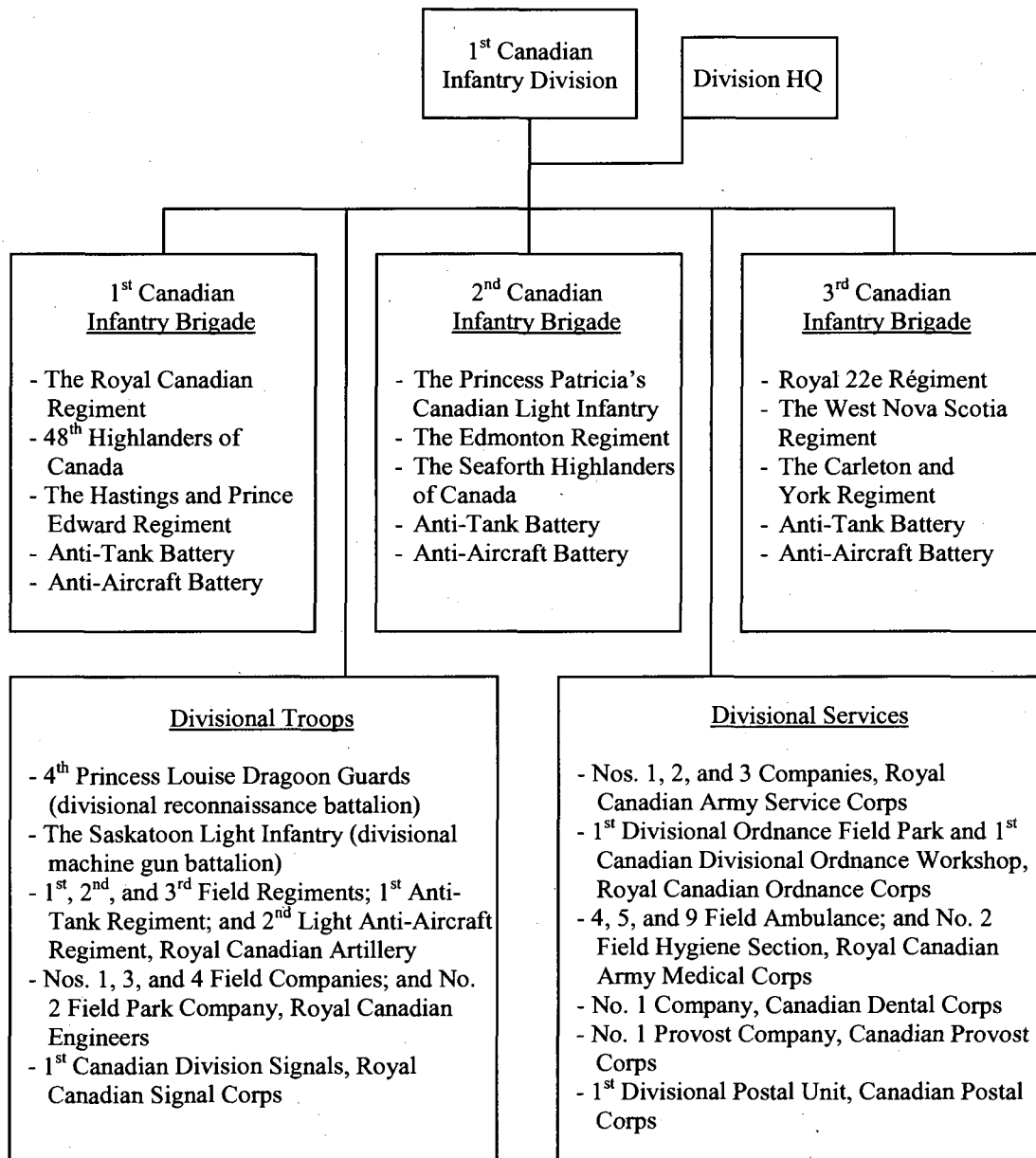
The 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division was the most senior of these formations, having begun its deployment to England in December 1939 just four months after its mobilization. Comprising three infantry brigades, several artillery, engineer, signals, medical, provost, and service corps units, and eventually numbering 926 officers and 17,363 men (see Figure 1), it contained the bulk of the Permanent Force units.<sup>4</sup> This gave the division a far greater representation of Permanent Force soldiers than was the case for the rest of Canada's overseas Army, although a large number of Militia and civilian volunteer soldiers were also to be found within its ranks.

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<sup>2</sup> C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men, and Government: The War Policies of Canada, 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1970), 45. Prime Minister Mackenzie King considered a large overseas army commitment to be politically dangerous, fearing that a conscription crisis similar to that of the First World War would divide Canada along linguistic and cultural lines. A less severe conscription crisis did materialize in late 1944, caused by a higher than expected casualty rate of infantrymen and a shortage of trained replacements.

<sup>3</sup> John R. Grodzinski, *Operational Handbook for the First Canadian Army, 1944-1945: Formation Organization, Staff Technique and Administration* (Kingston: The Regimental Historian, 1998), 7-9.

<sup>4</sup> The figure quoted is as of 31 May 1945. DHH, Major R.B. Oglesby, *Report No. 57, Historical Section (G.S.) Army Headquarters*, "A Summary of Major Changes in Army Organization, 1939-1945," 22 December 1952, Appendix "C", 59.



**Notes:**

1. Officers at the divisional level, such as the Commander Royal Artillery (CRA), commanded the divisional troops and services units. Elements of these units were frequently placed in support of the infantry brigades on the basis of standard affiliations. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's affiliated units included 3 Field Regiment, 90 Anti-Tank Battery, 3 Field Company (RCE), and 5 Field Ambulance.
2. The brigade anti-tank and anti-aircraft batteries were detached sub-units of the 1<sup>st</sup> Anti-Tank Regiment and 2<sup>nd</sup> Anti-Aircraft Regiments, respectively.

**References:** Grodzinski, *Operational Handbook for the First Canadian Army*, and DHH, Ogelsby, *Army Historical Report No. 57*.

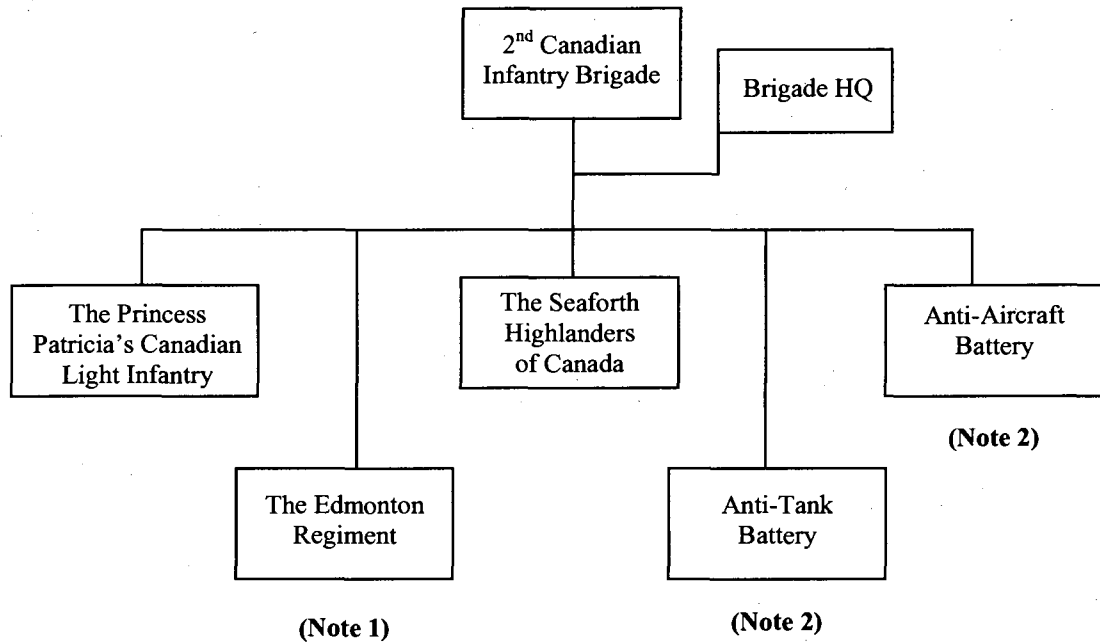
**Figure 1 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division, June 1942**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, which Chris Vokes would later command, had an established strength of roughly 2,650 officers and men. As shown at Figure 2, its main components were three infantry battalions – the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry (the PPCLI, a Permanent Force unit) and two militia units, Vancouver’s Seaforth Highlanders of Canada and the Edmonton Regiment – and a brigade headquarters.<sup>5</sup> Commanded by a lieutenant-colonel (Lt.-Col), each battalion ultimately comprised 38 officers and 812 men and had four rifle companies, a support company with anti-tank gun, 3-inch mortar, carrier, and pioneer platoons, and a headquarters company that provided integral command, communications, and logistic support. The brigade headquarters, depicted at Figure 3, enabled the brigadier to plan and control operations. Under the direction of the brigade major (the BM was the formation’s senior operations officer), the staff was divided into two main groups. The “G” Branch (general staff) dealt with all operational and training matters, while the “A and Q” Branch, led by the staff captain (also known by the acronym “SC”), dealt with personnel issues (adjutant-general or “A” concerns) and logistics, which were quartermaster or “Q” matters. The headquarters also had a small clerical section, a signals section that provided radio and line communications, and a defence platoon for local security.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The reason that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade contained all western Canadian units was because the 1<sup>st</sup> Division had been organized on a regional basis. Granatstein, *Canada’s Army*, 178-179. The Edmonton Regiment’s name was changed to the “Loyal Edmonton Regiment” in July 1943, although the unit did not learn of this honour until the following October. See Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, footnote to p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> DHH, Oglesby, *Army Headquarters Historical Report No. 57*, Appendix “A”, 58, and The War Office (UK), *Infantry Brigade Headquarters Standing Orders* (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1940). Military organizations changed frequently during the war. For example, the headquarters defence platoon was eliminated in May 1943, and re-created in 1944. The infantry battalion organization described above is as of May 1943. For an overview of the Army’s organizational hierarchy, see Appendix 1.

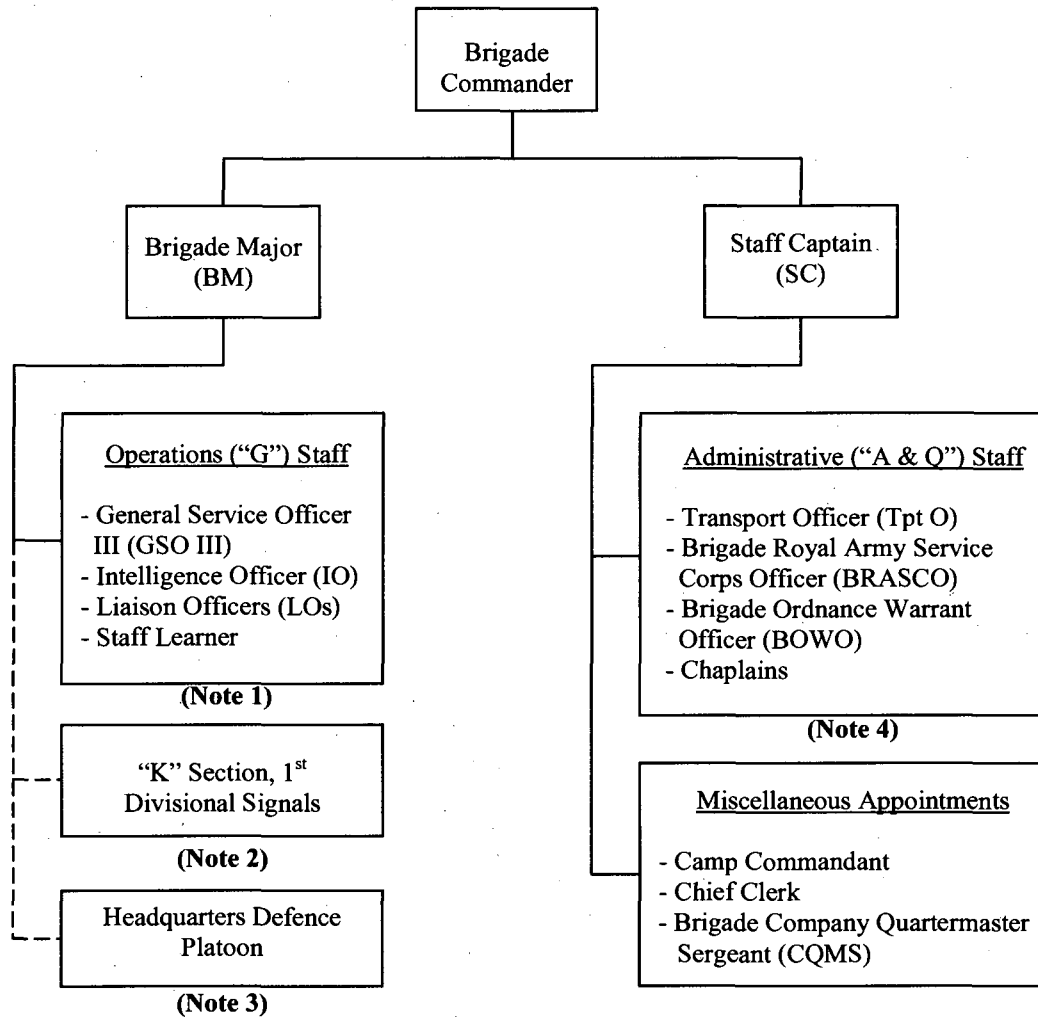


**Notes:**

1. The Edmonton Regiment was officially renamed "The Loyal Edmonton Regiment" in July 1943, although the unit did not learn of it until the following October in Italy.
2. The brigade anti-tank and anti-aircraft batteries were detached sub-units of the 1<sup>st</sup> Anti-Tank Regiment and 2<sup>nd</sup> Anti-Aircraft Regiments, respectively. These organizations were removed from the Brigade's war establishment in January 1943. In May 1943, a brigade support group replaced them. This new organization was a detached sub-unit of the divisional machine gun battalion, the Saskatoon Light Infantry, which was re-organized into a divisional support battalion. The Brigade Support Group consisted of a mortar company, equipped with 4.2 inch mortars; a medium machine gun company, comprising three platoons of Vickers machine guns; and an anti-aircraft company, which had four platoons equipped with 20 mm Oerlikon light anti-aircraft guns. Anti-tank support continued to be provided by the 1<sup>st</sup> Anti-Tank Regiment, specifically 90<sup>th</sup> Anti-Tank Battery, on the basis of a standard affiliation.

**References:** Grodzinski, *Operational Handbook for the First Canadian Army*, and DHH, Ogelsby, *Army Historical Report No. 57*.

**Figure 2 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, June 1942**



**Notes:**

1. The GSO III was a captain; he ran the brigade's command post in the BM's absence. The IO was either a captain or a lieutenant. There were three liaison officers (one captain and two lieutenants), provided by the infantry battalions. The staff learner was posted from one of the units to learn staff duties.
2. The signals section comprised two officers and 64 men. Its commander was the Brigade Signals Officer.
3. The headquarters defence platoon of 27 soldiers was a detachment of the Lorne Scottish Regiment. It was removed from the brigade's establishment in May 1943, and re-established in February 1944.
4. The Tpt O was a captain provided by a brigade unit. The BRASCO, also a captain, looked after supply matters, while the BOWO helped the SC. The three chaplains were assigned to brigade units.

*References:* Grodzinski, *Operational Handbook for the First Canadian Army*, and The War Office, *Infantry Brigade Headquarters Standing Orders*.

**Figure 3 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade Headquarters, June 1942**

Despite the leavening of regulars, when the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade arrived in England it was really a new formation that required extensive equipping and training in order to be ready for combat. Such was the situation throughout the Canadian Army.<sup>7</sup> Training had begun immediately, but effective training depended on getting modern equipment, which was in very short supply in the early days of the war. So, too, were well-qualified and talented officers to plan and supervise training activities. Initially, First World War veterans occupied many of the Army's senior command and staff appointments. George Pearkes, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's first wartime commander, was one of these, as was his successor, Arthur E. Potts. It was not an ideal situation, as tactical methods had changed greatly since 1918. However, such officers were all that Canada had available at the time, and someone had to fill these jobs until younger and more vigorous men could be found.<sup>8</sup>

By 1942, a number of senior British officers were well aware of the inadequacies of some of their Canadian counterparts. Of these, the opinions of the commander of Southeastern Command, then-Lt.-Gen. Bernard Law Montgomery, were particularly significant because at the time the Canadians were serving under his command. It is worth noting that, for the most part, he was very pleased by what he found in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade. In a letter he sent on 1 March 1942 to Lt.-Gen. Harry Crerar, then commanding I Canadian Corps, Montgomery described it as "an interesting Brigade. Seaforths have the best officers. PPCLI have the best NCOs (non-commissioned officers). Edmontons

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<sup>7</sup> See Stacey, *Arms, Men, and Government*, on equipment issues during the early war years. For matters concerning Canadian Army training, see especially Stacey, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, Volume 1, Six Years of War: The Army in Canada, Britain, and the Pacific* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1956), 230-253 and John A. English, *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign: A Study of Failure in High Command* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 107-123.

<sup>8</sup> Granatstein, *The Generals*, 28-31.

have the best men. A really high class Brigadier (sic) would make this Brigade the best in all the armies of the Empire.”<sup>9</sup> Given Montgomery’s keen eye for inefficiency this was high praise indeed, but the letter contained a note of sarcasm, for the brigade’s commander, Arthur Potts, was definitely not “high class.” Bert Hoffmeister, a Seaforth major then temporarily serving as a “G” Staff Learner in 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade headquarters, thought that Brigadier Potts was more interested in social events than in serious preparation for combat – or so his actions seemed to indicate. Prior to Montgomery’s inspection, for example, Hoffmeister had found it necessary to brief his superior on the brigade’s dispositions, a clear indication that Potts was seriously out of touch with his formation’s activities.<sup>10</sup> For his part, General Montgomery was not deceived. He told Crerar that Potts was “not fit to command and train an [Infantry Brigade] in 1942,” and that “a young, virile and knowledgeable Brigadier (sic)” should replace him.<sup>11</sup>

By this time, such officers were starting to emerge in the Canadian Army. Three years of rapid expansion had created opportunities for advancement for talented young officers that would never have been available to them in peacetime.<sup>12</sup> One of these men was Christopher Vokes. Born in Armagh, Ireland on April 13 1904, Vokes was the eldest son of a British soldier who had remained in Canada after serving on attached duty in

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<sup>9</sup> LAC, Crerar Papers, Vol. 2, Montgomery to Crerar, “Notes on Inf Bde of Canadian Corps – No. 5 – 28 Feb 1942 – 2 Inf Bde, 1 March 1942.” This assessment was made at the request of General Crerar, who as the newly appointed commander of I Canadian Corps had sought Montgomery’s views on the state of his formations.

<sup>10</sup> Delaney, *The Soldiers’ General*, 33. Norman Pope, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade’s Intelligence Officer, felt the same way. University of Victoria, Pope-Bell Interview, 10 June 1982.

<sup>11</sup> LAC, Crerar Papers, Vol. 2, Montgomery to Crerar, “Notes on Inf Bde of Canadian Corps – No. 5 – 28 Feb 1942 – 2 Inf Bde, 1 March 1942.”

<sup>12</sup> Other such officers were Guy Simonds and Harry Foster, who finished the war as a lieutenant-general and major-general respectively. The same experience was true for the British Army. See Anthony Clayton, *The British Officer: Leading the Army from 1660 to the Present* (Toronto: Pearson Education Ltd., 2006), 164-165.

Kingston, Ontario. In 1921 Chris Vokes entered the Royal Military College, graduating in 1925 as a lieutenant in the Royal Canadian Engineers. For the next fourteen years Vokes served in a variety of posts; most notably, he was one of two Canadian officers selected to attend the British Army Staff College at Camberley, England, for the 1934-1936 session. When the war broke out in 1939, Vokes was serving as a major at National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa. Determined not to miss his chance for action, he prevailed upon an old friend, Howard Penhale, to convince then-Brigadier Harry Crerar to request his services as a member of the Deputy Assistant Adjutant-General (DAAG) branch at Canadian Military Headquarters (CMHQ), which was then being established in London, England. After obtaining his superior's approval, Vokes left his wife and seven-year old son in Ottawa and reported for duty at CMHQ on 18 December 1939.<sup>13</sup>

Chris Vokes's abilities quickly drew favourable notice, for on 15 May 1940 he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant-colonel.<sup>14</sup> That September, he was transferred to the headquarters of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division, where for the next twenty-one months he filled two key staff positions, first as that formation's chief administrative officer (Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General, or AA & QMG), and then as its senior operations officer (General Staff Officer 1, or GSO 1). From 7 October to 14 November 1941, Vokes was also placed in temporary command of the PPCLI while that unit's commander, Lt.-Col. R.A. Lindsay, was attending a course.<sup>15</sup> In all these roles

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<sup>13</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 4-64, and LAC, Military Personnel File of Major-General Christopher Vokes, "Statement of Service, October 15<sup>th</sup> 1958."

<sup>14</sup> Paul Dickson credits Crerar with staffing CMHQ with "competent professionals" like Chris Vokes. Paul Douglas Dickson, *A Thoroughly Canadian General: A Biography of General H.G.G. Crerar* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 132.

<sup>15</sup> LAC, Military Personnel File of Major-General Christopher Vokes, "Statement of Service, October 15<sup>th</sup> 1958."

Vokes had greatly impressed his divisional commander, Maj.-Gen. George Pearkes, who repeatedly told Lt.-Gen. Crerar that Vokes was the division's top priority for promotion.<sup>16</sup> In May 1942, apparently in response to an inquiry from Crerar, Pearkes wrote that Vokes "[had] proved his powers of [command] as a [battalion commander]," that he "work[ed] well under pressure," and that he "would make an ideal Brigade Commander, capable of training and fighting his command."<sup>17</sup> Crerar agreed, and on 5 June he put Lt.-Col. Vokes "at the top of [his] list" for a brigade command.<sup>18</sup> Others also thought highly of Vokes during this time. George Kitching, who served on the 1<sup>st</sup> Division's staff in 1941 as a captain, remembered Vokes and Lt.-Col. Rod Keller (then the GSO 1) as "physically strong, first-class officers, good teachers, rough and yet soft hearted...They were a wonderful pair to work for and they ran a happy HQ."<sup>19</sup>

It is possible that Crerar's inquiry about Vokes in early May 1942 was linked to a command problem that he had to resolve after Exercise BEAVER III, a Canadian corps-level anti-invasion exercise that had ended on 24 April.<sup>20</sup> Such activities were more than just a test of how well military organizations dealt with tactical problems. They also gave senior officers an opportunity to measure their subordinates' ability to command, being in essence practical examinations that a commander must pass if he was to lead his troops into battle. General Montgomery, who had observed this exercise, believed that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's commander, Arthur Potts, had failed his test during BEAVER III. The day

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<sup>16</sup> LAC, MG 30, E133, Series III, General A.G.L. McNaughton Papers (hereafter McNaughton Papers), Volume 224, File 1/88/2 (G), "Recommended Lists, 13 November 1941," and LAC, Crerar Papers, Vol. 5, File GOC 6-1-1, "Appointments and Promotions Officers, February 1942 to January 1943," Pearkes to Crerar, 26 Feb 42.

<sup>17</sup> LAC, Crerar Papers, Vol. 5, Pearkes to Crerar, (undated) May 1942.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., "Recommendations for Promotion, Officers, 1 Cdn Corps, 5 June 1942."

<sup>19</sup> Kitching, *Mud and Green Fields*, 101-102.

<sup>20</sup> Stacey, *Six Years of War*, 243.

after the exercise ended, Montgomery wrote to Crerar and told him that in his view Potts “made a very poor showing in this mobile operation.” In the same letter, he restated his opinion that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade’s commander was “too old, and too set and rigid in [his] ways, to command [an Infantry Brigade] in modern war,” and concluded by strongly recommending that Potts be sent back to Canada.<sup>21</sup> General Crerar concurred with Montgomery’s assessment. On 19 May, Arthur Potts was promoted to the rank of major-general – a blatant act of Canadian Army politics that disgusted Montgomery – and posted to British Columbia as the commander of the 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Division, a home-defence formation that was highly unlikely to ever see combat.<sup>22</sup>

The relief of Arthur Potts as the commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade thus created a vacancy for a brigadier in the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division. Fortunately for Generals Crerar and Pearkes, a suitable officer to replace Potts was immediately available from within the formation to fill this important command position. Crerar’s command problem was thus easily resolved, for he simply followed through on his own recommendation to put Chris Vokes into a brigade command. All in all, it was a matter of the right man being in the right place and at the right time. Thus it was that, on 24 June 1942, Lt.-Col. Christopher Vokes was promoted to the rank of brigadier and appointed as the new commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade.<sup>23</sup> He was just 38 years of age.

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<sup>21</sup> LAC, Crerar Papers, Vol. 2, Montgomery to Crerar, “Beaver III, Notes on Commanders, 25 April 1942.”

<sup>22</sup> In the latter half of 1942, several other senior Canadian officers who had served in the First World War (including Maj.-Gen. George Pearkes) were also found wanting. They, too, were sent back to Canada. See Granatstein, *The Generals*, 28-52.

<sup>23</sup> DHH, Major C.P. Stacey, *Report No. 78, Historical Officer, Canadian Military Headquarters*, “Situation of the Canadian Military Forces in the United Kingdom, Summer 1942: I.”, 31 July 1942, 4-5. In order to gain an appreciation of how Brigadier Vokes fit into the First Canadian Army’s chain of command, see Appendix 2.

## CHAPTER 2

### FORGING AN EFFECTIVE TEAM

*One thing under Chris Vokes, you developed teamwork. And if you [didn't], then you were out.*

Captain F.N. Pope, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade Intelligence Officer<sup>1</sup>

Christopher Vokes arrived at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's headquarters, located in Brighton on England's southeastern coast, at noon on 25 June 1942.<sup>2</sup> Like any new commander, he had much to learn in a very short period of time. Almost immediately, Vokes had to familiarize himself with the brigade's organization and operational tasks, and work on training his troops to the highest possible standard. At the same time, he needed to get a sense of how the people under his command – especially his subordinate commanders – performed under all manner of circumstances, and to determine the most effective ways to motivate them to excel. To accomplish all this Vokes led from the front, employed his considerable planning and organizational abilities, and as Captain Pope noted, he demanded a high level of teamwork from every member of the brigade. It was through these methods that, from June 1942 to April 1943, Brigadier Vokes first proved to his subordinates and superiors alike that he possessed both the military and human skills to serve as an efficient and hard-driving infantry brigade commander.

Given the number and complexity of the technical and human-related matters with which Vokes had to contend as a new commander, it should not be surprising that he prioritized his efforts in order to deal with them effectively. Having just served as the 1<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> University of Victoria, Pope-Bell Interview, 10 June 1982.

<sup>2</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14072, 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade (hereafter 2 CIB) War Diary, 25 June 1942.

Canadian Division's GSO 1 he had the advantage of knowing the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's training plan, a fortuitous thing because the nature of the Army's training was undergoing considerable change. Up until the end of 1941, the emphasis had been on defensive operations to counter a possible German invasion; from January 1942 onward, the focus shifted to the offensive. At about the same time, new training methods came into vogue that promoted realism and demanded absolute physical fitness from all ranks. Two main innovations emerged. The first, known as "battle drill," reduced section and platoon tactics to a standard set of actions. The second was called "battle drill training." This technique incorporated battle drill with "battle inoculation," which included the use of live ammunition during field exercises.<sup>3</sup> For many Canadian soldiers, who by 1942 were bored with their repetitive and unimaginative training, these were welcome changes. Strome Galloway, then a captain with The Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR) in the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, described battle drill training as "the best thing that could have happened...our 'fighting efficiency' increased by leaps and bounds."<sup>4</sup>

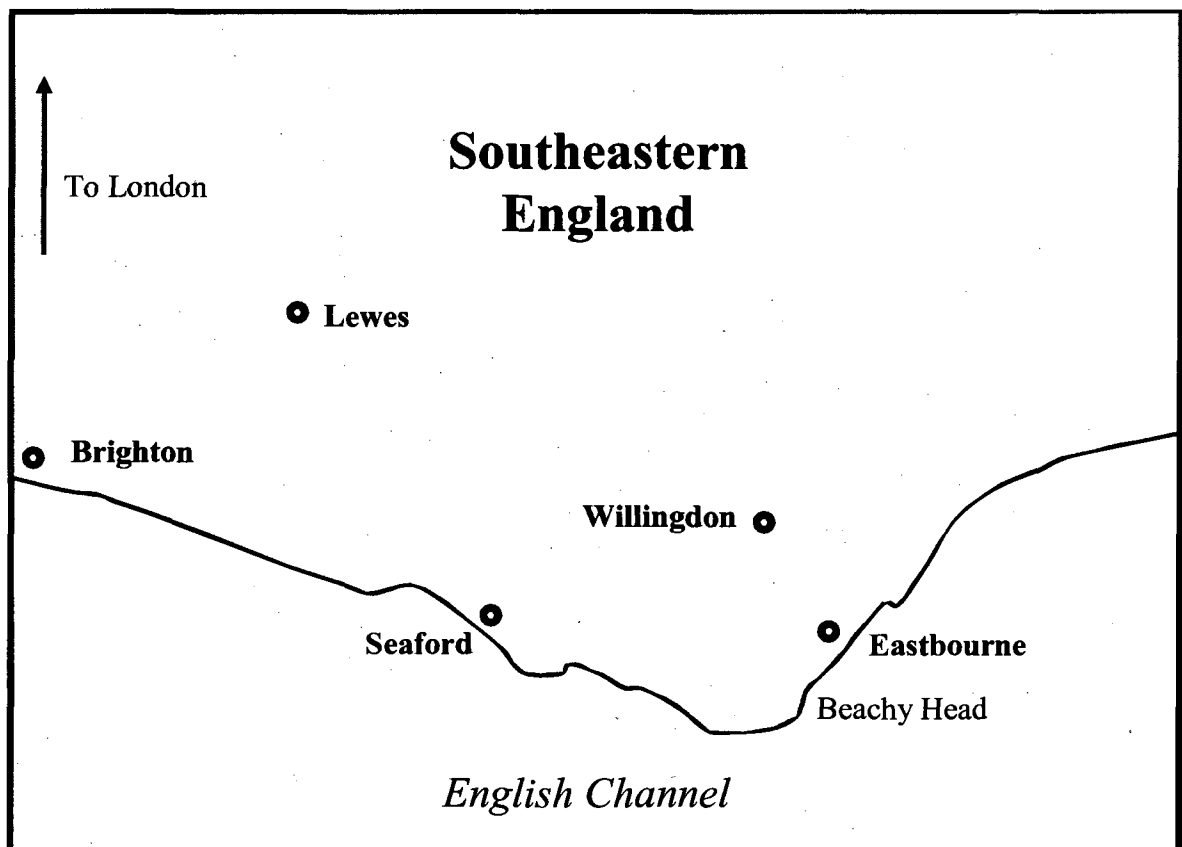
By the summer of 1942, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division was conducting live-fire exercises at the brigade level, and it was just this type of scheme that Chris Vokes had to undertake less than one month after assuming command. During the first half of July, each of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's three battalions was to undergo a unit-level live firing practice. This was to be followed by a brigade exercise on 20-21 July at a field firing range located at Lewes, about fifteen kilometres northeast of Brighton (see Map 1). The first day's

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<sup>3</sup> Stacey, *Six Years of War*, 240-241.

<sup>4</sup> Strome Galloway, *Bravely into Battle: The Autobiography of a Canadian Soldier in World War Two* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1988), 63. For differing views see English, *A Study of Failure in High Command*, 107-123, and Dominick Graham, "Observations on the Dialectics of British Tactics, 1904-45," in *Men, Machines, & War*, Ronald Haycock and Keith Neilson, eds. (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988), 66-70.

scenario involved a set-piece infantry attack supported by the divisional artillery and a company of medium machine guns provided by the Saskatoon Light Infantry. On Day Two, tanks would be added to the mix.<sup>5</sup> Such an event required careful planning and a high standard of professional performance on the part of everyone involved, as failure in either area could result in soldiers getting killed by “friendly fire.”



**Map 1 The 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's Operational Area, England, June 1942 – April 1943**

(Reference: [http://encarta.msn.com/map\\_701512223/East\\_Sussex.html](http://encarta.msn.com/map_701512223/East_Sussex.html))

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<sup>5</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (hereafter PPCLI) War Diary, June 1942, Appendix 18, "Lecture by Lt.-Col. R.A. Lindsay, C.O. P.P.C.L.I. at the Studio Cinema, Hassocks, 1000 hrs, 30 June 1942."

This formation-level exercise was Chris Vokes's first crucial test in handling his brigade in the field, and he used it to prove to his superiors and subordinates alike that he was more than equal to the challenge of command. From the moment that he arrived, his philosophy of personal leadership, which held that "As a commander, you and you alone must sit in the driver's seat as far as your subordinates are concerned," was clearly evident.<sup>6</sup> Vokes, immediately taking the initiative, got the acting brigade commander, Lt.-Col. E.B. Wilson of the Edmonton Regiment, to take him out to watch some training at a battalion firing area. The next day, he attended a brigade shooting practice, and on 29 June he held his first commanding officers (COs) conference.<sup>7</sup> Four days after that, Vokes attended the Seaforth Highlanders' field firing exercise.<sup>8</sup> All this gave him an initial idea of what was going on in the formation and how his units operated, the information he needed to gain a sense of what sort of tasks he could assign to them.

At the same time that Vokes was familiarizing himself with his units' capabilities, he was busy planning the brigade exercise. He began with an initial reconnaissance. Accompanied by his brigade major, staff captain, and brigade intelligence officer (IO), Vokes met his COs (accompanied by their Adjutants and IOs) at Lewes at 1900 hours on 30 June to see the ground over which the troops would advance. Next, the brigadier and his principal staff officers watched the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade going through its live-fire exercise, which was held on 9 July, looking for lessons that could help make the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's performance better. Armed with what had been learned through reconnaissance and

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<sup>6</sup> Major General C. Vokes, "Some Reflections on Operational Command," *Canadian Army Journal*, Volume 2, No. 10 (January 1949), 9.

<sup>7</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14072, 2 CIB War Diary, 26 and 29 June 1942.

<sup>8</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15255, Seaforth Highlanders of Canada (hereafter Seaforth) War Diary, 3 July 1942.

observation, Vokes and his staff completed the brigade-level plan over the next five days. On 13 and 14 July, he personally briefed the regimental officers and his brigade staff on the tactics the formation would use. To ensure that everyone understood the plan, Vokes continued to confirm things even after the brigade had deployed to Lewes. During the morning of 19 July he convened a conference for all officers and NCOs, where once again he explained the tactical scheme. Vokes then had his COs take their units through a practice run during the afternoon. That night, just to make sure that every detail had been considered and dealt with, he held a final brigade coordinating conference. All this was above and beyond the norms found in contemporary planning and training doctrine.<sup>9</sup>

Chris Vokes's meticulous approach to planning paid off. The all-infantry attack on 20 July was considered a great success despite the fact that an artillery shell fell short and killed three PPCLI soldiers – a tragic accident that underlined the seriousness of that which was being practiced.<sup>10</sup> Maj.-Gen. Pearkes, who as divisional commander had been watching to measure the training's progress, was pleased, and he complimented Vokes on the brigade's performance.<sup>11</sup> Events on the 21<sup>st</sup> also went well. Vokes had his units rehearse the infantry-tank assault without ammunition that morning in order to ensure that both arms would operate in harmony. This proved to be a wise precaution because the ground at Lewes was difficult for the Churchill tanks to traverse; as a result, the Edmonton Regiment got to the objective “nearly six minutes before [them].” Vokes was unhappy about this lack of coordination, and he ordered the Edmontons to slow down.

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<sup>9</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14072, 2 CIB War Diary, entries for 30 June, and 9, 13, 14, 18, and 19 July 1942. For training doctrine, see The War Office (UK), *The Training of an Infantry Battalion, Military Training Pamphlet No. 37 – 1940* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1940), 56-60.

<sup>10</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, 20 July 1942.

<sup>11</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 20 July 1942.

The brigade war diarist noted that the live-fire exercise that afternoon went much better than the rehearsal. Part of this was due to the lessons learned during the morning, but Vokes's timely corrective action likely also played a significant role.<sup>12</sup>

This early success no doubt boosted Chris Vokes's confidence, as well as that of his officers and men, in his command abilities. Having thus passed his first test, and with no large-scale exercises in store for several weeks, he had time to address other command matters which were directly related to his goal of forging an effective and cohesive brigade team. Here, too, Vokes's personal leadership was consistently evident.

As part of the team-building process, one of the first things Vokes focused on was being visible to his men. He had already taken such steps by watching training events, but in August 1942 he went further, conducting detailed unit inspections during which he saw nearly every man in his brigade. While many brigade commanders performed such tasks, in this case they were reflective of Vokes's philosophy of personal leadership: as he later wrote, "As a commander you must never lose the personal touch. You must see and be seen."<sup>13</sup> Brigadier Vokes had good reasons for such beliefs. Like most Canadian officers, he was well aware of the example of the First World War, when few soldiers had known their generals because such officers rarely visited the front. While their absence had largely resulted from trying to direct large numbers of men with only primitive communications systems – a fact of life that virtually tied them to their headquarters – the effect on morale had been devastating as soldiers lost confidence in a senior leadership

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<sup>12</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 21 July 1942. The infantry were supposed to lead, but a six-minute gap was too much. See The War Office (UK), *Infantry Training Memorandum No. 1: 1942* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, reprinted in Canada in February 1943), 13.

<sup>13</sup> Vokes, "Some Reflections on Operational Command," 9.

that seemed neither to appreciate nor care about their circumstances.<sup>14</sup> The lesson was clear: modern-day commanders had to overcome the technical challenges facing them, and find a way to be visible to their troops. Vokes definitely subscribed to such thinking: “My idea of command was everybody should know what I looked like, to start with. I thought then, and came to conclude I was absolutely right, [that] it is essential for soldiers to know the face and the appearance of their commanding officer.”<sup>15</sup>

It seems likely that another reason that Chris Vokes sought to be visible was that he realized his men needed to take a measure of *him* as their commander. The Seaforths’ war diary entry for 3 August 1942 shows that this was one of the results of his visits:

Main parade of the day at 1030 hours, when the [Battalion], 26 Officers, 599 Other Ranks, lined up to greet the Brigadier (sic), C. VOKES. He came, as he said, to show his face to the crowd, as well as that of his BRIGADE MAJOR, MAJ. MALONE. Neither face seemed to make an impression on the men, but some of his remarks did hit home. An item of interest among the men was the fact that the new BRIGADIER has no medals. “It’s about time we had a young guy for a BRIGADIER.”<sup>16</sup>

Vokes considered being seen to be so important that in September he ordered his COs to do likewise, telling them to “carry out one mass parade per week...to afford...an opportunity of seeing and addressing all members of their unit together at one time.”<sup>17</sup>

But while he wanted to be visible, Vokes could also empathize with his COs. Having

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<sup>14</sup> For more on how poor communications affected command during the First World War, see Van Crevald, *Command in War*, Chapter 5. Contemporary views on the lack of personal leadership shown by generals during that conflict are found in J.F.C. Fuller, *Generalship: Its Diseases and their Cure* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933). See also Michael Howard, “Leadership in the British Army in the Second World War: Some Personal Observations,” in G.D. Sheffield, ed., *Leadership and Command: The Anglo-American Military Experience Since 1861* (London: Brassey’s, 1997), 117-127.

<sup>15</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 68.

<sup>16</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15255, Seaforth War Diary, 3 August 1942. Vokes’s actual remarks to the men on such occasions have not been recorded.

<sup>17</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, September 1942, Appendix 14, “2 Cdn Inf Bde Training Instruction No. 2, 19 September 1942.”

briefly commanded the PPCLI, he knew that they would not want their brigadier looking over their shoulders. He thus balanced his need to be informed with their desire to “run their own show,” and did not visit them too frequently. George Kitching, who led the Edmonton Regiment from August to December 1942, appreciated such consideration:

Brigade Headquarters was in Willingdon only a couple of miles north of Eastbourne, and I think that many brigadiers would have been tempted, with such a short distance in between, to visit the regiment more often than they normally should. Chris Vokes, however, was very good in this regard. We would submit our training programme to him well ahead. He, in turn, would let us know which parts were of special interest to him. He rarely interfered unless there was good reason for it so he was always a welcome guest.<sup>18</sup>

By visiting unit training and conducting formal inspections, Brigadier Vokes was not just seeking visual recognition: he wanted his troops to “not only identify me but to identify **with** me (original emphasis).”<sup>19</sup> As a brigade commander, Vokes had to focus on two distinct groups of people in order to achieve such a goal. The first of these was very small in number. Within the brigade’s chain of command – the network of officers and NCOs serving at the platoon, company, and battalion level – Vokes primarily dealt with the brigade major and the unit COs. The second group was much larger, comprising the regimental officers, NCOs, and the troops. To gain their support, he first had to get his principal advisors and subordinate commanders on his side.

As it happened, Chris Vokes had to replace three key officers early in his tenure as brigade commander. Not surprisingly, he wanted to fill these vacancies with his own choices.<sup>20</sup> To backfill his brigade major, W.S. Murdoch, who was posted to I Canadian

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<sup>18</sup> Kitching, *Mud and Green Fields*, 123.

<sup>19</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 68.

<sup>20</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 74, and The Royal Military College of Canada (hereafter RMC), Dr. William J. McAndrew Papers (hereafter McAndrew Papers), Interview with Major-General Vokes by Bill McAndrew, (n.d.) June 1980.

Corps Headquarters at the end of July 1942, Vokes brought in a long-time friend, R.S. "Dick" Malone.<sup>21</sup> On 1 August, he arranged for George Kitching, whom he had known at 1<sup>st</sup> Division Headquarters, to succeed Lt.-Col. E.B. Wilson as CO of the Edmonton Regiment, who had also been posted. In October, Vokes took something of a risk by asking for Bert Hoffmeister, a Seaforth officer who had just completed the Canadian Junior War Staff Course, to take command of the Seaforth Highlanders: that unit's commander, Lt.-Col. J.M.S. Tait, had suffered a heart attack.<sup>22</sup> Vokes did not know Hoffmeister at the time, but a good friend of his, Major "Knobby" Clark, had strongly recommended him.<sup>23</sup> In making these choices, Vokes demonstrated that he was a good judge of military ability. Malone subsequently rose to the rank of brigadier and led the Canadian Army's public relations section, while both Kitching and Hoffmeister became major-generals, commanding the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Divisions, respectively.

Vokes evidently perceived that Hoffmeister and Kitching possessed the qualities to command a battalion, but what exactly was he seeking? In his memoirs, he said that:

I wanted people who were aggressive and who were, to some extent, stubborn. I wanted people with the mental and intestinal fortitude to command troops in battle. I wanted people who wouldn't become too worried about casualties...the risk of incurring casualties can't be allowed to affect decisions, unless it's evident casualties will be prohibitively heavy...I did not judge a man's intellectual characteristics. All I was concerned with was the man's ability...to command the organization.<sup>24</sup>

In short, Chris Vokes was looking for people like himself. Above all, he expected his COs to *lead*, a fact that Bert Hoffmeister discovered when he assumed command of the

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<sup>21</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 22 and 27 July 1943. The brigade's Staff Captain, S. Cooper, left for Staff College at about the same time.

<sup>22</sup> Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, 37, and LAC, RG 24, Volume 15255, Seaforth War Diary, 30 July 1942.

<sup>23</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 76.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-77.

Seaforths. Vokes told him: "Now you've got a real job of work to do. This battalion is a poor third in this brigade and my orders to you are to bring it up to par with the others. You've got absolutely a free hand. I'll back you up in anything you want to do."<sup>25</sup>

This is as a good example of how Vokes used his "human" skills to motivate a new subordinate and forge a strong working relationship. It seems clear that he was not simply appealing to Hoffmeister's regimental pride. What Vokes was *really* saying was that he was not going to tell the new CO how to lead his unit, and that he *trusted* his judgment. Both elements lay at the heart of Brigadier Vokes's preferred method of dealing with subordinates. He later said that he sensed that Lt.-Col. Hoffmeister "was a born leader," a hunch that soon proved to be correct.<sup>26</sup> Hoffmeister responded positively to this initial interview, and under his dynamic leadership the Seaforths' performance rapidly improved. Moreover, Vokes earned his life-long respect and friendship, and as Douglas Delaney has noted, Hoffmeister made a point of copying Vokes's approach of telling his subordinates *what* to do but not *how* to do it.<sup>27</sup>

It appears that Brigadier Vokes's approach in this regard was based on more than his awareness that he could not do everything himself. According to those who knew Vokes well, he *wanted* to trust others, but they first had to prove that his trust in them was deserved. Then, as Sydney Frost of the PPCLI recalled, "he would stand by you."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, 41.

<sup>26</sup> RMC, McAndrew Papers, Vokes-McAndrew Interview, June 1980.

<sup>27</sup> Douglas E. Delaney, "Hoffmeister in His Proving Ground: Sicily, July-August 1943," *Canadian Military History*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2003), 34, endnote No. 54; DHH, J.L. Granatstein Interview Notes for *The Generals*, Interview with Maj.-Gen. Bert Hoffmeister by J.L. Granatstein, Vancouver, B.C., 2 March 1992; and Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, 79.

<sup>28</sup> Colonel (ret'd) C.S. Frost, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, telephone interview with author, 27 July 2007.

Such was the experience of Captain Norman Pope, the brigade's intelligence officer. Shortly after the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade moved from Brighton to Eastbourne in early August 1942, Vokes sought Pope's opinion of an appreciation he had produced on how to defend the area against possible German raids. Pope told him it contained two errors. First, the assumption that the cliffs near Beachy Head were not scalable from the seaward approach was wrong, because some of the brigade's soldiers had done it the previous day. The second related to tidal data that Pope knew was incorrect because he had gotten the right information from the local Coast Guard station. These faults led Pope to conclude that Vokes had trusted that the previous area commander had done a proper job of his own appreciation, and he had simply copied it without checking the details. The brigadier, apparently mortified at his gaffe, nevertheless appreciated Pope's forthrightness, a reaction that indicated a willingness on his part to admit to his mistakes. From that point forward, Chris Vokes considered Norman Pope a valued member of his personal team.<sup>29</sup>

Gaining the support of the regimental officers, NCOs, and the men was equally important if Vokes was to achieve his goal of instilling teamwork.<sup>30</sup> Developing such cohesiveness, though, was a challenge. He was separated from them by the same chain of command through which he directed their actions, and the Army's regimental system emphasized loyalty to a regiment, not a brigade. A third factor was the nature of the troops themselves, most of whom had left civilian life and volunteered for military service only because their country was at war. As historian Michael Howard has noted of the British experience, such volunteers tended to need "continual inspiration from

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<sup>29</sup> University of Victoria, Pope-Bell Interview, 10 June 1982. Vokes kept Pope on his staff even after he assumed command of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division.

<sup>30</sup> For more on cohesion, see William Darryl Henderson, *Cohesion: The Human Element in Combat* (Washington, D.C.: National Defence University Press, 1985).

charismatic leaders to bridge the gap between their romantic motivations and the usually horrible conditions in which they [found] themselves.”<sup>31</sup> David Fraser has agreed with Howard, writing that, “such an army had to be led rather than driven.”<sup>32</sup>

Chris Vokes understood all this. Indeed, one thing that is not generally appreciated about Vokes is that he, like Bernard Montgomery, considered the human element to be of central importance to his job as a commander. As he later noted:

The most important part of an army is its human element and the purpose of man-management is to get the maximum effort in productive work from each and every member of this human element. A man, or a woman, for that matter, is a complex creature of many moods. When content with his lot, man produces his best effort; when discontented, his worst. Some men can be driven; some can be led; some are eager for anything; some are timid. But no matter what their characteristics, you will have your hands full in handling them if they are discontented or feel they have been bugged about. All, however, will respond if they are permeated by a sense of well-being, which is the result of proper treatment and handling – proper man-management.<sup>33</sup>

These were words that Chris Vokes lived by, for as the brigade and unit war diaries show, he used several tried and tested techniques to provide positive motivation for the troops during his tenure as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade’s commander. At the heart of these efforts lay Vokes’s determination to set a good personal example for his officers and men to follow. This is a basic leadership principle used by leaders in all walks of life, but in the military, where an officer must order men into battle where they may be killed, it is absolutely crucial. One way that Vokes sought to do so was in the area of physical fitness. On a personal level, he fully realized that he had to be in shape in order to be

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<sup>31</sup> Howard, “Leadership in the British Army in the Second World War,” 120.

<sup>32</sup> David Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them: The British Army in the Second World War* (Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), 99.

<sup>33</sup> CWM, Vokes, *Unpublished Lectures and Speeches*, Volume 1, “Leadership and Man-Management,” (n.d), 119-120. Montgomery’s views on the importance of the human element are described in the Introduction to this thesis.

able to make good decisions in battle, especially after days with little rest. At the same time, Vokes understood that soldiers generally do not have much respect for an officer who cannot do what he tells his men to do. Consequently, he worked hard at his own fitness until “there wasn’t a man in the brigade...who could do anything required that I couldn’t.”<sup>34</sup> This was no mean feat, for at age 38 Vokes was one of the oldest members of the formation. The brigadier found other ways to show a positive example, too. In December 1942, when petrol rationing necessitated austerity within the armed forces, Vokes gave up his jeep for a bicycle and, as the PPCLI regimental historian has noted, he was soon seen “touring the area...his pennon flying from [the] handlebars.”<sup>35</sup>

Chris Vokes was not alone in his efforts to set a good personal example to his men. Other officers, like Bert Hoffmeister and George Kitching, and many NCOs did so as well, although as the example of Arthur Potts (Vokes’s predecessor) clearly shows, not every commander was so enlightened. But Vokes evidently believed that he had to do more in order to develop teamwork, for he initiated several “team-building” activities in the fall of 1942. Many of these were sports-related, which had the added military benefit of promoting physical fitness. This, too, was not unusual, for sports competitions were (and still are) an important aspect of military life. What *was* different was the emphasis that Vokes placed on them. In September, he announced that the brigade would hold quarterly boxing competitions; on 2 November, the Patricias defeated the Edmontons to win the “Brigadier C. Vokes Trophy.”<sup>36</sup> Also in September, he ordered his headquarters

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<sup>34</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 80.

<sup>35</sup> Stevens, *Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry*, 62, and LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 16 December 1942.

<sup>36</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, September 1942, Appendix 20. See also the War Diary entry for 2 November 1942.

personnel to participate in early morning runs, a decision that likely delighted the soldiers in the battalions if not his staff officers.<sup>37</sup> A brigade cross-country run was held on 25 November, in which the Edmonton Regiment avenged its loss at boxing by edging out the PPCLI.<sup>38</sup> Overall, these efforts seem to have had a very positive impact on morale, for that same month the Edmontons' war diarist noted that, "this is really the first time for many moons that the Brigade has grown so sport conscious and it's good to see."<sup>39</sup>

Brigadier Vokes also sought to promote a sense of brigade identity. Following a concert party held at the Edmonton Regiment in November 1942, he prevailed upon the band's pianist (who claimed to be a composer) to "write a marching song for the Brigade, such song to have the toughness of the West, the glories of the Rockies, the splendour of the West Coast, all embodied therein." The final product was deemed to be "not bad," but it was generally agreed that it needed work. For some reason, though, nothing further came of this initiative, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade never did have a marching song.<sup>40</sup> Vokes achieved greater success several months later, when a brigade emblem was introduced.

In Vokes's view, fostering good morale involved more than what he called "good man-management." He later noted that, "of all the factors which go to the compounding of good morale, the most important is a high standard of discipline, fairly but rigorously maintained at all times."<sup>41</sup> This sentiment was evident in his actions throughout his tenure as a brigade commander, for he had a well-deserved reputation as a disciplinarian.

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<sup>37</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 28 September 1942. It was (and still is) not uncommon for fighting men to view HQ staff as being somewhat pampered.

<sup>38</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, 25 November 1942.

<sup>39</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15113, Loyal Edmonton Regiment (hereafter LER) War Diary, 1 November 1942.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 November 1942.

<sup>41</sup> CWM, Vokes, *Unpublished Lectures and Speeches*, Volume 1, "Morale in Battle," (n.d), 143.

Vokes believed that his soldiers would respond well to such a regime, which would in turn inspire a sense of self and unit pride and thereby contribute to good teamwork every bit as much as sports competitions. It was with these considerations in mind that, in September 1942, he ordered the units to conduct “smartening up” drill, which consisted of detailed inspections of men and equipment, each Saturday morning. Vokes conducted many of these reviews himself, and they evidently produced the desired results. In a Brigade Training Report dated 17 September, he wrote that, “the devoting of more time to Smartening Drill is improving (original emphasis) the bearing of the men.”<sup>42</sup> All this, of course, had an important technical application. In battle, as Brigadier Vokes and his men would later discover, “a well-disciplined unit...[made] all the difference.”<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps the most important element of Chris Vokes’s approach to team-building concerned his efforts to instill confidence in all levels of leadership within the brigade.<sup>44</sup> He believed that there was a strong link between confidence, training, and leadership, later writing that, “Soldiers have more confidence in someone who has been with them right from the start, who knows the score and who has come up through the training programme with them.”<sup>45</sup> Vokes was right. By promoting confidence in the brigade’s leadership, he was taking an important step towards assuring the formation’s operational efficiency once it went into action. All this reveals his understanding of the close inter-relationship that exists between the human and technical sides of command.

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<sup>42</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, “Training Report – 2 Cdn Inf Bde – Week Ending 19 Sep 42, 17 September 1942.”

<sup>43</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 80.

<sup>44</sup> CWM, Vokes, Volume 1, “Morale in Battle,” 143. In a CBC interview in 1970, Vokes said that his first task was to “train up the officers and NCOs.” LAC, Audio-Visual Collection, Frank Williams Fonds, Item No. 321103, Interview with Major-General Chris Vokes by Frank Williams, CBC Television, (n.d.) 1970.

<sup>45</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 80.

Chris Vokes's focus on leadership also stemmed from a very practical problem, one that had resulted from the Canadian Army's rapid wartime expansion. He knew that in the early years of the war there had been a "lack of trained officers and NCOs capable of properly training the men under their command...It wasn't until the spring of 1942 that we reached a state in the [1<sup>st</sup>] Division when, with enough officers and NCOs back from training courses, we could carry out a period of intensive training."<sup>46</sup> Given this, it seems likely that Vokes's goal of promoting confidence in the brigade's leadership had much to do with another objective, namely improving its quality. In this regard, Vokes showed a considerable degree of sophistication, for he took a holistic approach and strove to tackle the question of leadership at all levels within his formation.

It is a little-appreciated fact that Brigadier Vokes invested a considerable amount of time and effort in developing the junior leadership within his brigade. Young officers at the lieutenant and captain rank and NCOs at the corporal and sergeant level have the greatest contact with the troops, and Vokes's understanding of this fact at the time led to his later assertion that "battles are won by the initiative of junior leaders." He was also acutely aware that many of them were wartime volunteers and needed tutoring and mentoring from their more experienced seniors in order to develop their leadership skills. It was undoubtedly for these reasons that Vokes believed that "develop[ing] this initiative in the junior leader in all our training is a must, and [that] the careful selection and training of junior leaders and their subsequent professional advancement is vital to the well-being of an army."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> RMC, McAndrew Papers, Vokes-McAndrew Interview, June 1980.

<sup>47</sup> CWM, Vokes, *Unpublished Lectures and Speeches*, Volume 1, "Leadership and Man-Management," (n.d), 119.

There were several aspects to Chris Vokes's efforts to promote and develop junior leadership. Knowing that lance-corporals were not normally accepted for formal NCO courses at Canadian training establishments, Vokes took the initiative. On 17 August 1942, he established a Brigade NCOs school at Jevington Place, which was intended to provide basic leadership training for lance-corporals and privates who showed potential. This unique initiative was a tremendous success. Indeed, the school remained open until the end of 1942, conducting a total of four courses of approximately 70 candidates each.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, on 1 October he submitted a request to 1<sup>st</sup> Division Headquarters that lance-corporals be considered for formal leadership training, pointing out that "in many cases it is the [lance-corporal] who requires and would benefit most from many of the courses in fitting himself for promotion."<sup>49</sup> This was another example of Vokes's determined effort to ensure that his junior NCOs had every opportunity to develop their leadership skills.

Junior officers also benefited from Vokes's attention. On 19 September 1942, he announced that platoon-level training would be a major priority, and, that "all platoon [commanders] will be given an opportunity of organizing and carrying out a three to four day exercise, to be carried out independently and away from the unit."<sup>50</sup> This gave these junior commanders a chance to practice their planning and leadership skills while at the same time promoting teamwork. A "Junior Officers Week" followed in January 1943, which included subjects such as tactics, leadership, and the conduct of training. Vokes

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<sup>48</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, August 1942, Appendix H, "2 Cdn Inf Bde N.C.O.'s School Joining and Admin Instructions, 13 August 1942," and December 1942, Appendix 8, "Training Report – 2 Cdn Inf Bde, 26 December 1942."

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., "Training Report – 2 Cdn Inf Bde, 1 October 1942."

<sup>50</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, September 1942, Appendix 14, "2 Cdn Inf Bde Training Instruction No. 2, 19 September 1942."

played a very active role in this event, teaching the latter subject himself.<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, neither this nor his efforts to develop the leadership of his junior NCOs appear to have been replicated in either the 1<sup>st</sup> or the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigades during the same period for no mention of such activities are found in their respective war diaries.<sup>52</sup> Although this might be understandable with regard to Brigadier Charles Foulkes of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade (who had a reputation for paying little attention to the details of training), it is a mystery why the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade's commanders, namely Rod Keller, Guy Simonds, and Howard Graham respectively, did not implement such admirable projects themselves.<sup>53</sup>

Vokes did not ignore the leadership capabilities of the COs of his three battalions. Interestingly, his approach in this particular area was strikingly similar to that of General Montgomery, who was famous within the British Army for the amount of time and effort he dedicated to knowing and evaluating his subordinates.<sup>54</sup> Here, too, Vokes's comments on the subject reveal a certain appreciation for the subtleties of human behaviour:

To exercise command in battle you must know well the personal characteristics and temperament of your subordinate commanders. No two men are exactly similar and their reactions to any particular set of circumstances will never be exactly alike. They may be aggressive or cautious; quick off the mark or slow. They may be stubborn in their views and argumentative or the opposite. They may be self-reliant or slow to assume responsibility. It is your task as a commander to inspire their confidence and get the best out of them. You must have confidence in them...<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> The actual dates of the Junior Officers' Week were 24-30 January 1943. LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, January 1943, Appendix 10, "2 Cdn Inf Bde Junior Officers' Week," and Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, January 1943.

<sup>52</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14075, 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade (hereafter 1 CIB) War Diary, June 1942 to April 1943, and Volume 14161, 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade (hereafter 3 CIB) War Diary, June 1942 to April 1943.

<sup>53</sup> Granatstein, *The Generals*, 175, and Vokes, *My Story*, 140-141.

<sup>54</sup> See Montgomery's memoirs, pages 84-86, and also Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: The Making of a General, 1887 - 1942* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 496-545.

<sup>55</sup> Vokes, "Some Reflections on Operational Command," 9.

Vokes got to know his COs through his visits to the units, where he gauged their effectiveness by watching them with their troops. He quickly formed opinions regarding their abilities. As he had expected, George Kitching's performance was solid, and Bert Hoffmeister proved that trusting him was a well-justified decision. Vokes later said that he "wasn't too happy with the situation in the Patricias at the time but there wasn't time to do much about it."<sup>56</sup> This assessment likely stemmed from his brief stint as the regiment's CO, when he apparently got the sense – rightly or wrongly – that the unit's discipline was not up to his standards. It seems probable that Vokes suspected the CO, Lt.-Col. R.A. Lindsay, was to blame for this, and that he held on to this sentiment after assuming command of the brigade.<sup>57</sup> Still, if he was unimpressed by Lindsay, Vokes knew that he lacked a sufficiently solid reason to warrant dismissing his subordinate. Instead, possibly to give Lindsay a chance to prove his leadership abilities, Vokes periodically appointed him to serve as the acting brigade commander in his absence.<sup>58</sup>

One cannot examine Chris Vokes's initial months of brigade command without briefly describing his larger-than-life personality, for several of its aspects were almost immediately evident. Certainly, he seemed to cultivate a "tough-guy" image. Vokes's appearance could be threatening, for he had a stocky build and he growled when he spoke. Further, the brigadier could be mercurial and was known for his brief outbursts of rage. Dick Malone said that Vokes terrified some of his junior officers, an opinion with which Captain Norman Pope fully agreed: "Vokes tended to be a bit of a bully." Interestingly, as Pope also said that Vokes "liked to have men who didn't like to be

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<sup>56</sup> RMC, McAndrew Papers, Vokes-McAndrew Interview, (n.d.) June 1980.

<sup>57</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 68-69. For a Patricia's point of view regarding Vokes and Lieutenant-Colonel Lindsay, see Frost, *Once a Patricia*, 532-533.

<sup>58</sup> See for example LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, 26 July 1942.

bullied,” this behaviour might have been Vokes’s way of testing people’s strength of character. This was partly why Pope got along with him: he refused to be intimidated.<sup>59</sup>

Sometimes, Major Malone recalled, Vokes’s temper got the better of him and he acted precipitously, although he often realized it once he had cooled down. This, Malone said, “was recognized by those who served under him, and he was accorded a degree of affection not granted to [Guy] Simonds.”<sup>60</sup> One such example occurred in late July 1942. Angry at continually being blamed by local authorities for the failure of both anti-aircraft fire and the Royal Air Force to deal with German “hit-and-run” air raids against targets in the area, Vokes had his units position Bren gunners at the power house and gas works in the town of Portslade with orders to shoot down the German raiders.<sup>61</sup> As unlikely as it might seem, after a few days they achieved success. On 4 August 1942, the brigade had “a red-letter day,” shooting down a Focke Wulf 190 fighter-bomber. Nearly every unit claimed this victory: three weeks later, the Seaforths downed another.<sup>62</sup>

Vokes’s “tough-guy” image may have been a persona that he adopted for his role as a commander, for while he bullied some and terrified others, he could be a likeable man. His willingness to trust others was an admirable trait; so, too, was his admission of mistakes, and his empathy for the common soldier. George Kitching said that Vokes had “a heart of gold,” while Dick Malone opined that “he [had] an understanding character

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<sup>59</sup> Richard S. Malone, *A Portrait of War* (Don Mills, Ontario: Totem Press, 1983), 152, and University of Victoria, Pope-Bell Interview, 10 June 1982.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 152. Simonds had an icy personality. Granatstein, *The Generals*, 145-178.

<sup>61</sup> A Bren gun was a light machine-gun. Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *Infantry Tactics* (London: Almark Publishing Co. Ltd, 1976), 7. For Vokes’s order, see LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 29 July 1942, and Malone, *A Portrait of War*, 110-111.

<sup>62</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15112, LER War Diary, 5 August 1942; Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, Appendix 7 to August 1942; and Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 26 August 1942.

and deep down had a warm and emotional streak [with] a broad touch of rowdy humour about him.”<sup>63</sup> The latter point was obvious to the Seaforths’ war diarist, who noted that at an officers’ party on 5 August 1942, “the BRIGADIER distinguished himself by showing the officers how to drink a whisky and soda while standing on one’s head [and] later was seen on his hands and knees playing craps.”<sup>64</sup> He could also be very “down to earth” with the troops. Informed on 18 November 1942 that two of the Edmonton Regiment’s soldiers had developed a new wrestling hold that could break a man’s neck, Vokes “was not convinced of its efficiency and insisted that [Private] Holloway try it on him. This was a chance not to be missed and [Private] Holloway definitely (sic) proved to the Brigadier (sic) all that was claimed of the hold.”<sup>65</sup> It is difficult to imagine many Canadian generals, especially Harry Crerar or Guy Simonds, doing the same.<sup>66</sup>

Vokes was also able to forge good working relationships with his superiors and fellow brigadiers. He worshipped Maj.-Gen. George Pearkes, V.C., whom he considered his “guide and mentor,” and he apparently got along with the hard-driving Maj.-Gen. H.L.N. Salmon, who succeeded Pearkes as division commander in September 1942.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Chris Vokes had no difficulty with most of his peers. Both Rod Keller and Guy Simonds, who led the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade in that order during 1942, were old comrades, and Howard Graham, who followed Simonds in 1943, described Vokes as “my friend.”<sup>68</sup> It is

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<sup>63</sup> LAC, Reginald H. Roy Fonds, Interviews with Major-General George Kitching by W.S. Thackery (hereafter Kitching-Thackery Interviews), Victoria, 8 August 1980, and Malone, *A Portrait of War*, 152.

<sup>64</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15255, Seaforth War Diary, 5 August 1942.

<sup>65</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15113, LER War Diary, 18 November 1942.

<sup>66</sup> Crerar was as cold and austere as Simonds. Granatstein, *The Generals*, 83-115.

<sup>67</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 72.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 and 67, and Howard Graham, *Citizen and Soldier* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987), 140.

true that Vokes despised the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade's Charles Foulkes, but he was not alone in that: Foulkes had a sneering and superior personality that irritated many people.<sup>69</sup> Vokes got along much better with Foulkes's successor, Howard Penhale, another long-time associate who had helped arrange his overseas posting to CMHQ in December 1939.

While the human element was clearly important to Chris Vokes, performing well on the "technical" side of command was equally crucial if he was to be a successful commander. He had already proven his planning abilities during the brigade field firing exercise in July: in the fall of 1942 he went on to demonstrate a talent for developing and supervising a challenging training regime. During this period, Vokes demanded a high standard of performance from his subordinates. At the same time, however, he took the time to teach them how to plan and conduct training, displayed imagination by devising new ways to teach old lessons, and he made every effort to learn from experience. All of these actions reflected his understanding of the human side of soldiering. As historian Doug Delaney has aptly stated, training was Chris Vokes's "real strength."<sup>70</sup>

Brigadier Vokes's responsibility to train his men was clearly defined in military regulations and doctrine. Paragraph 34 of *The King's Regulations and Orders for the Canadian Militia* (1939) stipulated that a commanding officer was "responsible for [his unit's] training and readiness for war," while *Canadian Army Training Pamphlet No. 3* (1941) stated that training was a command responsibility that could not be delegated.<sup>71</sup> It

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<sup>69</sup> Vokes described Foulkes as "a military nincompoop." Vokes, *My Story*, 200. Maj.-Gen. Harry Foster felt the same way. See Foster, *Meeting of Generals*, 340.

<sup>70</sup> Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, 40.

<sup>71</sup> *The Canadian Militia, The King's Regulations and Orders for the Canadian Militia, 1939* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1939), 7, and *Canadian Army, Canadian Army Training Pamphlet No. 3, Principles and Organization of Training, 1941* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1941), 1.

seems reasonable to conclude that, given his strong belief in the importance of personal leadership, Vokes fully supported such regulations for he took the lead in the training of his brigade. He was not alone in this. His divisional commander, George Pearkes, did the same thing. So, too, did General Montgomery, who had a great reputation as a trainer of men and has been credited by several historians for transforming Canada's overseas army into a real fighting force.<sup>72</sup> Vokes thus had two good examples to follow, and much of what he did in the area of training was similar to their respective approaches.

Chris Vokes had good human and technical reasons for his focus on training. He was well aware that his men lacked combat experience; the Germans, on the other hand, were battle-seasoned soldiers by 1942. In order to defeat such formidable opponents, it was absolutely essential that the brigade achieve a high degree of operational efficiency. The only way that such a standard of performance could be reached was by instituting a tough, thorough, and realistic training regime. This was another reason why teamwork at all levels was so crucial: there would be few second chances to get things right in battle.

Not surprisingly, Vokes developed the brigade's training plan himself and it was he who set the priorities in the formation's monthly training instructions.<sup>73</sup> As he had done prior to the live-firing exercise in July, Vokes made sure that his officers understood what he wanted to achieve by personally briefing them on his training policy.<sup>74</sup> This was consistent with his personal style of leadership, and was yet another way in which Chris

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<sup>72</sup> For more on George Pearkes, see Reginald H. Roy, *For Conspicuous Bravery: A Biography of Major-General George R. Pearkes* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1977), 135-174. For comments on Montgomery, see Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, 38; English, *A Study of Failure in High Command*, 137; and Ronald Lewin, *Montgomery as Military Commander* (London: Batsford, 1971), 265-266.

<sup>73</sup> See the brigade's Weekly Training Reports for 5, 19, and 24 September 1942 in LAC, RG 24, Volume 15113, LER War Diary, September 1942, Appendix 21.

<sup>74</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, 21 September 1942.

Vokes set a positive example to his subordinates. Such an approach was very different from that of his predecessor, Arthur Potts, who had little to do with training. Vokes also established performance standards that he expected his units to meet. Bert Hoffmeister recalled that these were “pretty high;” moreover, the brigadier “made it his business to see that it was done.”<sup>75</sup> High standards were unquestionably necessary for operational reasons, but Vokes understood that challenging his men to excel would also have very positive human effects. Sharing a difficult experience tends to make most soldiers physically and emotionally stronger, both individually and as a team. This, in turn, often promotes good morale and teamwork, effects that Vokes was seeking to achieve.

Chris Vokes’s high standards had already become evident to many in the brigade as a result of his thorough unit inspections. He was even more demanding on matters concerning training. The fact that Vokes, like his role models Generals Pearkes and Montgomery, habitually attended training events meant that he knew what was going on, both good and bad. Vokes was adamant that things should be done properly. If they were not, he demanded that they be repeated until the desired standard of performance had been met. One such incident occurred on 6 December 1942 when he saw problems with the manner in which “A” Company of the Seaforth Highlanders had executed an infantry-tank cooperation exercise. Vokes ordered Lt.-Col. Hoffmeister to have the company do it again.<sup>76</sup> It seems likely that Vokes would have agreed with a motto that later became famous within The Royal Canadian Regiment: “Never Pass a Fault.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Delaney, *The Soldiers’ General*, 51-52.

<sup>76</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15255, Seaforth War Diary, 6 December 1942, and Delaney, *The Soldiers’ General*, 40-41.

<sup>77</sup> This motto was adopted by the RCR in Italy, when Lt.-Col. Dan Spry had erected signs to this effect throughout the unit’s area. Galloway, *Bravely into Battle*, 180.

Christopher Vokes was not content just to plan and supervise training. What was different about his approach was that he replicated part of Montgomery's methodology by making it his business to teach his subordinates how to do the same thing.<sup>78</sup> Vokes seems to have understood that many of them were not as knowledgeable or experienced as he was in this area. On 28 October 1942 he issued a document entitled "Guiding Rules in Planning Training Programmes," which was published as an appendix to a brigade training instruction. The chief elements of Vokes's policy were that training had to be "planned well in advance and [be] realistic," and that "all ranks must understand the objective to be achieved." Both of these things, of course, were what he had done in preparation for the brigade's field firing exercise earlier in July, a fact that his COs must have realized. Vokes went on to declare that, "All sub-unit [commanders would be] made and held responsible for [training] their respective [commands]."<sup>79</sup> In this way, he made the planning of training an important part of his subordinates' activities.

Brigadier Vokes personally taught his officers and NCOs in other areas, too. During brigade-level Tactical Exercises Without Troops (TEWTs) – exercises that allowed officers to study tactical problems before tackling them in the field with their men – he often led the discussion. Similarly, Vokes instructed his subordinate leaders on a host of subjects, from the responsibilities of officers to the nuances of operational planning. In some instances, these talks were conducted down to the platoon level.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> In a paper sent to General Crerar, Montgomery stressed that COs had to teach their officers how to train soldiers. LAC, Crerar Papers, Vol. 2, Montgomery to Crerar, "Some General Notes on What to Look For When Visiting a Unit," 6 March 1942.

<sup>79</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, October 1942, Appendix 16, "Training Instruction No. 4, 16 October 1942."

<sup>80</sup> See for example LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, 2 December 1942, and Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 19 January 1943.

Chris Vokes's promotion of good teamwork at all levels of command proved to be invaluable, for the fall of 1942 was a very busy time for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade. There were battalion, brigade, and divisional exercises of various types and durations; at the same time, TEWTs, map exercises, unit, brigade, and divisional sports competitions, lectures from a variety of staffs on a myriad of topics, unit and brigade inspections, and individual training courses of all descriptions were also conducted.<sup>81</sup> A great deal was demanded of everyone, especially from the officers and NCOs. Despite the stress that came with all this activity, though, it seems that spirits within the formation were high. On 28 October 1942, the brigade's war diarist observed that, "the standard of fitness throughout the [brigade] is good, and morale on the whole is better than it has been in some time."<sup>82</sup>

It was during this same period that the Canadian Army began learning how to carry out assault landings on a defended beach. On 17-18 September, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade conducted Exercise VIKING, which was intended to rehearse the organization of landing serials, actions to be taken on landing, and forming a bridgehead.<sup>83</sup> In keeping with his habit of planning in advance, Vokes provided the brigade officers with a reading package entitled "Notes on Combined Operations" on 6 September. This was quickly followed by two brigade-level TEWTs, held on the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of the month.<sup>84</sup> Largely because amphibious assault training was new to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, Exercise VIKING was a valuable learning experience for everyone involved, as it "proved in several ways the difficulties that Unit [Commanders] and [Brigade] Staff would run into on actual operations." Still,

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<sup>81</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, October 1942, "2 Cdn Inf Bde Training Summary and Forecast, Period 1 Oct-15 Nov 1942."

<sup>82</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 28 October 1942.

<sup>83</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15112, LER War Diary, 17 September 1942.

<sup>84</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10962, File 260C2.009 (D10), "Notes on Combined Operations, 6 Sep 42," and Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 14 and 15 September 1942.

as the brigade war diarist added, “it was hard to impart to the [Other Ranks] the idea of a beach landing.” This last comment likely stemmed from the overall artificiality of the exercise. No landing craft were actually used; instead, the troops were formed up into their landing serials, loaded into trucks, and then deposited on the beach.<sup>85</sup>

It was also in the fall of 1942 that Chris Vokes displayed a creative side in his approach to training. On 16 August, he directed the brigade Intelligence Section to build an “open air relief map” of the Eastbourne area, which was to be some 76 square metres in size. Used for brigade TEWTs from 7 September onward, the model proved to be a great success. On 9 September, the brigade war diarist commented that it was “liable to get used by the whole Division:” in fact, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade used it later the same day.

Another model, this time of a miniature village, was later built for use during a Brigade TEWT on street fighting.<sup>86</sup> Such innovations made training interesting, which was undoubtedly one of Vokes’s intentions. Another way of achieving the same end was arranging for guest lectures from authorities outside of the brigade. One such event occurred on 10 September, when Lt.-Col. The Lord Lovat and Major Young of the British Commandos briefed the brigade officers and NCOs on their actions during the Dieppe Raid. Several months later, Vokes provided his officers with lessons learned by the British Army in North Africa, which were contained in a set of notes prepared by a Canadian officer who had been attached to the First (British) Army in that theatre.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 18 September 1942.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 August, 7, 9, and 25 September 1942. Models were “a useful medium for instruction.” The War Office (UK), *The Training of an Infantry Battalion*, 51.

<sup>87</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15113, LER War Diary, September 1942, Appendix 21, “Training Report, 2 Cdn Inf Bde – Week Ending 12 Sep 42,” 10 September 1942, and Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, April 1943, Appendix 7, “2 Cdn Inf Bde Training Instruction No. 4, 6 April 1943, Appendix A – LESSONS FROM NORTH AFRICA.”

Another type of exercise that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade undertook in the fall of 1942 was tied to its operational role of coastal defence. It was considered that the enemy might conduct raids similar to those that the British had been doing against German-occupied Europe, and thus all formations deployed along England's southeastern coast prepared plans for just such a contingency.<sup>88</sup> It is a standard military practice that a contingency plan be tested to ensure that it is workable, and so the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's anti-raid plan for the Eastbourne area was practiced on 28 September during Exercise BLACKBOY. In attendance was the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division's new commander, Maj.-Gen. Harry Salmon, who had replaced George Pearkes a few weeks earlier. Salmon "studied the [brigade's] system of Anti-Raid [communications]," and suggested several ways in which to speed up the passage of information. This was typical of Salmon, who had a well-earned reputation as a stickler for detail.<sup>89</sup> Vokes implemented his boss's "suggestions," and when the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade repeated Exercise BLACKBOY on 24 November 1942 there was a noticeable improvement: "Messages were received in much shorter time than formerly and communications throughout the [Brigade] Area...were very efficient."<sup>90</sup>

In early 1943, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, along with ten attached units and detachments, was ordered to undergo amphibious assault training at the Combined Training Centre (CTC) at Inverary, Scotland (see Map 2).<sup>91</sup> As always, Chris Vokes ensured that his men were

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<sup>88</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, September 1942, Appendix 9, "2 Cdn Inf Bde Plans to Defeat Invasion, Operation Instruction No. 2 – Anti-Raid Precautions," 8 September 1942."

<sup>89</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 28 September 1942. Salmon's strict approach is described in Farley Mowat, *The Regiment* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974), 19-22, and Kitching, *Mud and Green Fields*, 129.

<sup>90</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 24 November 1942.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, February 1942. Attachments included a battery from 3 Field Regiment, 90 Anti-Tank Battery, 54 Anti-Aircraft Battery, 3 Field Company, and 5 Field Ambulance.

well prepared for this new challenge. On 19 January, after having attended a week-long course at the CTC in late December 1942, he gave a lecture on the intricacies of the planning of combined operations to the unit COs, their adjutants, IOs, and company commanders, as well as the brigade staff. That same month, a small cadre from each battalion underwent some special combined operations training.<sup>92</sup> These preparations were fitted into an already hectic training schedule. During January, each unit took part in Exercise SPITFIRE, a battalion-level scheme that had been devised by Brigadier Vokes in order to test their abilities in conducting several different types of combat operations, including the advance, contact drills, consolidating objectives, and the withdrawal. Vokes's own headquarters was also kept very busy. In addition to planning and conducting the movement of the brigade group's personnel, vehicles, and equipment by road and rail to Scotland, the staff participated in a I Canadian Corps signals exercise, MAPLE 2, during 25-26 January 1943.<sup>93</sup>

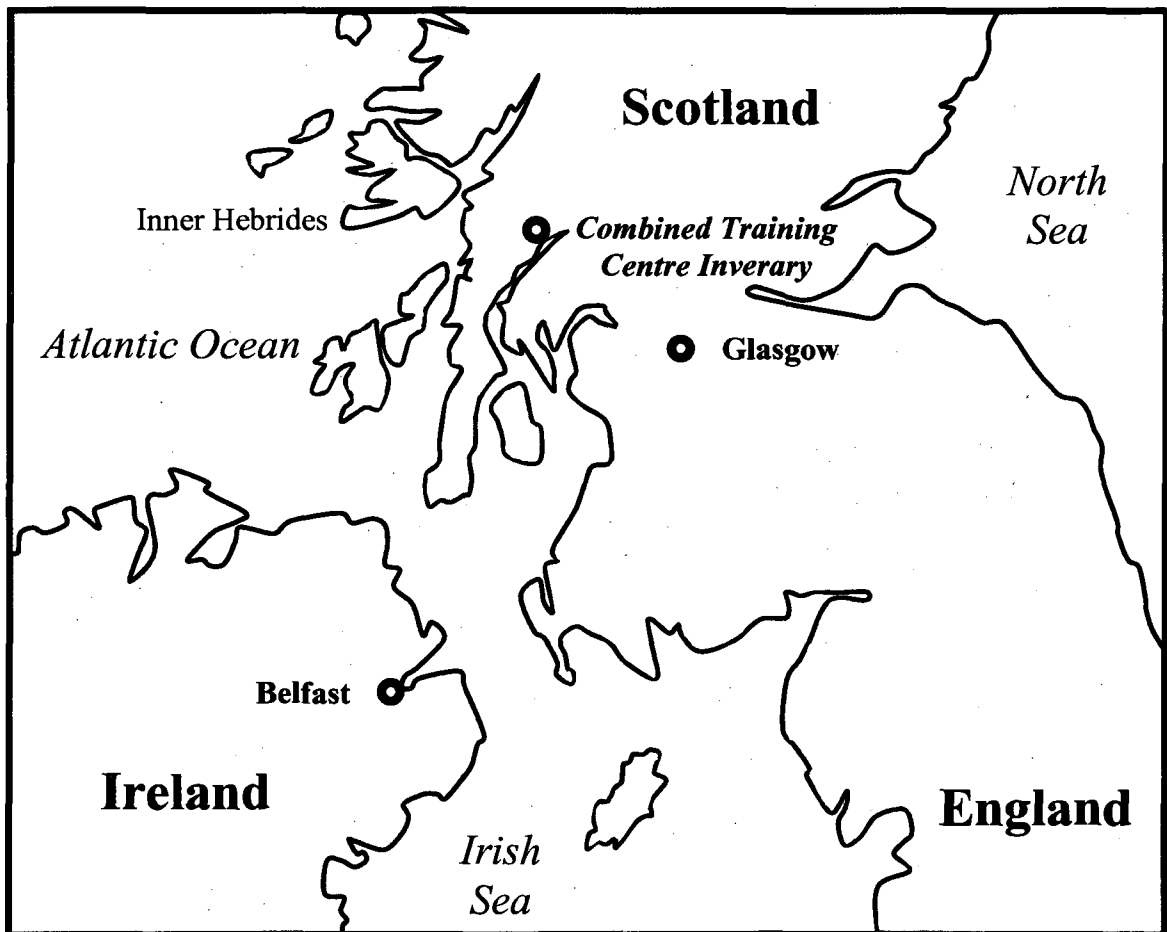
Another element of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's preparations for Scotland lay in Vokes's efforts to motivate his men to strive for a high degree of professional performance. To achieve this aim, he issued an order that was to be read aloud to all ranks within the brigade. He began by repeating what he had been told by the CTC's senior officers, namely that the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade was "the best [Infantry Brigade] ever to attend at the C.T.C. and there have been many [Brigades] in [training] there." Realizing that such a statement would sting his troops' pride, Vokes then went on to say that, "The 2<sup>nd</sup> [Canadian Infantry Brigade] takes second place to NO other [Brigade] in the British or Canadian Armies...We won't get this reputation by telling people how good we are.

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<sup>92</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 19 January 1943.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 25-26 January 1943.

We will be judged by what we do and how we do it.”<sup>94</sup> With this motivation in mind, Chris Vokes and his troops left their billets in Eastbourne on 10 February 1943 and began moving north to the Scottish Highlands, where they underwent the most demanding and realistic combined operations training they had yet experienced.



**Map 2 Combined Operations Training Centre, Inverary, Scotland**

(Reference: [http://encarta.msn.com/map\\_701582321/Troon.html](http://encarta.msn.com/map_701582321/Troon.html))

<sup>94</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, February 1943, Appendix 11.

The period that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade spent at Inverary, from 14 February to 2 March 1943, was busy for everyone. It began with “hardening” training which, as Private Charlie Johnson of the Seaforth Highlanders recalled, included runs through the Scottish countryside and climbing up and down scrambling nets while wearing battle equipment and carrying weapons and ammunition. This was followed by practicing boarding and exiting an unused landing craft that had been beached.<sup>95</sup> Then came two battalion-level exercises, EAGLE I and EAGLE II, during which the troops conducted actual landings by day and by night. Throughout it all, as the brigade’s war diarist noted, Vokes was “out nearly all day” making notes on how to improve his troops’ performance, which he passed on to the COs for implementation. Vokes was present at night training, too. In fact, he very nearly came to grief on the evening of 25 February when he fell over a 15-foot sea wall and landed on a pile of old barbed wire. Luckily, he survived unscathed.<sup>96</sup>

Brigadier Vokes’s abilities as a commander were also being exercised at Inverary, for the culmination of the training was Exercise DALMALLY, a brigade-level assault landing scheduled for the night of 28 February. In order to prepare for this challenging task, Chris Vokes started writing his appreciation six days beforehand.<sup>97</sup> He used the standard method that he had been taught in Staff College, methodically analyzing the tactical situation in order to develop his plan. Vokes carefully considered how factors

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<sup>95</sup> Charles Monroe Johnson, *Action with the Seaforths* (New York: Vantage Press, 1954), 98-103.

<sup>96</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary. See especially the entries for 19, 20, and 25 February 1943.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 February 1943, and Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, March 1943, “Exercise ‘DALMALLY’, Appreciation by Comd 2 Cdn Inf Bde, 1400 hrs, 20 February 1943.” See also The War Office (UK), *Military Training Pamphlet No. 23, Operations, Part III: Appreciations, Orders, Intercommunication and Movements – 1939* (London: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, reprinted in Canada with Amendment No. 1 in February 1941), 1-4.

such as the strength and capabilities of the enemy and his own troops, the nature of the ground, and the amount of time available would affect his ability to achieve his mission. Based on this analysis, Vokes developed two possible courses of action and, using a comparative method, decided which one he would actually use. His final plan, which he issued to his COs on 26 February, was simple and apparently easily understood by his subordinates, for according to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's war diarist, Exercise DALMALLY "went according to plan." Indeed, the initial landings went very smoothly and the beachhead was secured within a few hours.<sup>98</sup>

Doug Delaney has said that "the [2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's] combined operations training at Inverary, Scotland, was progressive and comprehensive, and it did wonders for unit skills and morale."<sup>99</sup> But if the brigade's officers and men were galvanized by what they had learned, the CTC staff was equally impressed by their performance: "The Senior Naval Officer gave us a bouquet which has to be recorded, namely that our communications throughout the [Exercise] DALMALLY were better than any similar [Group] had shown."<sup>100</sup> Such a compliment must have contributed to a greater sense of confidence between the formation's leader and his followers, as well as having boosted morale.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade returned to its billets at Eastbourne on 5 March 1943; the next day, it was ordered to move to an area centred on Seaford, about 15 kilometres to the west. There, the formation resumed its training. At the end of the month the brigade took part in a divisional scheme called Exercise PAST, which focused on the conduct of deliberate attacks, the defence, and river crossings. Vokes's preparations for the exercise

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<sup>98</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 26 February and 1 March 1943, and Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, 48.

<sup>99</sup> Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, 46.

<sup>100</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 2 March 1943.

were typically thorough. In keeping with his efforts to continually improve his formation's operational performance, Vokes issued a "lessons learned" document after the exercise was over. His main focus was the orders process. Believing that detailed orders would only be possible for the first phase of an attack, Vokes directed that in the future his command group would move with the headquarters of the lead battalion during an advance; at the same time, the command elements of the other two units would also travel well forward. This, Vokes argued, would save time in reconnaissance and speed up the delivery of orders, thereby allowing him to commit his forces to battle faster.<sup>101</sup>

Chris Vokes's thorough approach to technical matters in the spring of 1943 was not necessarily unique within the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division; as the comment regarding the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade's performance at Inverary suggests, that formation's commander, Howard Graham, was equally diligent. What *was* different was the nature of some new initiatives that Vokes implemented during this same time to promote good teamwork and morale. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of March, he ordered his COs to conduct "an officers' day each week with all [available officers] taking part in an outdoor TEWT, [with] particular stress to be paid on [the] study of ground," as well as "one NCO's day at least once per month when all NCOs will receive the same [training] as the [officers]."<sup>102</sup> Vokes also launched a competition to design a brigade emblem (with a prize of £5) on 13 March; the emblem would symbolize the spirit of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, and would be displayed on the brigadier's vehicle pennant. This aroused a considerable and positive response from the brigade, for

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<sup>101</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, April 1943, Appendix 18, "2 Cdn Inf Bde Training Instruction No. 5, Appendix B – LESSONS OF [Exercise] 'PAST,' 16 April 1943."

<sup>102</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15256, Seaforth War Diary, "2 Cdn Inf Bde Trg Instruction No. 3, 23 March 1943."

several teams were formed within the units and the brigade headquarters, most of which were made up of junior soldiers. Ultimately, the design chosen by the brigadier was a grizzly bear on a blue background.<sup>103</sup> Like Vokes's efforts to develop junior leadership in the fall of 1942, these initiatives were apparently unique to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, as there is no record of similar events within the war diaries of either the 1<sup>st</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigades.<sup>104</sup>

By the end of April 1943 it was evident that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade had come together as a cohesive team. Everyone had played their part, but the leading role belonged to Brigadier Chris Vokes who, despite his own lack of battle experience, had proven to be very effective in training soldiers. Much of his success stemmed from his provision of personal leadership. Always leading from the front, Vokes demanded very high standards of teamwork, discipline, and operational performance from every member of the brigade. These elements, combined with his planning, organizational, and teaching skills, his emphasis on leadership training, and his appreciation for the human element, were key factors in Vokes's success in making the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade an efficient, close-knit fighting formation. Equally important was the fact that Vokes had imported men whom he believed possessed strong command and leadership abilities to occupy key staff and command positions within his brigade, an astute move that showed sound judgment on his part. In achieving all this, Chris Vokes had earned the respect of his subordinates, peers, and superiors alike. All that was needed was an actual combat operation where he and his men could prove themselves battle-worthy against the enemy.

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<sup>103</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, March 1943, Appendix 10, "2 Cdn Inf Bde Emblem, 13 March 1943." Vokes's decision was announced on 8 April 1943. See LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 8 April 1943.

<sup>104</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14075, 1 CIB War Diary, June 1942 to April 1943, and Volume 14161, 3 CIB War Diary, June 1942 to April 1943.

## CHAPTER 3

### PREPARING FOR BATTLE

*Our days of waiting were over; we were at last to  
come to grips with the enemy.*

Brigadier Christopher Vokes, 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade<sup>1</sup>

For nearly three years, the officers and men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade had waited impatiently for their chance to see action. When it finally came at the end of April 1943, a hectic two-month period of planning and training began. What resulted was a clear demonstration of teamwork at its best. Everyone in the formation performed his duties at the highest possible standard, and morale was never higher. At the centre of all this preparation, directing and leading his men, was Brigadier Christopher Vokes, who once again demonstrated his human and technical skills as a commander.

The story of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's preparations for a combat operation in the spring of 1943 actually began in January, at which time the Axis forces in North Africa had their backs against the wall in Tunisia. With the end of that campaign in sight, Sir Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt met at Casablanca to discuss future operations. Initially, the two nations disagreed on how best to proceed. The British believed that the Allies were not strong enough to successfully mount an attack on northwestern Europe in 1943, and argued that the Mediterranean theatre offered immediate prospects for success. The Americans feared that this would divert resources from what they considered to be the main effort, but could see the tactical advantage in maintaining the momentum of the Allied offensive. They reluctantly agreed to the "temporary expedient" of seizing the

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<sup>1</sup> CWM, Vokes, *Unpublished Lectures and Speeches*, Volume 2, "Recollections of an Army Career," (n.d.), 260.

island of Sicily, which was to be used “as a base for operations against Southern Europe and to open the Mediterranean to the shipping of the United Nations.”<sup>2</sup> Code-named Operation HUSKY, this move was intended to knock Italy out of the war and compel the Germans to defend their southern flank, thereby depleting their strength elsewhere.

Originally, Canadian troops were not to be involved in HUSKY, but the nation’s political and military leaders had long been pressuring the British to get its unused army into action. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 1942, it seemed that they had succeeded. Britain’s Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), General Sir Alan Brooke, told Lt.-Gen. McNaughton, then commanding First Canadian Army, that one of his divisions might participate in Operation BRIMSTONE, an assault being planned against either Sardinia or Sicily.<sup>3</sup> BRIMSTONE, however, was cancelled on 9 February 1943. Disappointed, the Canadians redoubled their efforts, especially after learning that a cross-Channel invasion of Europe would definitely not occur that year. On 23 April, their hard work at last bore fruit when Britain requested that Canada provide an infantry division and an independent tank brigade to replace the 3<sup>rd</sup> (British) Infantry Division for Operation HUSKY. Two days later, the Canadian government signalled its approval, whereupon General McNaughton selected the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division and the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Army Tank Brigade to take part in the mission.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “The Conquest of Sicily,” Despatch by His Excellency Field Marshal the Viscount Alexander of Tunis, 12 February 1948, quoted in Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> This was the real reason why the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade had undergone combined operations training in early 1943. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 24.

<sup>4</sup> McNaughton Papers, Volume 136, File PA 1-14-1, “McNaughton to Brooke, 25 April 1942.” Lt.-Gen. McNaughton, who feared the breakup of First Canadian Army if its formations were detached for employment under British command, concurred with sending Canadian troops to Sicily so long as they returned to England afterward. Granatstein, *The Generals*, 74.

For the officers and men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, events began to move very quickly. On 25 April, Brigadier Vokes attended a divisional “Orders Group” – a conference at which a commander delivers orders to his key subordinates – where he was informed that the brigade would “undergo special training from the 10-16 May and would sever its [operational] role in [the Seaford] sector.” The same day, all leave was cancelled.<sup>5</sup> On the 26<sup>th</sup>, Vokes was ordered to report with two of his COs for a “planning course” in London; two days later his brigade major, staff captain, IO, and a clerk joined him.<sup>6</sup> Their destination was Norfolk House, located in St. James Square, where they met Maj.-Gen. Salmon, his staff, and the other two brigade commanders, Howard Graham and Howard Penhale. The brigade officers had no idea why they had been summoned, and it was only after their arrival that they were told that the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division had been chosen for Operation HUSKY. Vokes was delighted; after all, “this was what we had come for.” He also learned that because he was the formation’s longest serving brigadier, General Salmon had appointed him as his deputy division commander for the invasion.<sup>7</sup>

Almost immediately, Salmon and several of his key officers had to fly to Cairo to be briefed by XXX (British) Corps, under which the Canadians would serve in Sicily.<sup>8</sup> His aircraft took off at 0900 hours on 29 April: tragically, it crashed soon afterward, killing everyone on board. Within hours, General McNaughton transferred Maj.-Gen.

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<sup>5</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 25 April 1943.

<sup>6</sup> Lt.-Cols. Hoffmeister and Lindsay accompanied Vokes to Norfolk House. LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 26 April 1943.

<sup>7</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 86 and CWM, Vokes, Volume 2, “Recollections of an Army Career,” 258. Howard Graham assumed command of the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade on 15 January 1943, while Howard Penhale took over the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade on 8 April 1943. In terms of time in rank, the senior brigadier was actually Penhale, who had been promoted two months earlier than Vokes. Grodzinski, *Operational Handbook for the First Canadian Army*, 42.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 29-30. This meeting had been requested by the British in order to coordinate planning and preparation for the forthcoming operation.

Guy Granville Simonds from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division to take over.<sup>9</sup> Like many in the division, Chris Vokes was shocked by General Salmon's death, but he was happy about Simonds's appointment. The two men had been friends since their days at the Royal Military College, and Vokes greatly respected Simonds's military abilities, as did most officers.<sup>10</sup> As a professional soldier, though, Vokes realized that "I would be judged on my performance and by what my brigade did in action, and that if I didn't measure up, or if the brigade didn't, I would be fired by Guy, old friendship notwithstanding."<sup>11</sup> This was indeed possible, for Simonds had a reputation for cold efficiency with subordinates. Lt.-Col. George Kitching, who had left the Edmonton in December 1942 to become the 1<sup>st</sup> Division's GSO 1, later recalled Vokes telling him, "Now we've got to sharpen up."<sup>12</sup>

At 0915 hours on 30 April, Chris Vokes and three other officers flew to Cairo to meet with the XXX Corps planners.<sup>13</sup> Simonds and the rest of his party followed the next day. All were generally aware that the overall plan for Operation HUSKY had changed since its first conception, but they had no accurate information as to how these changes would affect the Canadian landing.<sup>14</sup> As it happened, the Allied invasion plan was only approved in principle on 3 May, the day before Simonds arrived in Egypt. Briefly, the

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<sup>9</sup> LAC, McNaughton Papers, Volume 136, File P.A. 1-14-1, "CANMILITARY GS 954, McNaughton to [Lieutenant-General] Stuart, 29 April 1943."

<sup>10</sup> For views on Simonds's military abilities, see Granatstein, *The Generals*, 146.

<sup>11</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 88.

<sup>12</sup> LAC, Kitching-Thackery Interview, 30 July 1980.

<sup>13</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10861, File 232C1.013 (D2), "Diary of Planning Party Trip to Middle East, n.d."

<sup>14</sup> Montgomery was behind most of these changes. For more on how these plans evolved, see Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 9-20; Moloney, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East*, Volume 5, *The Campaign in Sicily, 1943 and the Campaign in Italy, 3rd September 1943 to 31st March 1944* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1973), 1-24; Montgomery, *Memoirs*, 170-182; and Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield 1942 - 1944* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1983), 245-272.

revised plan called for an assault on the southeastern corner of Sicily, supported by naval and air forces (see Map 3 on page 73). General Sir Harold Alexander, commanding the 15th Army Group, would direct land operations.<sup>15</sup> General Sir Bernard Montgomery's Eighth (British) Army, consisting of six infantry divisions, one infantry brigade, and an airborne division, was to assault the beaches between Syracuse and Pozallo and seize Syracuse's port and the Pachino airfield. Lt.-Gen. George S. Patton's Seventh (US) Army of four infantry divisions, an armoured division, and an airborne division was to land on the left between Scaramia and Licata, where it would protect the British left flank and capture several airfields.<sup>16</sup> D-Day was to be 10 July 1943, just two months away.

Upon arriving in Cairo on 4 May, General Simonds learned that the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division was to assault the beaches near Pachino, which was on the extreme left of the British landing area, and take the nearby airfield. On the Canadians' right would be the 51<sup>st</sup> (Highland) Division; a Special Service Brigade of Royal Marine Commandos would protect the left flank. At the same time Simonds was being briefed, Chris Vokes and George Kitching updated the XXX Corps staff on the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division's training, while other members of the Canadian team tackled a myriad of administrative details. That night Simonds drafted his plan, which was cabled the next day to Norfolk House where the divisional and brigade staffs were working on the written orders.<sup>17</sup>

As historian Bill McAndrew has aptly noted, "time was brutally short" for the Canadians to prepare for battle.<sup>18</sup> The task was especially difficult for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade because its commander would be absent for two critical weeks. It fell to Dick Malone, as

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<sup>15</sup> The Allied chain of command for Operation HUSKY is provided at Appendix 3.

<sup>16</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 20.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>18</sup> McAndrew, *Canadians and the Italian Campaign*, 26.

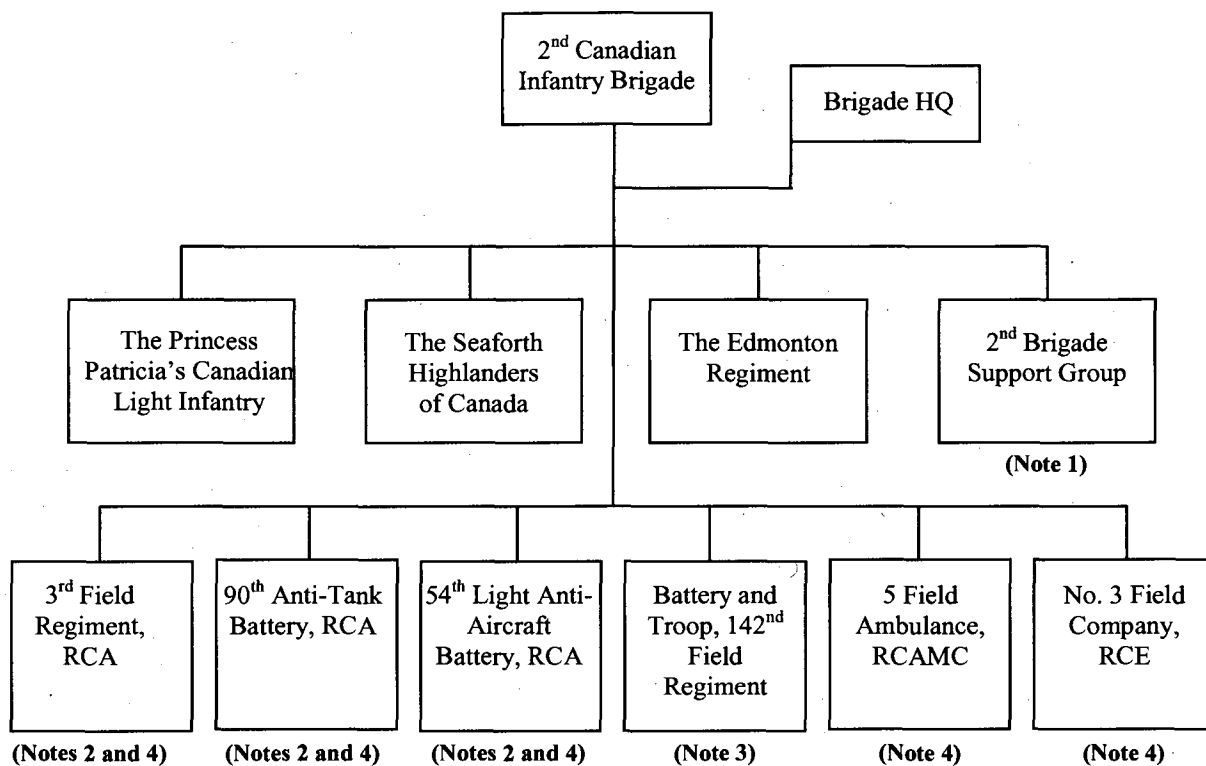
brigade major, to produce the orders: "I had had no time to discuss a single point with Chris Vokes before he left [London]. I didn't even know whether he wished to attack with one battalion or two...so I got on with it and trusted to God."<sup>19</sup> Three sets of plans had to be developed simultaneously. The first task was to start moving the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade and its attached units (see Figure 4) by road and rail to Scotland on 7 May for further amphibious training. Secondly, ship-loading tables specifying vehicles, supplies, and troops that would be loaded aboard each ship had to be produced.<sup>20</sup> Because the vessels had to be loaded tactically – which meant that items needed immediately upon landing had to be loaded last – the planners needed to know the details of the orders for the beach assault, which constituted the third major plan that had to be written. All this involved a great deal of intricate staff work. In the midst of this frenzied activity, Malone had to face an even greater personal test. In order to familiarize himself with the current state of planning, Simonds announced that both he and General Alan Brooke, the CIGS, would listen to the outline brigade plans (which were based on what was known at the time) at 2100 hours on 30 April. Major Malone was understandably nervous about presenting his plan to such high-ranking officers, but it would seem evident that Vokes's trust in his abilities was well-placed. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's plan was "approved without change."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Richard S Malone, *Missing from the Record* (Toronto: Collins, 1946), 24. The acting Brigade Commander, Lt.-Col. Lindsay, remained at Seaford. LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, "Field Return of Officers, Weeks Ending 14 and 21 May 1943."

<sup>20</sup> The shiploading plans were due at Division Headquarters by 14 May. LAC, RG 24, Volume 10861, File 232C1.015 (D2), "1 Cdn Div Planning Programme, 26 Apr – 10 Jun 43, "Op HUSKY," n.d.

<sup>21</sup> Malone, *Missing from the Record*, 25, and LAC, RG 24, Volume 10861, File 232C1.015 (D2), "1 Cdn Div Planning Programme, 26 Apr – 10 Jun 43, "Op HUSKY," n.d.



**Notes:**

1. For Operation HUSKY, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's Support Group deployed with only the mortar and machine-gun companies. The anti-aircraft company joined the brigade in Italy in September 1943.
2. Artillery units were normally controlled by the division's Commander Royal Artillery (CRA) and placed in support to a brigade for a specific mission, not under command.
3. 142 Field Regiment was a British artillery unit equipped with self-propelled artillery pieces.
4. These units were normally affiliated with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, which meant that they typically operated in support of the formation, although not necessarily under command.

Reference: 1 Cdn Div Op O No. 1, 7 June 1943.

**Figure 4 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade Task Organization, Operation HUSKY**

Chris Vokes returned to England only on 14 May, having been delayed by aircraft problems.<sup>22</sup> Much had happened during his absence. The Seaforths' headquarters staff had spent most of 28 April burning documents: two days later, the acting CO, Major J.D. Forin, lectured the men "on the maintenance of security [which sent] the rumour-mongers off into new ecstasies of embellishment."<sup>23</sup> On 1 May, a Brigade Support Group was created and the infantry battalion war establishments were modified.<sup>24</sup> On 4 May, the Patricias' war diary noted that, "the tension and suspense is becoming more pronounced – little is said for fear of being overheard by security personnel."<sup>25</sup> These events aroused the suspicions of many soldiers. The most obvious indication that something was afoot, however, was the issue of new equipment. At the end of April, the battalions' anti-tank platoons received modern 6-pounder anti-tank guns. By the end of May, Thompson sub-machine guns and light-weight "khaki drill" tropical clothing had been distributed.<sup>26</sup> The Edmontons' war diarist likely spoke for many soldiers when he noted that "Never since the time of our proposed trip to Norway in 1940 has equipment been issued so freely."<sup>27</sup>

Everyone in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade was excited by these mysterious happenings, and Chris Vokes was no exception. Major Dick Malone later claimed that:

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<sup>22</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 89, and Kitching, *Mud and Green Fields*, viii-xiii.

<sup>23</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15256, Seaforth War Diary, 29 April 1943.

<sup>24</sup> Between 1 January and 1 May 1943, the number of rifle companies changed from four to three and back to four again. The creation of the Brigade Support Group resulted from a re-organization of the divisional machine-gun battalion, the Saskatoon Light Infantry, into a divisional support battalion. DHH, Oglesby, *Army Headquarters Historical Report No. 57*, 19 and 37-38.

<sup>25</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, 5 April 1943.

<sup>26</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073; 2 CIB War Diary, 26 May 1943. Other items included 4.2-inch mortars and 20-millimetre anti-aircraft guns for the Support Group. For a more detailed description, see Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 35-36.

<sup>27</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15113, LER War Diary, 24 May 1943. The war diarist was referring to a proposed deployment of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade to Trondheim in April 1940 to help the British repel the German invaders. This operation was cancelled due to its great risk.

Just before leaving Sussex [to go to Inverary], Chris had published in Brigade Orders a prohibition against shaving the upper lip...applicable to all ranks. It was a harmless gag which produced a monster moustache-growing contest, and everyone went along with the nonsense. Chris gave as his reason that, as it was no longer necessary to attract the girls in Britain, everyone should look as fierce as possible now to scare the hell out of the enemy.<sup>28</sup>

For his part, Vokes claimed in his memoirs that he did not cut his moustache for the next three years. Indeed, its huge, walrus-like shape became a personal idiosyncrasy that Chris Vokes cultivated for the rest of his life.<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade was in Scotland carrying out combined operations training, which was conducted in much the same way as it had been in February when the brigade had last been at the Combined Training Centre. Once again, the units underwent “hardening training,” which was followed by two battalion-level exercises – EAGLE I (a daytime landing), and EAGLE II (a night assault) – on 13 and 15 May, respectively. Generally speaking, all three units carried out these exercises with few difficulties: the troops were in good spirits, and some PPCLI soldiers had even been heard singing during a downpour.<sup>30</sup> Vokes had missed both exercises but he was just as busy as his men were, for he was catching up with Major Malone and his small planning team at Norfolk House. Trusting Lt.-Col. Lindsay and the other COs to supervise activities in Scotland, he remained in London until he was satisfied that all was in order with the brigade plans. Then, knowing that he had to participate in a brigade-level practice landing (Exercise WETSHOD) scheduled for 20-21 May, Vokes left for Scotland with his staff captain, D.W. Maclean, arriving at Inverary on 19 May.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Malone, *A Portrait of War*, 152.

<sup>29</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 100.

<sup>30</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, 15 May 1943.

<sup>31</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 19 May 1943.

Exercise WETSHOD was to be a night assault for which Vokes planned to land the PPCLI and the Seaforths, keeping the Edmonton Regiment as a floating reserve.<sup>32</sup> The men were already aboard the ships when he arrived, but a curious event had occurred during their embarkation that provoked further rumours. The Edmontons had boarded the *Circassia* with the Seaforths but were suddenly told – apparently on orders issued directly from London – to move to a larger vessel, the *Dunbar Castle*. Such high-level intervention clearly impressed the Seaforth war diarist, who wrote, “This tends to confirm a theory to which most of the [battalion] holds: that this is no ordinary exercise.”<sup>33</sup>

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade’s ships sailed at 1100 hours on 20 May and arrived at the release point, about ten kilometres off the Scottish coast, at 2100 hours. At midnight the troops boarded their landing craft, but at that point things began to go wrong.<sup>34</sup> The navy landed the PPCLI and the Seaforths on the wrong beaches, a common error in amphibious operations.<sup>35</sup> Significantly, both units quickly sorted themselves out and captured their first phase objectives, actions that validated Chris Vokes’s emphasis on teamwork and his trust in his COs’ leadership abilities. There were also some communications problems, apparently because the radios had not been waterproofed due to a lack of the proper materials. The brigade’s war diarist mentioned two other difficulties, namely “the difficulty in obtaining information and the absence of the regular staff who are still in

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<sup>32</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, “Exercise ‘WETSHOD’ 2 Cdn Inf Bde Op O No. 1, 16 May 1943.”

<sup>33</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15113, LER War Diary, 18 May 1943, and Volume 15255, Seaforth War Diary, 19 May 1943.

<sup>34</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 20 May 1943.

<sup>35</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, 22 May 1943, and Delaney, *The Soldiers’ General*, 50. A similar thing happened on D-Day, when the 4<sup>th</sup> (US) Infantry Division was landed some two kilometres south of the originally planned UTAH beach. Cornelius Ryan, *The Longest Day: June 6, 1944* (Toronto: Popular Library, 1959), 232.

LONDON.”<sup>36</sup> Little of this confusion was the fault of anyone within the brigade, but the truth was that Exercise WETSHOD was not as successful as perhaps it should have been.

Vokes took these lessons with him when he returned to Norfolk House following WETSHOD. His three COs accompanied him, as they were required to attend a briefing being given by Maj.-Gen. Simonds to all commanding officers on 24 May, at which he outlined the divisional plan.<sup>37</sup> His presentation was based on the formation’s operations order, an enormously detailed document that comprised more than 200 typed pages (including annexes). Its final version was published on 7 June 1943, and according to Lt.-Col. George Kitching, it was “the last document of that size that was produced by the division.”<sup>38</sup> Despite the voluminous nature of the order, the plan itself was relatively simple. The assault would be conducted in three phases. First, the division would land on BARK WEST beach on a two-brigade front (see Map 4 on page 77), supported by naval gunfire and close air support. On the right, the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade would come ashore on ROGER beach and seize the Pachino airfield. Chris Vokes’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade would land on the left, on SUGAR beach, and capture the high ground overlooking the coastline. Next, the divisional reserves, which included the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, would disembark. The third phase involved an advance “in conformity with 51 (Highland) Division” to a line running northwest connecting the villages of Rosolini, Ispica, and Pozzallo.<sup>39</sup> Subsequent operations would be developed later as the situation dictated.

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<sup>36</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 21 May 1943.

<sup>37</sup> DHH, Colonel C.P. Stacey, *Report No. 126, Historical Officer, Canadian Military Headquarters*, “Canadian Operations in Sicily, July – August 1943, Part I: The Preliminaries of Operation ‘HUSKY’ (The Assault on Sicily),” 16 November 1944, 107.

<sup>38</sup> Kitching, *Mud and Green Fields*, 144.

<sup>39</sup> DHH, Stacey, *CMHQ Historical Report No. 126*, Appendix G, “1 Canadian Division Operation Order No. 1, 7 June 1943.”

At the same time that the divisional operations order was being finalized, Vokes's staff was putting the finishing touches on the brigade-level orders. These consisted of thirty-two pages, and were signed on 15 June 1943. Chris Vokes intended to make his own attack with two battalions in the first phase. Two companies of the PPCLI would come ashore on the right on SUGAR GREEN beach, destroy the beach defences, and link up with the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade's Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment (Hast PER). The other assault battalion, the Seaforth Highlanders, would land two of its companies on SUGAR AMBER beach, to the left of the PPCLI. Its task was to break through and make contact with the Special Service Brigade, on the brigade's left flank. Both units would land their remaining companies in the second wave. Vokes kept the Edmonton Regiment in reserve to support the PPCLI or the Seaforths as the situation demanded. The COs of the 90<sup>th</sup> Anti-Tank and 54<sup>th</sup> Light Anti-Aircraft Batteries, along with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Field Regiment, all of whom were under Vokes's command for the landing, received their own tasks to support the infantry, as did the mortar company commander from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade Support Group. One of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Field Regiment's more important jobs was to provide forward observation officers (FOOs) – who would direct artillery fire as requested by the infantry – to each battalion. Naval FOO parties would also be provided.<sup>40</sup> All in all, Brigadier Vokes's orders were simple, clear, and concise: in other words, they were exactly what his subordinates had come to expect from him. Moreover, his plan was tactically sound, and complied with all of the principles of the attack as provided in contemporary doctrine.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, June 1943, "2 Canadian Infantry Brigade Operation Order No. 1 – Operation "HUSKY, 15 June 1943."

<sup>41</sup> See The War Office (UK), *Military Training Pamphlet No. 23, Part IX, The Infantry Division in the Attack – 1941* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, reprinted in Canada in September 1941), 1-41.

With the brigade orders nearly ready, Chris Vokes rejoined his troops in Scotland on 27 May 1943. By this time, many of them were enjoying five days of “privilege leave.”<sup>42</sup> Vokes used the opportunity to speak to the brigade’s officers about “the handling of men and morale in general;” he himself offered a good example by granting Captain Norman Pope a 36-hour pass to see his British wife, who had just given birth to a son.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, the training continued. Two division-level assault landing signals exercises, ROCKET I and ROCKET II, were conducted from 8-10 June, with the brigade headquarters participating in both.<sup>44</sup> One week later, on 17-18 June, a division-level assault landing exercise, STYMIE I, was conducted. Few within the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, with the exception of Vokes, some of his staff, and the COs, realized that this exercise was in fact a dress rehearsal. Practically everything about it – the nature and code-names of the landing beaches, the assault plans they were practicing, and the ships the troops were embarked on – was identical to what they would see and do when they attacked Sicily. Even the ship-loading tables were the same: in fact, the brigade staff included the tables for Exercise STYMIE I, which were dated 26 May 1943, in the orders for HUSKY.<sup>45</sup>

Unlike WETSHOD, Exercise STYMIE I came off practically without a hitch, although bad weather prevented the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade from carrying out its landing. This success was welcome news for commanders at all levels. A confirmatory divisional exercise, called STYMIE II, was supposed to be conducted almost immediately afterward, but the weather continued to plague the division. For this reason, STYMIE II

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<sup>42</sup> DHH, Stacey, *CMHQ Historical Report No. 126*, 108.

<sup>43</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, 31 May 1943, and University of Victoria, Pope-Bell Interview, 10 June 1982.

<sup>44</sup> DHH, Stacey, *CMHQ Historical Report No. 126*, 108.

<sup>45</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14073, 2 CIB War Diary, June 1943, “2 Canadian Infantry Brigade Operation Order No. 1 – Operation “HUSKY, 15 June 1943.”

was cancelled on 22 June.<sup>46</sup> It was not rescheduled, for there was very little time left before the 1<sup>st</sup> Division's planned departure for the Mediterranean.

By this time, most of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's preparations for Operation HUSKY had been completed. The vehicles had been waterproofed, loaded aboard vessels belonging to a "slow assault convoy," and – along with tons of stores, ammunition, and equipment – had left the United Kingdom on 19 June. The troops themselves were embarked on the ships on which they would travel to Sicily. The Seaforths and Brigade Headquarters were loaded onto His Majesty's Troopship (HMT) *Circassia*. The Edmonton Regiment was travelling on HMT *Durban Castle*, while the PPCLI was on the *Llangibby Castle*. These vessels were part of the "fast assault convoy" which was due to sail on 28 June. Both groups were to reunite at sea on 5 July, five days before the planned landings.<sup>47</sup>

It was roughly during this period that Brigadier Vokes apparently had a "run-in" with General Simonds. The division commander had inspected the brigade for the first time on 5 June 1943, and he had met the unit COs. According to Dick Malone, Simonds was not impressed by the slow-speaking commander of the Edmonton Regiment, Lt.-Col. J.C. Jefferson (who had replaced George Kitching in December 1942), and Major G.A. Welsh, a 46-year old First World War veteran commanding 90 Anti-Tank Battery, and wanted them removed from their commands. Having known Jefferson for five months, Vokes considered him a very capable officer, and had formed the same opinion of Welsh while watching him with his battery in Scotland. Realizing that such a last-minute change would seriously upset his brigade, he argued strongly against it. After some discussion, Vokes "finally elicited from Simonds a grudging consent that the two COs

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<sup>46</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 42.

<sup>47</sup> DHH, Stacey, *CMHQ Historical Report No. 126*, 159-160.

should be given their chance in action. If in the first week they didn't stack up, Chris would undertake to fire them himself."<sup>48</sup> In standing up for these men, Vokes again showed that he was a good judge of military ability. Both Lt.-Col. Jefferson and Major Welsh won DSOs in Sicily: moreover, in February 1944 Jefferson was promoted to command the 10<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, part of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Division, which he successfully led until the end of the war in 1945.<sup>49</sup>

During the two months of preparation for Operation HUSKY, it was obvious to all that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade was functioning like a well-oiled machine. The mutual respect that had been established between Vokes and his principal subordinates allowed him, as brigade commander, to focus his effort where and when it was most needed: he knew he could trust his brigade staff in London and his COs in Scotland to do their jobs without constant supervision on his part. Good teamwork, leadership, and initiative at all levels of command were clearly evident during the brigade's assault landing exercises, as was a determination on the part of all ranks to learn from their mistakes. High standards of military performance and discipline were accepted as the norm, and morale was sky-high throughout the brigade. It was under these highly satisfactory circumstances that, on the evening of 28 June 1943, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's long training period in the United Kingdom came to an end. The day they had all been waiting for had finally arrived. Brigadier Christopher Vokes and his men were going to war.

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<sup>48</sup> Malone, *A Portrait of War*, 139.

<sup>49</sup> DHH, Colonel C.P. Stacey, *Report No. 135, Historical Officer, Canadian Military Headquarters*, "Canadian Operations in Sicily, July – August 1943, Part II, The Execution of the Operation by 1 Cdn Inf Div, Section 2, The Pursuit of the Germans from VIZZINI to ADERNO, 15 Jul – 6 Aug, Appendix A, Canadian Honours and Awards for the Sicilian Campaign," 212, and Grodzinski, *Operational Handbook for the First Canadian Army*, 71.



## CHAPTER 4

### LEARNING THE ROPES

*Sicily was where we met the Germans, beat them, and became soldiers. Before that we weren't soldiers.*

Anonymous Canadian veteran of the Sicilian campaign<sup>1</sup>

By June 1943, Christopher Vokes had successfully met every challenge he had been given as a brigade commander: it remained to be seen was if he could duplicate such achievements on the battlefield. During his first three weeks of action in Sicily, Vokes passed this ultimate test. Like the anonymous veteran quoted above, he learned how to adapt his “technical” and human command skills to a combat environment; more importantly, he adopted new methods that made his performance even more effective. By the end of the battle of Leonforte on 22 July 1943, Brigadier Vokes had proven to his superiors and subordinates alike that he was a highly capable battlefield leader.

On the evening of 28 June, just before the ships carrying the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade sailed from the Clyde Estuary in Scotland, Chris Vokes told the officers and NCOs of his three battalions that they were going to join the British Eighth Army in the Mediterranean to take part in “a landing that [would] be the first blow in the invasion of the Continent.” What he did not say was exactly *where* they were going: it was only on 1 July 1943 that the troops learned that they were bound for Sicily.<sup>2</sup> This news was followed by a flurry of activity. Over the course of the next few days, as Vokes later recalled, “every officer,

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Broadfoot, *Six War Years, 1939-1945: Memories of Canadians at Home and Abroad* (Don Mills, Ont.: PaperJacks Ltd., 1976), 148.

<sup>2</sup> For Vokes's visits see LAC, RG 24, Volume 15256, Seaforth War Diary, 28 June 1943; Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, 28 June 1943; and Volume 15113, LER War Diary, 28 June 1943. The announcement that Sicily was the target is described at LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, 1 July 1943.

non-commissioned officer and man was carefully briefed in the tasks which lay ahead.” At the same time, he and his staff monitored incoming intelligence reports, which indicated that the enemy remained unaware of the forthcoming invasion, while his soldiers practiced embarkation drills and did calisthenics to keep in shape.<sup>3</sup>

On 1 July the troops also listened to messages from Generals Montgomery, McNaughton, and Simonds, who welcomed them to the Eighth Army and urged them to do their country proud.<sup>4</sup> Shortly afterwards, Chris Vokes issued his own “Message to All Ranks,” stating that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade would “destroy the enemy wherever he may be found,” that the men must be “hard and ruthless,” and that “only cowards surrender.” He concluded by wishing his men “good luck – and good scalping.”<sup>5</sup> These were tough words, and reactions to them varied. Roy Durnford, the chaplain for the Seaforths, could see that the brigadier’s message was “designed to instill a certain fearsomeness into the character of his men...and doubtless, from a military point of view, a much needed injection.” Still, he found “something repulsive in this business of teaching men to hate their fellows...a man can fight without bitterness.”<sup>6</sup> Major Tom de Faye, the CO of the Brigade Support Group, agreed, describing Vokes’s message as “ill-conceived.”<sup>7</sup> It seems clear that Vokes’s choice of words stemmed from his “tough guy” persona, an

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<sup>3</sup> CWM, Vokes, Volume 2, “Recollections of an Army Career,” 261, and Johnson, *Action with the Seaforths*, 133-138.

<sup>4</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10499, File 214B8.016 (D1), “Personal Message from the [Eighth] Army Commander, July 1943,” and Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 44.

<sup>5</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15113, LER War Diary, July 1943, Appendix 1, “Message to All Ranks, 2 Cdn Inf Bde,” n.d.

<sup>6</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 20405, File 958.001 (D1), “Diary of Major Roy C.H. Durnford, Chap (P), the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, June 1943 to June 1945, 28 June 1943.”

<sup>7</sup> University of Victoria, Reginald H.R. Roy fonds, Record No. 167, Interview with Colonel Thomas de Faye, by Mark C. Hill (hereafter de Faye-Hill Interview), 3 June 1985, Victoria, B.C.

approach that sometimes produced the opposite effect to that which he intended. Chris Vokes's intentions were entirely good – to promote a healthy fighting spirit among his men – but to many soldiers he sounded more like America's George S. Patton than a Canadian officer.<sup>8</sup> Vokes's tough talk was part of who he was as a person, and some of his men liked such an approach. In this instance, however, others did not.

On 9 July, the two Canadian convoys linked up with each other about seventy miles south of Malta. The "fast convoy" made the trip without loss, but German U-boats sank three ships of the "slow convoy," along with 52 men, 562 vehicles, and 38 guns of varying types.<sup>9</sup> The Canadians joined an Allied invasion fleet numbering some 3,000 ships; overhead, 4,300 aircraft swept the skies clear of the enemy's air force.<sup>10</sup> The only problem was the weather, for that morning a Mediterranean storm (known as a *sirocco*) began, producing huge waves that threatened to make the troops' embarkation into their landing craft a dangerous proposition. By nightfall the seas were calmer, although there was still a heavy swell when, at 0048 hours on 10 July, the ships carrying the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division dropped anchor some eleven kilometres offshore from Pachino.<sup>11</sup>

Aboard the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's troopships, few knew what to expect when they hit the beach. Some soldiers undoubtedly recalled the disaster that had befallen the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Division at Dieppe in August 1942, and wondered if they might face a similar reception from the enemy ashore. From contemporary accounts, however, it seems that

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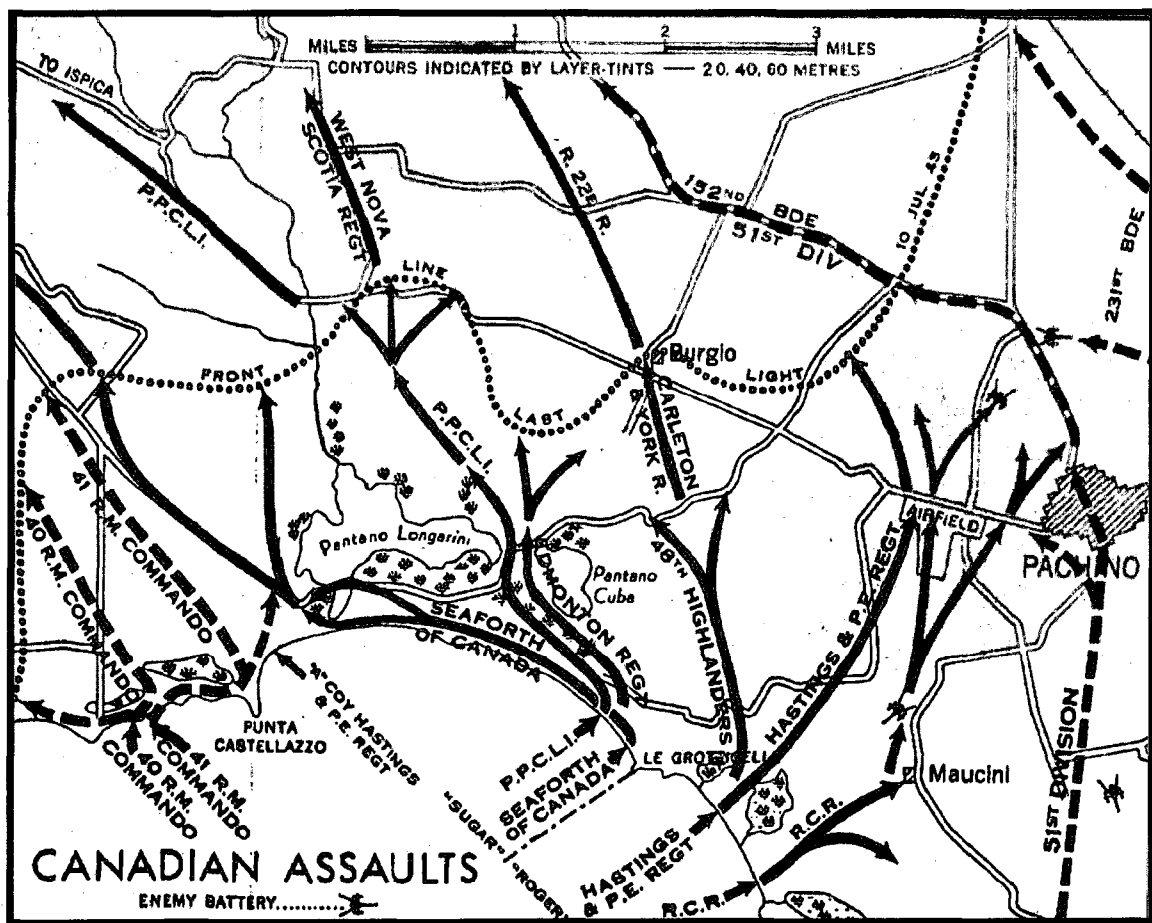
<sup>8</sup> Years later, George Kitching described Chris Vokes as "Canada's Patton." LAC, Kitching-Thackery Interviews, 30 July 1980.

<sup>9</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, 4 July 1943, and Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 46.

<sup>10</sup> S.W.C. Pack, *Operation "Husky"* (Vancouver: Douglas David & Charles, 1977), 52, and Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 64-80.

<sup>11</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 67-68.

most of the assault troops, like those seen by PPCLI company commander Captain D. Brain aboard the *Llangibby Castle*, were “confident and cheerful.”<sup>12</sup> Chris Vokes, aware that in a few hours his men might be fighting for their lives, offered some final words of encouragement: “Actions speak louder than words! Go in and get the bastards.” This time, his message was better received. The PPCLI war diarist noted that, “The words were typical of our [brigadier] and a roaring cheer greeted them.”<sup>13</sup>



**Map 4 The Canadian Landings at Pachino, 10 July 1943**

(Source: G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, Map No. 2, Close-Up of Canadian Landing Zone)

<sup>12</sup> Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, 31, and LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, Appendix 12, “The Initial Landing in Sicily, by Maj. D. Brain, PPCLI, n.d..”

<sup>13</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, 10 July 1943.

At about 0245 hours on 10 July 1943, under the cover of naval gunfire, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade began landing on SUGAR beach (see Map 4).<sup>14</sup> On the right, the PPCLI achieved complete surprise. The Seaforths also met little opposition, but in a set of circumstances reminiscent of Exercise WETSHOD a few weeks earlier, their two assault companies landed at the PPCLI beachhead while the rest of the unit came ashore even further to the east. Despite this initial confusion, Lt.-Col. Hoffmeister and his company commanders quickly sorted themselves out and seized their objectives on the high ground to the northwest of the beach area. Douglas Delaney has said that this corrective action proved the worth of the training that the unit had done in Scotland.<sup>15</sup> It also validated Chris Vokes's efforts in developing leadership, teamwork, and initiative in the brigade.

The fact that the landings at Pachino proved to be so unlike Dieppe was primarily due to the ineffectiveness of the Italian-manned beach defences, which Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, Germany's Commander-in-Chief South, contemptuously described as "mere eyewash."<sup>16</sup> This fortunate circumstance, however, was not immediately clear to Brigadier Vokes: "From my battle station on the upper deck of *Circassia* there appeared to be a great deal of firing and tumult ashore. There were streams of tracer flying in all directions, aircraft were dropping flares and bombs and it was hard to know whether they were friend or foe. The big guns of His Majesty's ships had opened up and the din was terrific."<sup>17</sup> It therefore came as "a great relief" when, sometime between 0350 and 0400 hours, Lt.-Cols. Hoffmeister and Lindsay radioed that the beaches had been secured with

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<sup>14</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15256, Seaforth War Diary, 10 July 1943, and LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, 10 July 1943.

<sup>15</sup> Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, 55.

<sup>16</sup> Albert Kesselring, translated by Lynton Hudson, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal Kesselring* (London: William Kimber & Co., 1953), 158.

<sup>17</sup> CWM, Vokes, Volume 2, "Recollections of an Army Career," 262.

only a few casualties, and that numerous Italian prisoners had been taken. Armed with this information, Vokes “ordered the Edmontons to land behind [the] PPCLI as quickly as possible and with my brigade headquarters I landed on the beach at 0430 hours.”<sup>18</sup>

In fact, part of Vokes’s headquarters, led by Major Dick Malone, had landed just after the assault companies, which gave the brigadier a further means of coordinating the actions of his two assault battalions. It meant trusting the major to run things during the first hour or so of battle, but having written the brigade’s orders Malone knew what had to be done and Vokes clearly considered him capable of doing the job. Malone’s first priority was to set up communications with the Seaforths and the PPCLI. He later noted that, “we hadn’t been established very long before Chris, together with a few more of our HQ personnel, came striding up the path, full of steam and energy.”<sup>19</sup>

Vokes recalled that, upon landing, “I made a round of my battalions with as little delay as possible and [ordered] them to the beachhead objectives.”<sup>20</sup> This was consistent with his philosophy of personal leadership, and he spent the rest of the day urging his men forward. By 2130 hours the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade was on its Phase Two objective, a piece of high ground about six and a half kilometres inland overlooking Highway 115 (see Map 4). It had been a good day’s work. There had been practically no casualties among Vokes’s battalions: indeed, some soldiers had not even fired their weapons.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> CWM, Vokes, Volume 2, “Recollections of an Army Career,” 262-263, and DHH, Captain J.B. Conacher, *Report No. 127, Historical Officer, Canadian Military Headquarters*, “Canadian Operations in Sicily, July – August 1943, Part II: The Execution of the Operation by 1 Cdn Inf Div, Section 1: The Assault and Initial Penetration Inland,” 21 November 1946, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Malone, *A Portrait of War*, 148.

<sup>20</sup> CWM, Vokes, Volume 2, “Recollections of an Army Career,” 263.

<sup>21</sup> McAndrew, *Canadians and the Italian Campaign*, 42, and LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, 10 July 1943. The division suffered just thirty-two casualties.

At noon on 11 July, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade struck out in a northwesterly direction along Highway 115, taking the towns of Ispica and Modica over the course of the next thirty-six hours.<sup>22</sup> There was little opposition, a pleasant fact that was not entirely unexpected. Despite the presence of some 230,000 Italian and 40,000 German troops, Allied Intelligence considered Sicily to be weakly garrisoned because of the unreliable state of the Italian Sixth Army.<sup>23</sup> The real defenders were the Germans, but with only the Herman Goering Panzer Division and the 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Division present when the Allies landed, they were thinly spread. Initially, only a battle group of the Herman Goering Division was in the invasion area, and a British advance on the Catania Plain – the loss of which would give the Allies an easy path to the Straits of Messina, the sole withdrawal route from the island – quickly absorbed the Germans’ attention.<sup>24</sup> As a result, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division faced only Italians who offered minimal resistance.

With virtually nothing standing in their way a “vacuum” of sorts resulted, and the Canadians moved as quickly as they could in order to keep the enemy off balance. Most of the men had to march, for the infantry battalions were not fully mechanized and, owing to the loss of some 500 vehicles at sea, the division was short of transport. These factors largely determined the rate of advance, which by all accounts was a tough slog. On 12 July, the Seaforths’ war diarist noted that, “mileage covered in the last 24 hours

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<sup>22</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15113, LER War Diary, 11 July 1943, and LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, 12 July 1943.

<sup>23</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 55, and DHH, A.G. Steiger, (Captain), *Report No. 14, Historical Section (G.S.) Army Headquarters*, “The Sicilian Campaign (July – August 1943), Information from German Sources,” 15 April 1947, paragraph 21. Intelligence data was largely obtained through ULTRA, the means by which the Allies read highly classified German messages. See Ralph Bennett, *Ultra and Mediterranean Strategy* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1989), 220-238.

<sup>24</sup> Kesselring, *Memoirs*, 163.

amounted to about 30 miles over rocky mule tracks and hot dusty roads,” a distance that was typical during this time.<sup>25</sup> Combined with the blistering heat of the Sicilian summer, such marches were exhausting work for soldiers carrying heavy loads of ammunition and personal equipment. Living conditions were Spartan, and as Chris Vokes later recalled, “there had been practically no sleep for any man in my brigade.”<sup>26</sup> Still, the brigadier was more fortunate than most because he had the services of his batman, Lance-Corporal Willie Sargeant, who looked after his meals and other such comforts.

Two other elements that affected both marching conditions and the conduct of military operations in Sicily were the island’s sparse road network and its mountainous terrain. Roads were essential in order to get ammunition, food, and water forward to the fighting troops, but the few good ones twisted through steep valleys and wound their way up to the mountaintops where the Sicilians had built their towns as a means of defence against invaders. Canadian planners had the foresight to create a divisional Mule Transporter Company to support cross-country operations over such ground, but the mules could only augment, not replace, vehicular transport.<sup>27</sup> The combination of these factors led Allied commanders to select routes of advance based on the road system, and in the case of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division, to move in brigade or even divisional columns along a single route. This had the effect of reducing the frontage of an

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<sup>25</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15256, Seaforth War Diary, 12 July 1943, and Volume 10981, File 263C2.011 (D1), “Some Comments and Impressions on the Sicilian Campaign, given verbally by Brig. C. Vokes, DSO, Comd 2 Cdn Inf Bde, at Bde Rest Area near MITETELLO in Val di CATANIA on 17 Aug 43.”

<sup>26</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 93-94.

<sup>27</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10889, File 234C1.051 (D1), “Account by Lt.-Col W.P. Gilbride [AA&QMG 1 Cdn Div] – Italy – covering period from 10 Jul – 2 Nov 43,” and Arnold Warren, *Wait for the Waggon: The Story of the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps* (Canada: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1961), 221-241.

advancing formation to that of a single battalion or even a company, which was one of the reasons that many of the Canadian actions in Sicily were fought at those levels.<sup>28</sup>

It was during these first few days that Chris Vokes proved that the dangers of combat would not interfere with his style of personal leadership. Accompanied by two Signal Corps despatch riders, and with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's grizzly bear pennant flying from his jeep – which Vokes had named “Shan,” after a favourite Irish aunt named Susan – the brigadier seemed to be everywhere.<sup>29</sup> Decades later, veterans of the campaign recalled him being forward with the fighting troops. One early incident involved a PPCLI soldier named Andy Schaen, who encountered Vokes while he was crawling through a ditch near Modica on 12 July. Later that day, a ration party from the Seaforth Highlanders led by Captain A.W. Mercer came under fire from the town. Upon learning that Brigadier Vokes was nearby, “we went over and informed him of the situation. He seemed surprised and disturbed, and he ordered artillery fire to be brought to bear on Modica.”<sup>30</sup> Easily recognizable by his walrus-like moustache, Vokes was a familiar sight to his men.

Why did Vokes risk his life in such a way? There were several reasons, which reflected both his character and his appreciation of human nature. Chris Vokes believed in leading by example, and he seemed to understand that in a combat zone, as S.W. “Syd” Thomson of the Seaforth Highlanders so brilliantly put it, “on the scale of 1 to 10, morale

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<sup>28</sup> Shaun Brown, “The Loyal Edmonton Regiment at War, 1939-1945” (MA Thesis: Wilfred Laurier University, 1984), 8, and Cessford, “Hard in the Attack,” 192-193. Mike Cessford has criticized General Simonds's tendency to use only a single axis of advance.

<sup>29</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 93.

<sup>30</sup> For the Andy Schaen story, see David Bercuson, *The Patricias: The Proud History of a Fighting Regiment* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2001), 182. Captain Mercer's account is found in Robert L. McDougall, *A Narrative of War: From the Beaches of Sicily to the Hitler Line with the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, 10 July 1943 – 8 June 1944* (Ottawa: Golden Dog Press, 1996), 16.

will go from 4 to 9 just by the appearance of a senior commander in the line when and where the bullets are flying.”<sup>31</sup> Another related to what Dick Malone described as Vokes’s “great personal bull-like courage,” a trait that may have stemmed from his sense of fatalism: “From the day a soldier is born, his fate is written, and likewise the manner of his going...there is nothing he can do about it, nothing.”<sup>32</sup> The brigadier also had very good “technical” reasons for being at the front, realizing that:

Once a battle commences, there is usually a complete vacuum of information for varying periods of time. The higher the headquarters, the more dense the vacuum. It is only by piecing together various scraps of information from different sources that one can begin to get the picture. If a battle is to be conducted properly the commander concerned must have information. Even negative information is of value.<sup>33</sup>

What Vokes was referring to was something that the great Prussian military philosopher Carl von Clausewitz called “the fog of war.”<sup>34</sup> In Sicily, this phenomenon was compounded by the fact that, for the most part, the Canadian division operated in mountainous terrain, in which the No. 18 set man-pack radios used by the rifle companies were notoriously unreliable.<sup>35</sup> This meant that the quality of the information being passed upward through the chain of command by those who were actually fighting the battle was likely to be spotty, inaccurate, or simply out of date by the time it got to the brigade command post. Chris Vokes’s appreciation of this was why he considered going forward to see things for himself to be so important.

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<sup>31</sup> Colonel (retired) S.W. Thomson, quoted in Delaney, *The Soldiers’ General*, 59.

<sup>32</sup> Malone, *A Portrait of War*, 152, and Vokes, *My Story*, 169.

<sup>33</sup> CWM, Vokes, *Unpublished Lectures and Speeches*, Volume 1, “Battle Tactics,” (n.d.), 46.

<sup>34</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 138-140.

<sup>35</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10735, File 2191C.009 (D181), “Canadian Operations in Sicily,” by Lt.-Col. C.P. Stacey, 27 September 1943, “Extract from 1 Cdn Div Sigs War Diary, 19 July 1943.”

Spending time with his battalions was clearly essential, but Brigadier Vokes also recognized that by doing so he risked losing control of the situation. As he later wrote, “In modern battle, leaders above troop/platoon or squadron/company level seldom lead their troops into battle. It is physically impossible for them to do so, and control their part of the battle. Hence their leadership or command must be exercised from a controlling headquarters and by visits to lower headquarters two below their own commands.”<sup>36</sup> In order to reduce the obvious risks associated with being away from his headquarters, Chris Vokes normally situated it well forward, usually only “a couple of minutes away from the three battalion headquarters.”<sup>37</sup> Close proximity to the units assured reliable communications with their command posts, facilitated his staff’s efforts to coordinate operational planning, and allowed Vokes to go back and forth between his headquarters and the front quickly. At the same time, he trusted his brigade major, Dick Malone, to run things in his absence. Years later, Vokes thought that “Malone... must have gone frantic often when he couldn’t get in touch with me.” The fact was that while the brigadier had a radio in his jeep, “I didn’t much use it except when I was actually at brigade headquarters.”<sup>38</sup> Vokes was rarely far away, though, and maintained contact with his headquarters by using his despatch riders to convey messages.

After a brief rest on 13-14 July, which General Montgomery had ordered to give the Canadians a chance to recuperate, the march inland continued. At the same time, events were occurring at higher levels that would bring their unopposed advance to an end. On 12 July the Germans deployed two regiments of the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Division to

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<sup>36</sup> CWM, Vokes, Volume 1, “Leadership and Man Management,” 118.

<sup>37</sup> Vokes, “Some Reflections on Command,” 9.

<sup>38</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 94-102.

Sicily: these were soon followed by the bulk of the 29<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Division and the headquarters of XIV Panzer Corps, led by General of Panzer Troops Hans Hube, a battle-wise veteran of the Russian front.<sup>39</sup> The next day the commander of the 15<sup>th</sup> Army Group, General Sir Harold Alexander, ordered Montgomery to advance on two axes. The first thrust was to be aimed at Catania, while the other would push northwest to seize Piazza Armerina, Leonforte, and especially Enna, the centrally located hub of the Sicilian road network, in order to split the island in two.<sup>40</sup> These towns were important because they commanded good lateral roads that ran east towards the Catania Plain, and could be used by the Eighth Army to outflank the enemy's defensive positions in that vital area. To counter such moves, the Germans shifted most of their forces to the Eighth Army front. Hube ordered the Herman Goering Panzer Division to establish a main position on the Catania Plain. The 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadiers posted rearguards at the vital hilltop towns to protect the German right flank, and in cooperation with the 29<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Division, began to develop an interior line of defence anchored by Mount Etna.<sup>41</sup>

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade soon felt the effect of these decisions. XXX Corps, to which the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division belonged, had the task of taking Enna, and on 14 July Simonds was ordered to take the lead.<sup>42</sup> The next day, the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade defeated a German rearguard at Grammichele, a small town located on Highway 124 (see Map 5 on page 87). That evening, Vokes was ordered to push his troops through the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade and

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<sup>39</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 115-116.

<sup>40</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10497, File 213A15.012 (D1), "Message No. 0569 from 15 Army Group to 8 Army dated 132116B July 1943."

<sup>41</sup> DHH, Stacey, *CMHQ Historical Report No. 135*, 7-8. See also G.A. Shepperd, *The Italian Campaign, 1943-1945: A Political and Military Re-assessment* (New York: Praeger, 1968), 57, and Moloney, *The Campaign in Sicily, 1943*, 112-113.

<sup>42</sup> Montgomery of Alamein, *El Alamein to the River Sangro; Normandy to the Baltic* (London: Barry & Jenkins in association with Arcadia Press, 1973), 94.

follow a route through Piazza Armerina to capture Enna.<sup>43</sup> The manner in which Vokes received this direction clearly impressed him as a good example of a commander providing a clearly defined mission, because he immediately adopted it for his own use:

General Simonds gave me a verbal order one day as follows: "You will advance along this road as your axis and capture Enna. Get cracking. Any questions?" I said, "Where the hell is Enna?" He replied, "It's about sixty-five miles away and off your map." I said, "Yes, sir." So I gave my battalion commanders the same treatment and headed for Enna. We never got there as someone else got there first, but there was never any doubt in my mind or my battalion commanders where we were going even though the Germans did their best to stop us. That the orders were subsequently changed, altering my objectives to Leonforte and Agira mattered not a whit.<sup>44</sup>

After conducting a reconnaissance with Brigadier Vokes, Lt.-Col. Jefferson led the Edmonton Regiment, accompanied by a squadron of tanks from the Three Rivers Regiment, northwest along Highways 124 and 117. By 1200 hours on 16 July this force was about five kilometres south of Piazza Armerina, when it was ambushed by elements of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 104<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Regiment.<sup>45</sup> Vokes moved forward to be with Jefferson, but was called back to his headquarters to brief General Simonds on what was going on. Satisfied with Vokes's explanation, Simonds left him to get on with the job. The fighting in Piazza Armerina, however, was a battalion-level engagement, and Vokes sensibly let Lt.-Col. Jefferson handle it. By 0600 hours the following morning the Edmontons had captured the town at a cost of six dead and twenty-one wounded.<sup>46</sup>

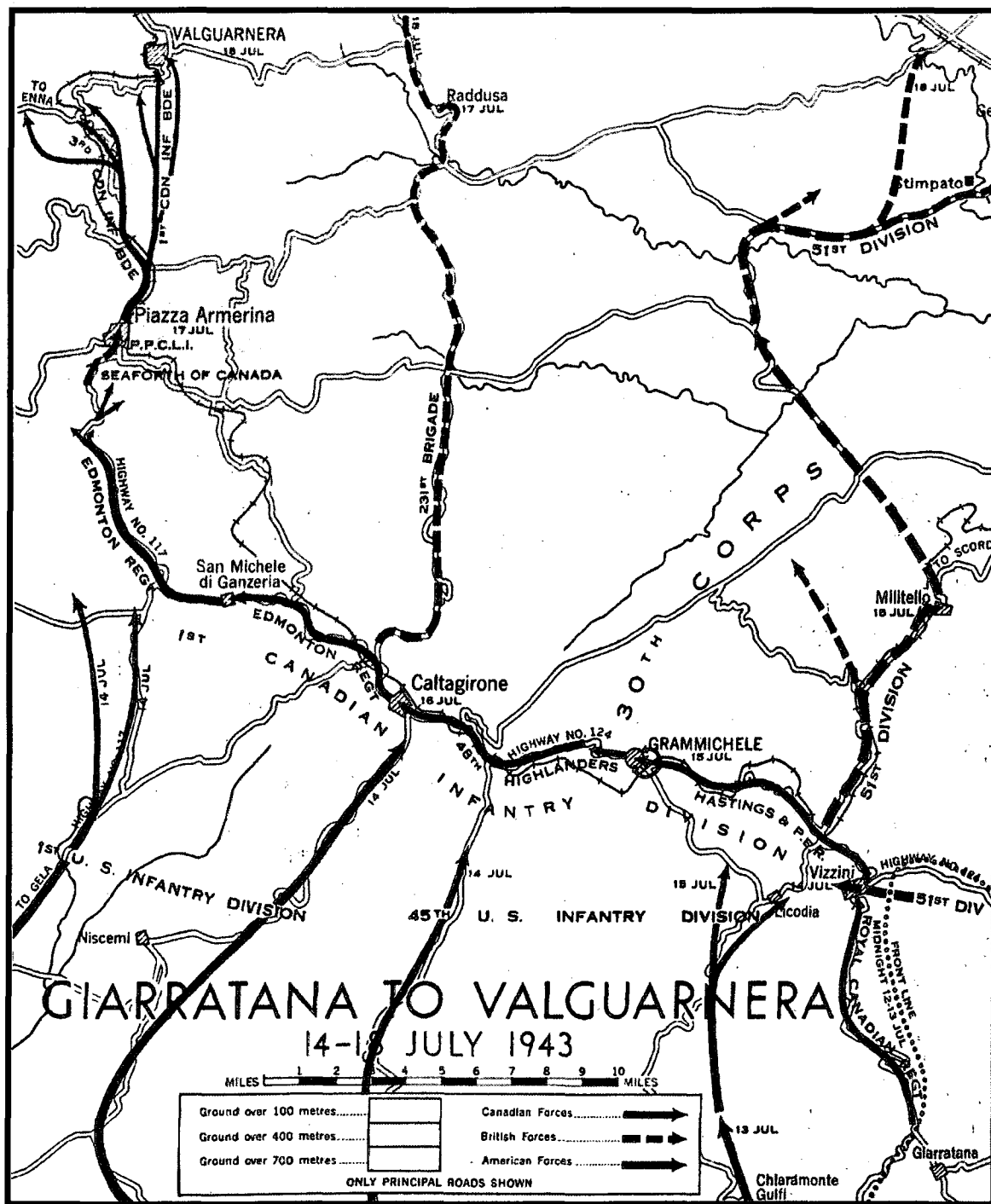
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<sup>43</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, 15 July 1943.

<sup>44</sup> CWM, Vokes, *Unpublished Lectures and Speeches*, Volume 4, "Offensive Drive," (Edmonton, Alberta, 4 March 1954), 735-736.

<sup>45</sup> The brigade war diary entry for 16 July 1943 incorrectly identified the enemy as "Nos. 1 and 2 Companies, 15 Panzer Grenadier Regiment," which was north of Catania on 16 July. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 116.

<sup>46</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, 16-17 July 1943; LAC, RG 24, Volume 15113, LER War Diary, 17 July 1943; and Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, 54.



**Map 5 The Advance Towards Enna, 14-18 July 1943**

(Source: G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, Map No. 3, Close-Up of Canadian Advance)

While this battle was going on, the high-level plan was being modified yet again. On 16 July 1943, General Alexander gave the task of taking Enna to the Americans, and directed the Eighth Army to advance on three possible axes: northward from Catania; eastward from Leonforte via Highway 121 to Adrano; and an even wider arc through Nicosia to the northern side of Mount Etna.<sup>47</sup> With XIII (British) Corps on the Allied right flank facing fierce opposition on the Catania Plain – and realizing that the Eighth Army was not strong enough to advance on three fronts at once – Montgomery ordered XXX Corps to have the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division launch “a strong movement” eastward from Leonforte towards Adrano (see Map 6), believing that such a “left hook” operation would unhinge the whole German position.<sup>48</sup> It was a tactic that had worked well in North Africa, and in theory the plan seemed simple enough. In practice it proved to be less so, for the rugged Sicilian terrain heavily favoured the German defenders.

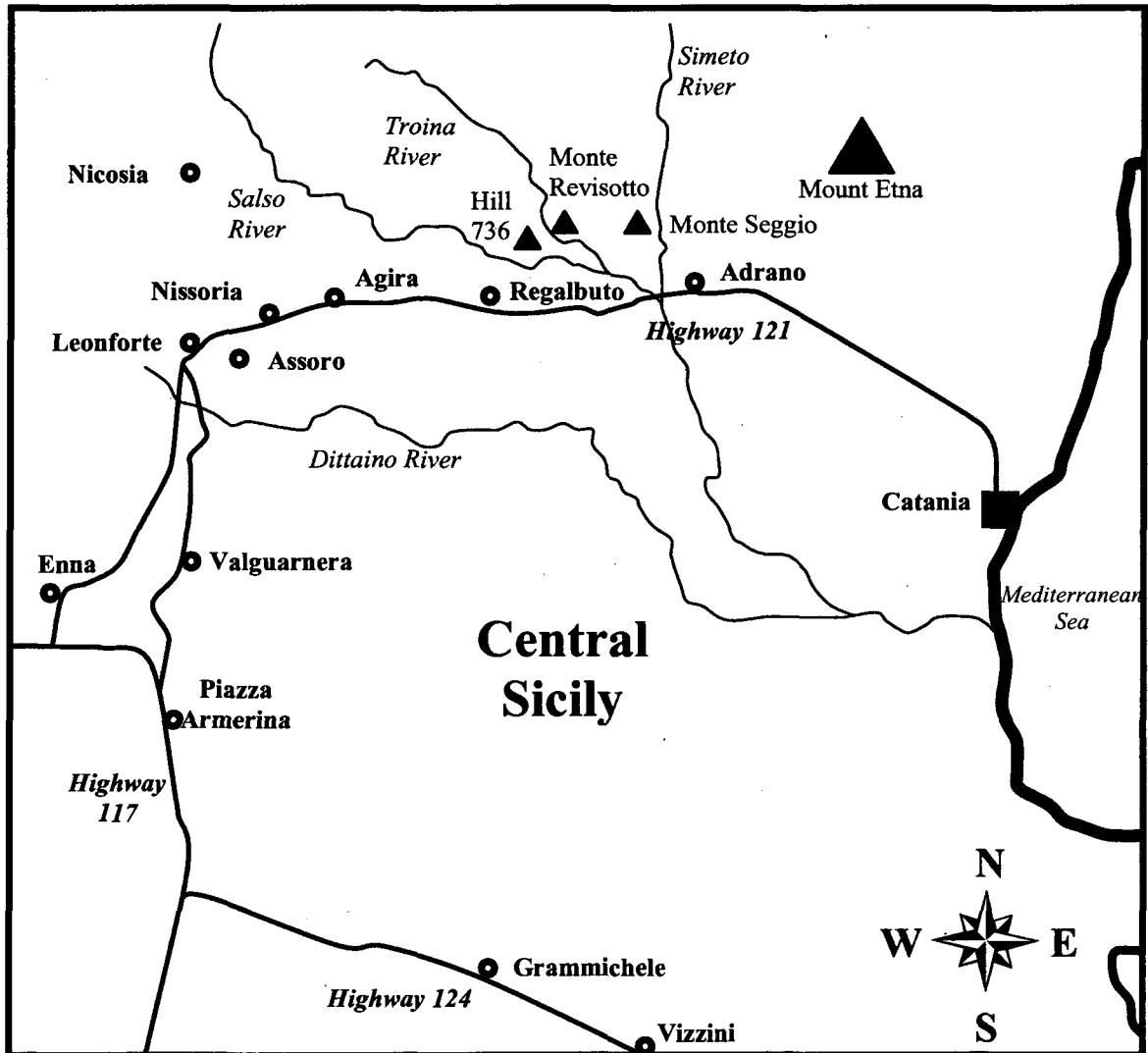
The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of July saw some stiff fighting for the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigades at Valguarnera and Grottacalda, respectively. Vokes’s brigade remained in reserve throughout this period, and was thus not involved in these engagements. At about 1440 hours on 18 July, however, the brigadier was called to a divisional “O” Group where he learned that his formation was to pass through the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade that night. Chris Vokes immediately issued his orders to his unit commanders. In order to give the Edmonton Regiment a well-deserved break, he directed that the Seaforths would lead the way, followed by the Brigade Support Group, Brigade Headquarters, the Patricias, and the

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<sup>47</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 94.

<sup>48</sup> Viscount (Field Marshal) Montgomery of Alamein, *Montgomery and the Eighth Army: A Selection from the Diaries, Correspondence and Other Papers of Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, August 1942 to December 1943*, ed. Stephen Brooks (London: The Bodley Head for the Army Records Society, 1991), “Letter to Lieutenant-General Sir Oliver Leese, 16 July 1943,” 246.

Edmontons.<sup>49</sup> Vokes then went forward to liaise with the CO of the Royal 22e Régiment (the “Van Doos”), which was occupying a position straddling the road over which the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade would advance. As always, two Signal Corps despatch riders accompanied Brigadier Vokes’s jeep.



**Map 6 The 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade’s Area of Operations, 18 July – 06 August 1943**

(References: G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, Map No. 1, and Daniel G. Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, map on page 30)

<sup>49</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, 18 July 1943.

On this occasion, Chris Vokes's preference for personal leadership nearly got him killed. He arrived at the road junction that the Van Doos were supposed to be holding, but in the growing darkness he could see no sign of them. Pressing on, Vokes came upon a hatless soldier wearing a khaki uniform, who halted him at a bend in the road:

The soldier approached and, without preliminaries, he stuck his gun in my ribs and shouted words I did not understand. He reeked of alcohol. I assumed the words to be colloquial Quebec French, *joual*. For a variety of obvious reasons, I was suddenly furious. "Stand to attention," I shouted at the soldier. "And take that goddam gun out of my ribs." The soldier lurched to attention and stood as rigidly as he could under the circumstances. I turned to Guest [Vokes's driver.] "Let's go on," I said. "This sonofabitch is drunk." We continued up the road, leaving the soldier standing there, perplexed, staring after us. When we had gone along about 200 yards I heard the loud noise of the motor of one of my motorcyclists. He caught up and drew abreast of us and motioned us to stop. "Sir, were you stopped by a soldier just back there?" he asked. "Yes," I said impatiently, wondering why he had stopped us. At the rate we were going we would be very late. "A drunken French-Canadian," I added. "Like hell he was a French-Canadian. He was drunk all right, but he was a German. I just had to run over the bastard."<sup>50</sup>

Vokes was lucky that the German had been drunk. Realizing he had strayed into enemy territory, Vokes turned around and made his way to the Van Doos' well-camouflaged positions, which were about 800 metres to the rear of where he had been stopped.

At 0430 hours on 19 July – daybreak in the Sicilian summer – the Seaforths were ambushed just past the town of Valguarnera. Lt.-Col. Hoffmeister skillfully extracted his unit from this cleverly laid trap and during the afternoon the enemy withdrew, but not before inflicting several casualties.<sup>51</sup> As usual, Chris Vokes was in the thick of things; according to the brigade war diarist, he spent "most of the day forward with the leading

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<sup>50</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 106-107. This story is also described in CWM, Vokes, Volume 2, "Recollections of an Army Career," 266-267, and Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, 60.

<sup>51</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15256, Seaforth War Diary, 19 July 1943, and Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada*, 171.

battalions.”<sup>52</sup> He was not the only member of his headquarters to do so. His brigade major, Dick Malone, had begged him to be allowed to go forward and see what was happening, and the brigadier, understanding that “it is quite hard on men to be routinely left out of battle, to be chained to auxiliary work at a headquarters,” finally assented.<sup>53</sup> He soon regretted his decision. At 1730 hours, Vokes learned that Malone had been seriously wounded when his Universal carrier (a small tracked vehicle, also known as a Bren Gun carrier) struck an anti-tank mine. Major P.R. Bingham, “a talented junior staff officer at divisional headquarters,” immediately replaced him, but for Chris Vokes it was a severe blow: “I had lost both a good brigade major and a good friend.”<sup>54</sup>

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade’s progress throughout the day was painfully slow. Ambushes forced the advancing Canadians to deploy and develop attack plans in order to deal with them, all of which took time. So, too, did the Germans’ widespread use of demolitions and mines, which caused casualties and imposed further delays. These effects were precisely what the enemy wanted, for they needed time to finish building their interior defensive line, which in part ran southeast from Nicosia to a point about four and a half kilometres west of Agira on Highway 121.<sup>55</sup> They also established defended locations in front of this line in order to provide depth to their positions, which by virtue of the rough terrain were easy to defend and very difficult to attack. On 19 July the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade was nearing one such outpost, situated near the town of Leonforte.

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<sup>52</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, 19 July 1943.

<sup>53</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 109.

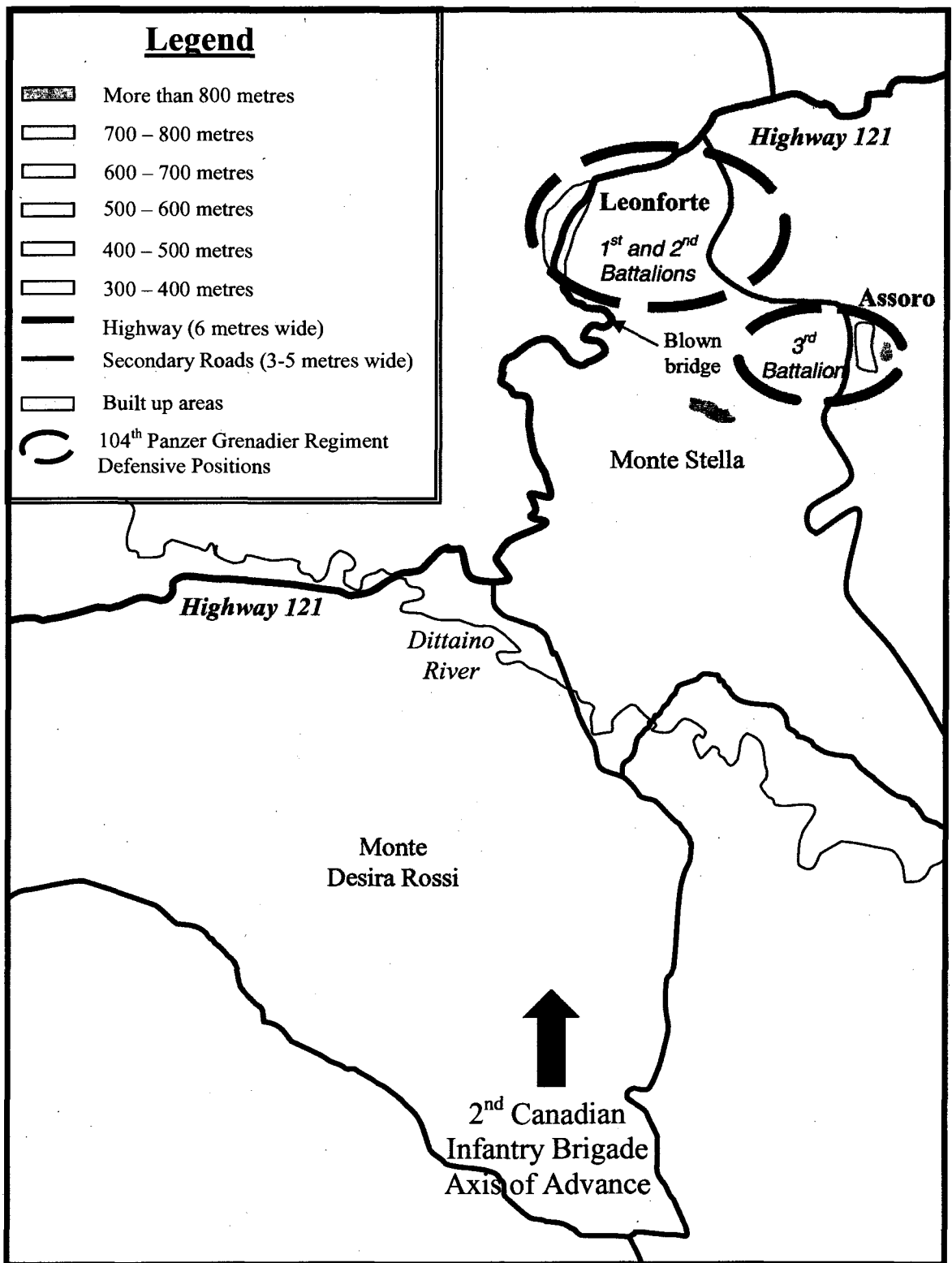
<sup>54</sup> Malone, *Missing from the Record*, 37; LAC 2 CIB War Diary, 19 July 1943; Vokes, *My Story*, 109; and LAC, RG 24, Volume 10878, File 233C1.008 (D1), 1 Cdn Inf Div War Diaries, 20 July, 1800 hours. Malone recovered quickly from his wounds. On 1 September 1943, he joined General Montgomery’s staff as the Canadian liaison officer.

<sup>55</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 118.

In order to understand the actions that subsequently took place at Leonforte, one must appreciate the difficulty of the surrounding terrain. As seen at Map 7, the town was perched on a hilltop that was part of a high ridge that stood roughly 600-700 metres above sea level. This ridgeline stretched five kilometres to the southeast and culminated at the massive heights of Assoro, which dominated the entire area. Between Leonforte and Valguarnera to the south, from which the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade was advancing, were three other tactically significant features. The first was Monte Desira Rossi, located eight kilometres south of Leonforte, which overlooked the intersection of Highway 121 and the Dittaino River. The second major feature was the Dittaino Valley, which in places was several kilometres wide and ran more or less parallel to the Leonforte-Assoro ridge. To get to Leonforte the Canadians would have to cross the valley in full view of the Germans who could bring down artillery fire from their ridge-top positions. Executing such an assault would be a tough proposition, but it was possible for dismounted troops going cross-country. What complicated matters was the likelihood that the Germans would counter-attack with tanks, which meant that the Canadian infantry would need the support of their own anti-tank guns and tanks. The only way to get such heavy weapons forward was via Highway 121, which turned sharply eastward about two kilometres short of Leonforte, dropped to a small bridge spanning a ravine and then abruptly turned northwest, climbing gradually towards the town. This ravine represented the third important aspect of the Leonforte position for if the Germans destroyed the bridge it would serve as a natural anti-tank ditch. Defended by two battalions of the 104<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Regiment, Leonforte was a tough tactical problem for the inexperienced Canadians.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 100-107.



**Map 7 The Leonforte-Assoro Position**

(Reference: J.B. Conacher, "Canadian Participation in the Sicilian Campaign, 1943," Map No. 14, 179)

Maj.-Gen. Guy Simonds delivered his orders to his brigade commanders on the afternoon of 19 July. Realizing that the Germans had to hold both Leonforte and Assoro in order to retain control of the ridgeline, he planned to launch two separate but mutually supporting brigade attacks (see Map 8 on Page 99). The 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, operating on the division's right flank, would be given the formidable task of taking the Assoro position; upon doing so, that formation was to push northward and cut Highway 121 behind Leonforte. These moves would support the actions of Chris Vokes's 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade on the left, which was to advance along the axis of the Valguarnera-Leonforte road and "take LEONFORTE during darkness."<sup>57</sup> For the brigade commanders, the forthcoming battle of Leonforte-Assoro would be the first real test of their technical skills. Chris Vokes would pass his with flying colours.

Given that Leonforte was Vokes's first brigade-level battle, it is worth examining how he approached the tasks of operational planning and delivering orders in some detail. After receiving his instructions from Simonds, Vokes made his own appreciation of the tactical situation, from which he produced the brigade plan. As a brigade commander, he did not personally sort out details such as fire-planning or logistic support. That task he entrusted to his brigade major, Peter Bingham, who in turn coordinated the efforts of the brigade staff. This approach stemmed from Vokes's philosophy of personal command, and under combat conditions it proved to be a simple and effective means of producing operational plans. General Montgomery was perhaps the most famous proponent within the British and Canadian armies of such a "chief of staff" methodology, although Guy Simonds and (later) Bert Hoffmeister used the same system and for the very same reason:

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<sup>57</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10879, File 233C1.016 (D6), "1 Cdn Div – GOC's 'Ops' Conference, 19 July 1943."

they believed that planning battles was a command responsibility.<sup>58</sup> Clearly, Brigadier Vokes was in good company by personally taking the lead in brigade-level planning.

Vokes may not have handled all of the details, but he knew which ones were the most important to the outcome of his plan. He had shown the same ability in England, and here, too, his approach mirrored Montgomery's philosophy: "No man can be a great military leader unless he has the ability to cut through overlying difficulties, and to see clearly the few essentials in any problem with which he is faced."<sup>59</sup> Historian Richard Lamb has said that Montgomery's tremendous grasp of "the essentials" meant that, "his decisions were soundly based on a proper appreciation of what it was possible for his army to do."<sup>60</sup> Others have made similar comments about Chris Vokes. Lt.-Col. George Kitching, who saw a great deal of him in Sicily, noted that, "[Vokes] was meticulous and very careful as to detail. But, once he was satisfied and knew that we at [Division] HQ would give him all the support he needed he gave his orders clearly and forcefully."<sup>61</sup>

Another characteristic of Vokes's approach to planning that had not changed since his time in England was his insistence that an operational plan had to be simple. This partly stemmed from his acceptance of the "fog of war" as a battlefield reality. But it also reflected his understanding of how combat conditions affected his soldiers:

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<sup>58</sup> In a pamphlet that Montgomery issued within the Eighth Army in early 1943 entitled "High Command in War," he wrote, "No officer...who has not time for quiet thought and reflection, can make a sound plan of battle on a high level or conduct large-scale operations efficiently. It is for this reason that the plan must always be made by the commander and NOT by his staff." Imperial War Museum (hereafter IWM), Field-Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein Papers (hereafter Montgomery Papers), BLM 52/4, n.d. See also Granatstein, *The Generals*, 164, and Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, 155-176.

<sup>59</sup> Montgomery, *Military Leadership*, 12-13.

<sup>60</sup> Richard Lamb, *Montgomery in Europe, 1943 - 1945: Success or Failure?* (London: Buchan and Enright, 1983), 20-21.

<sup>61</sup> Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, 81.

[The plan] must be simple in order to make it easily understandable by a lot of simple-minded, tired soldiers. It must be simple in order to ensure coordination between the different arms. If it is the slightest bit complicated, you yourself will have difficulty remembering the details, so will everyone else, and the result is predestined failure.<sup>62</sup>

Clearly, Chris Vokes's passion for simplicity had nothing to do with a lack of intellectual ability. Indeed, his philosophy was apparently well respected within the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division, for it was in this connection that Brigadier A.B. Matthews, the formation's senior artillery officer, later described him as "an ideal Brigade Commander."<sup>63</sup>

While the technical details of a military plan are important, two other aspects are even more significant. The first relates to what today is described as "the mission": in 1943, it was known as "the intention," and as Vokes noted, it represents "the keystone of an operation order."<sup>64</sup> His views on the need for a clearly articulated intention have been described earlier. The second element revolved around how to define unit-level tasks. In this regard Vokes followed the British and Canadian practice of thinking "two down," meaning that as a brigade commander he told his COs how many companies he wanted them to attack with. Such a technique allowed him to "preserve control of battle manoeuvre which would be otherwise impossible."<sup>65</sup> He also adopted the Eighth Army method of conducting a reconnaissance with his subordinates and then asking for their comments about his plan, an approach he likely felt was workable because of the mutual trust and respect that had been built during their time together in England. This collegial procedure, as Douglas Delaney has explained, ensured that plans were subjected to "a

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<sup>62</sup> CWM, Vokes, Volume 1, "Battle Tactics," 44.

<sup>63</sup> Brigadier A.B. Matthews, quoted in Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, 69.

<sup>64</sup> CWM, Vokes, Volume 4, "Offensive Drive," 737-739.

<sup>65</sup> CWM, Vokes, Volume 1, "Battle Tactics," 44-45. Control was a key element of British and Canadian tactical doctrine. See McAndrew, "Fire or Movement?" on how this affected Canadian operations in Sicily.

thorough and proper examination of the tactical problem.”<sup>66</sup> It also gave lower-ranking commanders a stake in the outcome, a psychological aspect that Guy Simonds – who rarely sought input from others – seemed incapable of appreciating. Indeed, as George Kitching later related, “Once General Simonds had made up his mind about a situation or a person, it was very difficult to get him to change it.”<sup>67</sup>

Chris Vokes developed a simple three-phased plan for the assault on Leonforte (see Map 8 on page 99). On the night of 19-20 July, the Edmonton Regiment would pass through its sister units and establish a bridgehead on the far side of the Dittaino River. This move was to happen at midnight, the time that Vokes and Lt.-Col. Jefferson had agreed upon. From this position the Edmontons would cover the advance of the PPCLI, who in the second phase would occupy Monte Desira Rossi. Lastly, the Seaforth Highlanders would follow Highway 121 into town.<sup>68</sup> It was a tactically sound plan, for during each phase a battalion’s movement would be covered by the other two. Moreover, the brigade would have access to a tremendous amount of fire support, provided by its own Brigade Support Group as well as the divisional artillery and the Allied air forces.

Like most Canadians, Vokes had been accustomed to producing written orders for his subordinates.<sup>69</sup> In Sicily, such documents were rarely used. General Montgomery

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<sup>66</sup> Delaney, *The Soldiers’ General*, 176.

<sup>67</sup> Kitching, *Mud and Green Fields*, 153, and Granatstein, *The Generals*, 159. That Vokes convinced Simonds to keep Lt.-Col. Jefferson was thus a real accomplishment.

<sup>68</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 110, and Vokes, “Some Reflections on Command,” 10.

<sup>69</sup> For example, Dick Malone has related an incident that took place in early 1944, in which Lt.-Gen. Harry Crerar (then commanding I Canadian Corps) produced a 16-page order covering the movement of portions of his headquarters from Sicily to the Italian mainland, and then issued information copies to nearly every Eighth Army formation. This order apparently became “almost a collector’s item, passed around in amazement that so much paper was required by the new corps to move a few HQ vehicles about in the [Administration] area.” Malone, *A Portrait of War*, 215.

believed that “a commander must train his staff, and his subordinate commanders, to work and act on verbal orders or instructions,” and that “commanders who cannot be trusted to act on clear and concise verbal orders are useless.”<sup>70</sup> This approach took a bit of getting used to, but the Canadians quickly adapted. In fact, Chris Vokes was so impressed by this example of military professionalism that he made it his own practice to deliver orders “in person and verbally – never written – and never through a staff officer.”<sup>71</sup> Remarkably, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division’s historical officer, Captain A.T. Sesia, was present when Vokes gave oral orders for the capture of Monte Desira Rossi on the afternoon of 20 July, and he wrote a detailed account of what he witnessed:

The Brigadier was on the summit of the hill with his officers, giving his orders for an attack. The objective was a ridge three or four miles away. It was not known whether the enemy were there in strength, but the hill that we were on and the intervening ground were taped by 88 mm. guns whose exact positions could not be located...

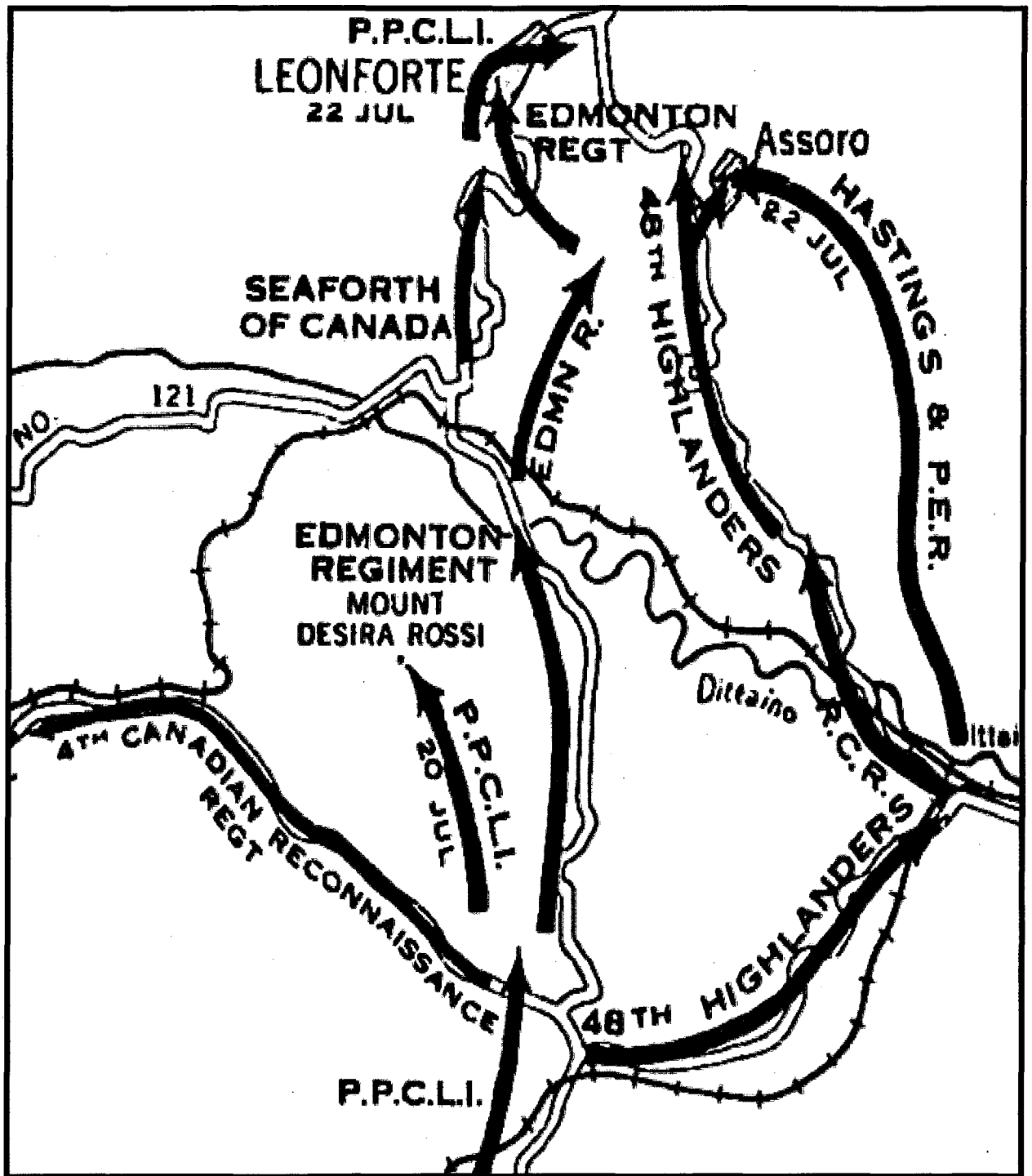
I was rather impressed by the manner in which Brigadier Vokes held his “O” Group conference. It was certainly the most informal giving of orders that I have ever witnessed. To begin with, we were all smoking cigarettes and standing on the sky-line and certainly in view of the enemy’s [Observation Posts]. Vokes would point out to the officer to whom he was giving the orders, the target or area which was to be attacked, and describe it something like this: “Now do you see that ridge over there, Bill? Well, that’s where I want you to bring up your troops and capture the farmhouse just to the side of it.” Then he would say to the gunner officer: “Do you see that line of trees there, Joe? Well, just plunk a few on this side of it and then put a few more into that farmhouse over there, and you might as well stick a couple in the left of that clump of bushes for good measure.” I am sure that all of his officers were as clear in their instruction as though they had been formally written out.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> IWM, Montgomery Papers, BLM 52/4, “High Command in War.”

<sup>71</sup> Vokes, “Some Reflections on Operational Command,” 9.

<sup>72</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10878, File 233C1.011, “Personal Notes and Observations, Part 1, SICILY, 24 Apr 43 – 2 Sep 43, by Major A.T. Sesia.” “Gus” Sesia was a Captain while he was in Sicily. For more on Sesia’s experience, see Bill McAndrew, “Recording the War: Uncommon Canadian Perspectives of the Italian Campaign,” *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, Volume 18, No. 3 (Winter 1988), 43-50.



**Map 8 The 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's Assault on Leonforte, 20-22 July 1943**

(Source: G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, Map No. 3, Close-Up of Leonforte. Shaded areas on this map indicate high terrain features)

It should be noted that military leaders at all levels of command are taught how to give orders, as this is a crucial element of a commander's responsibilities. Regardless of whether they are delivered in writing or orally, orders must be clear and concise as the cost of confusion can be high. Oral orders, however, can be more difficult because they are given to a "live" audience. For this reason, a certain degree of forcefulness, even showmanship, is required on the part of the individual delivering them in order to "sell" the plan. Some officers are good at this; others are not. It would seem reasonable to conclude from Captain Sesia's description that Chris Vokes fell into the former category.

By 0445 hours on 20 July the Edmontons, having crossed the dry riverbed of the Dittaino, had established positions on some high ground from which they could cover the brigade's advance.<sup>73</sup> Later that morning Vokes moved his command post forward to the reverse slope of the hill then being occupied by the PPCLI, in order to be close to the action and accessible to his COs. The Germans reacted quickly, and throughout the day all elements of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade – including the brigade headquarters – were subjected to heavy shelling which caused some casualties.<sup>74</sup> Phase Two of the operation began that evening. At 1800 hours, the Patricias, supported by a troop of tanks from the Three Rivers Regiment and the Brigade Support Group, took Monte Desira Rossi, which had not been occupied by the Germans. It was not an entirely bloodless action, for the unit was shelled in its Forming Up Place (an FUP is now known as an Assembly Area) and suffered a few casualties.<sup>75</sup> So far, everything was going according to Vokes's plan.

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<sup>73</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15113, LER War Diary, 19 July 1943.

<sup>74</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, 20 July 1943.

<sup>75</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, 20 July 1943, and Stevens, *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry*, 80.

Things soon got a bit stickier. By daybreak on 21 July the Seaforths had reached the high ground overlooking the ravine in front of Leonforte (see Map 8), whereupon they came under intense machine gun and mortar fire and were forced to hastily dig in. From this vantage point, Lt.-Col. Hoffmeister could see that the Germans had destroyed the bridge, which would make assaulting the town a difficult proposition.<sup>76</sup> Upon receiving this news, Vokes went forward to see the situation for himself:

I found a steep-sided ravine lay between us and them. The assault infantry would have to climb down our side and scale up the other side – not impossible but very difficult...Any movement of ours towards the remnant of the bridge – as though we might rebuild it – drew heavy fire from the town. I decided the Seaforths would need plenty of artillery support and it would take until 4:30 in the afternoon before I could arrange this.<sup>77</sup>

By 1630 hours, everything was ready. Tragically, as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's war diarist noted, "this attack failed before it could get started."<sup>78</sup> As the assaulting companies were about to head off, a few Canadian artillery rounds fell short and landed in the battalion's headquarters area, killing seven and wounding several others. Although Bert Hoffmeister and his second-in-command, Major Forin, both survived – they were severely dazed by the concussion of the exploding shells – neither officer was in a condition to lead their men into what was expected to be a stiff battle. Lt.-Col. Hoffmeister thus asked Vokes to have the Edmontonians take over the assault, but added that if necessary he would carry on with the original plan. The brigadier agreed with this sensible suggestion, and at 1800 hours he warned Lt.-Col. Jefferson, whose unit had moved to a position just southeast of

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<sup>76</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15256, Seaforth War Diary, 20-21 July 1943. See also Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, 21 July 1943, and Volume 14691, Headquarters, 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Engineers War Diary, 21 July 1943, 0620 hours.

<sup>77</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 110.

<sup>78</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, 21 July 1943.

the Seaforths, to prepare his men for action.<sup>79</sup> At the same time, Vokes realized that this incident could damage the Seaforths' morale. That evening, as Padre Durnford noted in his diary, the brigadier visited the regiment "to offer his condolence & to assure us of his confidence in us in spite of our inability to carry out the plan [as] conceived before the barrage had been laid down."<sup>80</sup> It was a sincere gesture on Vokes's part, and as Durnford's comments suggest, it was gratefully received.

The battle did not stop because of this accidental shelling. At 2100 hours on 21 July, supported by the whole of the divisional artillery and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's Support Group, the Edmonton Regiment attacked Leonforte.<sup>81</sup> At the same time, engineers belonging to 3 Field Company began to construct a Bailey bridge – a remarkable piece of engineering equipment that came in several pieces and had to be assembled by hand – in order to span the thirteen-metre gap over the ravine. The Edmontons gained entry to the town, but the defending Panzer Grenadiers, reacting quickly to these moves, counter-attacked with tanks and infantry. This represented a real problem for Lt.-Col. Jefferson and his men, for they had no anti-tank guns to deal with the enemy armour. Two other factors made a bad situation even worse. Firstly, it had become dark, which made control of the battle nearly impossible to achieve. Secondly, communications with brigade headquarters had broken down, which meant that Jefferson could not request the anti-

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<sup>79</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15256, Seaforth War Diary, 21 July 1943, and Volume 10981, "Account by Capt. E.H. Pritchard, Edmn R., formerly Adjt and now carrier pl comd, given in bn rest area, 18 Aug 43, near MILITELLO in VAL di CATANIA."

<sup>80</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 20405, "Diary of Major Roy C.H. Durnford, 21 July 1943," and Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, 59.

<sup>81</sup> LAC, RG 42, Volume 15113, LER War Diary, 21 July 1943; Volume 15248, 2 Cdn Inf Bde Sp Gp War Diary, 21 July 1943; Volume 10981, "Account by Capt. F.N. Pope, IO, 2 Cdn Inf Bde, on the battles of LEONFORTE and ADERNO;" and Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 107-108.

tank guns he desperately needed in order to deal with the German tanks. In the confusion of bitter street fighting, the Edmonton Regiment was quickly split up into small groups. Most of the men fought their way out to safety, but Lt.-Col. Jefferson, his battalion headquarters, two platoons of "C" Company, and one platoon from "D" – about one hundred men in all – found themselves cut off in the centre of town.<sup>82</sup>

At his brigade headquarters, which had moved to the reverse slope of Monte Desira Rossi about twenty-four hours earlier, Chris Vokes had no way of knowing what was happening to the Edmontons. Years later, he recalled that, "I became deeply anxious. But there was little I could do except try to piece together the reports that came out with occasional stragglers who managed to make their way back to our lines. By midnight I felt the despair of failure. I considered I had lost most of a fine battalion."<sup>83</sup> It was in this frame of mind that Vokes called division headquarters and asked Lt.-Col. George Kitching, the formation's GSO 1, if he could speak with General Simonds, or better still, come and see him. Kitching recalled that,

Chris arrived about ten minutes later – I went with him to Simonds's caravan. The latter listened as Chris told the story... Simonds spoke very quietly to Chris and told him that in his opinion the battalion was probably holed up somewhere in the town and conserving its ammunition as they assumed there would be no re-supply until daylight. He encouraged Chris to think on the bright side and make a plan to get support across the ravine as soon as the bridge across it was completed.<sup>84</sup>

What happened to the "tough guy" image that Chris Vokes normally projected? Was this a sign of weakness, a chink in the Vokes armour? Perhaps, but not knowing the fate of a full third of his brigade must have been intensely nerve-wracking, and it seems

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<sup>82</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, 21 July 1943. See also Volume 10981, "Account by Capt. E.H. Pritchard, Edmn R., 18 Aug 43," and Stevens, *A City Goes to War*, 236-238.

<sup>83</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 111.

<sup>84</sup> Graham, *The Price of Command*, 95.

likely that his deep concern for the lives of his men and the stress of the tactical situation temporarily got the better of him. In fact, it was a very human response that confirms Dick Malone's assertion that, despite his tough exterior, "deep down [Vokes] had a warm and emotional streak."<sup>85</sup> If such a reaction appears surprising, it is because Chris Vokes normally kept this side of his character well hidden from other than his closest friends.

What is more significant about this incident from a military perspective is that, according to the divisional war diary, Vokes's staff was submitting situation reports that suggested the Edmonton Regiment had been "annihilated." The division's GSO 1, Lt.-Col. George Kitching, apparently discounted such reports, preferring to believe that "because of the terrific pace that this [brigade] has been maintaining during the past few days it was quite likely that the [brigade] staff were inclined to exaggerate possibilities into facts...[and] that it was too soon to assume the worst had occurred."<sup>86</sup> Kitching was probably right, but one wonders if Vokes's officers were somehow taking their cues from their commander. If so, Vokes should have taken far greater care to hide his feelings as such displays of emotion could have seriously affected the morale of his troops. He was doubly fortunate that his friend, George Kitching, did not pass on these reports to Maj.-Gen. Simonds without first sending one of his staff officers, Captain Frank Klenavic, to check things out.<sup>87</sup> Had he done so, these alarming reports (which were soon proven to be erroneous) might have reflected very badly upon Brigadier Vokes's leadership ability, and Simonds might not have been quite so understanding during their brief meeting.

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<sup>85</sup> Malone, *A Portrait of War*, 152.

<sup>86</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10878, File 233C1.008 (D1), Op HUSKY, 1 Cdn Inf Div War Diaries, 22 July 1943, 0800 hours. See also Volume 10878, "Personal Notes and Observations by Major A.T. Sesia," 22 July 1943.

<sup>87</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10878, 1 Cdn Inf Div War Diary, 22 July 1943, 0800 hours.

Upon returning to his headquarters, Vokes got some good news. A Sicilian boy named Antonio Guiseppe had delivered a note from Lt.-Col. Jefferson addressed to “Any Canadian or British officer,” which said that he and his men were holding on but needed help to deal with the German panzers.<sup>88</sup> At the same time, Vokes learned that despite continual German fire, the engineers of 3 Field Company had completed the bridge over the ravine. Vokes was overjoyed to hear that Jefferson was not dead (as he had feared), but he knew that he could not help the Edmontons until morning. In the meantime, the regiment would have to hold on, something he was confident could be done: “Jefferson was always a very determined man who never flapped when the going got rough.”<sup>89</sup>

It was at this point in the battle that Chris Vokes decided on an imaginative and daring plan. Meeting with the PPCLI’s CO, whose battalion had been moved forward to a position about three kilometres south of Leonforte, Vokes told him that he planned to rush a “flying column” consisting of a rifle company, four tanks from the Three Rivers Regiment, and some of 90 Canadian Anti-Tank Battery’s anti-tank guns across the bridge to relieve the Edmontons. The rest of the Patricias and the tanks were to follow behind this tiny assault group and take Leonforte. As Vokes later said, “speed and audacity were to be the keys to success.”<sup>90</sup> Clearly, Chris Vokes had fully recovered from the despair that had engulfed him just a few hours earlier, and was again acting like the hard-driving commander that his men believed him to be. It was indeed a remarkable transformation, one that reflects both his sometimes-mercurial nature and the strengths he had as a

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<sup>88</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 107-109, and LAC, RG 24, Volume 10981, “Brigadier J.C. Jefferson interview with G.W.L. Nicholson, 10 December 1949.” Years later, Vokes tried, but failed, to locate the boy and thank him. Vokes, *My Story*, 111.

<sup>89</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 111.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

commander. That Vokes settled on such an unorthodox plan speaks highly of his initiative and his use of bold measures to achieve surprise. These qualities, combined with his willingness to take calculated risks in order to keep the brigade's battle moving, were tendencies that he repeatedly showed in action in Sicily.<sup>91</sup>

At 0900 hours on 22 July, Chris Vokes's tiny assault force, led by PPCLI Captain R.C. Coleman, stormed across the Bailey bridge and shocked the Germans at the town's entrance into immediately surrendering.<sup>92</sup> Vokes's plan had worked brilliantly. The infantry then began the laborious task of clearing the buildings in Leonforte, while the tanks and anti-tank guns dealt with the German panzers. At 1000 hours they linked up with the Edmontons, and the rest of the Patricias stormed into town. By the end of the day, the battle was over. That evening, Vokes deployed the brigade in an all-round defensive posture in and around Leonforte.<sup>93</sup> They remained there for the next three days while the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade pressed on towards Agira, about thirteen kilometres to the east.

With the fighting momentarily at an end, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's war diarist wrote that, "This is the first real battle in which the [Brigade] has been engaged, and we have proved we are a match for the Germans."<sup>94</sup> It had not been an easy victory, for in three days of battle, 162 officers and men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade had been killed or wounded. The Seaforth Highlanders had been hit the hardest: they lost 76 officers and men, of which 28 had

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<sup>91</sup> Four days later, on the evening of 26 July, Vokes committed the Seaforth Highlanders to assist the Patricias in an equally bold attempt to maintain the momentum of his brigade's assault at Agira.

<sup>92</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 109, and LAC, RG 24, Volume 10981, Accounts of Action by Officers of PPCLI, "Sicilian Campaign – Leonforte, by Major R.C. Coleman, n.d."

<sup>93</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, 22 July 1943, and CWM, Vokes, Volume 2, "Recollections of an Army Career," 271.

<sup>94</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, 22 July 1943.

been killed. The PPCLI counted 21 killed and 40 wounded, while the Edmontons lost seven killed, seventeen wounded, and one soldier who had been taken prisoner.<sup>95</sup> The Germans, however, paid a far greater price. Captured documents showed that up to 21 July the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions of the 104<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Regiment had lost 237 and 385 all ranks, respectively. It was for good reason that the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division's intelligence staff believed that "the condition of [1 Panzer Grenadier Regiment] (sic) must now be serious."<sup>96</sup>

The combined battles of Leonforte-Assoro were of considerable importance in terms of the Sicilian campaign as a whole. The Germans' position on the ridgeline had been a vital outpost of their defensive line in the Sicilian interior; thus, they had committed all three battalions of the 104<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Regiment in a desperate attempt to hold it. Indeed, after the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade's Hast PER captured Assoro on 21 July – in what historians have rightly described as a brilliant example of manoeuvre warfare<sup>97</sup> – the Germans shifted the regiment's 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion to Leonforte in order to bolster their defences at that location. The 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division's intelligence staff rightly interpreted these tactics as being "something new...the fact that they are not voluntarily retiring from their latest strong point but are fighting for every yard of ground indicates that we are nearing something like a serious defence zone," and concluded that "beyond doubt, [the Germans] would have held LEONFORTE had they not been driven out of

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<sup>95</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 110.

<sup>96</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10879, File 233C1.023 (D1), 1 Cdn Div Intelligence Summaries, No. 1 (15 July 1943) to No. 10 (7 August 1943), "1 Cdn Div Intsum No. 5 (Up to 0500 hours 23 July 1943)." As mentioned earlier, the German force involved in the Leonforte-Assoro battle was actually the 104<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Regiment, and not 1 Panzer Grenadier Regiment as stated in this document.

<sup>97</sup> See for example Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 107, McAndrew, "Fire or Movement," 141-142, or Cessford, "Hard in the Attack," 161.

it.”<sup>98</sup> The loss of Assoro, however, made the enemy’s position at Leonforte untenable, and they had little choice but to withdraw to positions situated on the high ground just west of Agira to await the next Canadian assault.<sup>99</sup>

The significance of these events was not lost on observers at the time. Canadian war correspondent Ross Munro called the Leonforte-Assoro battle “one of the most important achieved so far by the forces of Maj.-Gen. Guy Simonds.”<sup>100</sup> The Germans also acknowledged the military skills of their Canadian adversaries. The 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Division described them as being “in fieldcraft (*Indianerkrieg*) superior to our own troops. Very mobile at night, surprise break-ins, clever infiltrations at night with small groups between our strongpoints.”<sup>101</sup> Historians have generally agreed with such views. Bill McAndrew asserted that, “the capture of Leonforte marked the beginning of the last phase of the Sicilian campaign,” while Geoffrey Hayes wrote that “intelligence, imagination and boldness easily describe the battles for both Assoro and Leonforte.”<sup>102</sup> Chris Vokes’s actions, too, have been praised. Lt.-Col. G.W.L. Nicholson, Canada’s official historian of the campaign, called his improvised plan to relieve the Edmonton Regiment on the morning of 22 July a “bold venture.” Popular historian Daniel

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<sup>98</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10879, File 233C1.023 (D1), “1 Cdn Div Intsum No. 5 (Up to 0500 hours 23 July 1943).”

<sup>99</sup> Most historians are agreed on this point. See for example Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 107; McAndrew, *Canadians and the Italian Campaign*, 54; or Cessford, “Hard in the Attack,” 162.

<sup>100</sup> Ross Munro, “Nazis Driven Out of Town by PPCLI,” *The Globe and Mail*, 30 July 1943, CWM, “Democracy at War.”

[http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/newspapers/intro\\_e.shtml](http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/newspapers/intro_e.shtml).

<sup>101</sup> DHH, Steiger, *Army Historical Report No. 14*, Appendix D, “Report of 15<sup>th</sup> German Panzer Grenadier Division on the Sicilian Campaign, n.d.”

<sup>102</sup> Geoffrey W. Hayes, “The Canadians in Sicily Sixty Years On,” *Canadian Military History*, Volume 12, No. 3, (Summer 2003), 14, and McAndrew, *Canadians and the Italian Campaign*, 54.

Dancocks noted that “Vokes acted decisively,” while Bill McAndrew has remarked on the “speed and audacity” of Captain Coleman’s flying column.<sup>103</sup>

In keeping with his appreciation for the human element, Chris Vokes ensured that those who had displayed courage and leadership while under fire received the recognition they richly deserved. Twenty-one members of his brigade were decorated, including Lt.-Col. Jim Jefferson of the Edmonton Regiment and Major “Tiger” Welsh of the 90<sup>th</sup> Anti-Tank Battery, both of whom won the DSO. Clearly, General Simonds – who had wanted Vokes to fire both men prior to leaving Scotland – had been wrong to judge them so hastily. Vokes’s belief in their command abilities and his defence of them against Simonds, on the other hand, was thus entirely justified. Also recognized were Major Ken Southern (who had led 3 Field Company’s bridging effort at the ravine) and Captain Rowan Coleman, the intrepid leader of Vokes’s improvised flying column; they received the DSO and the Military Cross, respectively. All this stood in stark contrast to the situation within the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade. For some reason, no member of the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment was ever decorated for that unit’s capture of Assoro.<sup>104</sup>

For his part, Maj.-Gen. Simonds presented Brigadier Vokes with an immediate DSO on 24 July, just two days after the battle of Leonforte had ended. It would seem clear from this that Simonds had not considered Vokes’s expression of self-doubt during their conversation on the night of 21-22 July to be a sign of weakness on the latter’s part. Perhaps not surprisingly, the wording of Vokes’s citation gave no hint of his emotional side. Instead, it noted that, “The forceful drive and aggressive spirit of Brigadier Vokes

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<sup>103</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 109; Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, 71; and McAndrew, *Canadians and the Italian Campaign*, 54.

<sup>104</sup> DHH, Stacey, *CMHQ Historical Report No. 135*, Appendix A, “Canadian Honours and Awards for the Sicilian Campaign,” 212-219.

was a tremendous inspiration to his men and resulted in the final capture and clearance of the strong enemy positions at LEONFORTE inflicting heavy casualties to the enemy,” and that Vokes had commanded his formation “with skill and determination, visiting and encouraging the foremost troops under fire.”<sup>105</sup> Considering Simonds’s high professional standards and coldly critical personality, such words were high praise, indeed.

The DSO served as public recognition of the high quality of Brigadier Vokes’s performance during his first three weeks of battlefield command. What was really important at the time, though, was the fact that he had learned how to take the methods he had used as a commander in the “make-believe” world of training in England and adapt them to “the real thing” in Sicily. On the “technical side,” he improved his own orders process by adopting the Eighth Army’s practice of using oral orders. He showed an eye for ground and an ability to develop good solutions to difficult tactical problems, and he wisely copied Guy Simonds’s method of giving his subordinates a clear-cut mission. Combined with his long-standing belief about the need for simplicity in order to counter the effects of “the fog of war,” his troops had no doubt about what he wanted them to do. With regard to the human element, Vokes found that his preference for leading by example and getting out to see what was going on were morale-boosters to men facing the dangers of combat. Equally important, the brigadier came to realize that teamwork – which had been his main focus in England – was enhanced by actively involving the battalion commanders in *his* planning process, an approach that showed his trust in their judgment and gave them a personal stake in the brigade’s plan. All in all, Christopher Vokes had “learned the ropes” of battlefield command at the brigade level rather well.

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<sup>105</sup> DHH, Honours and Awards Collection, “DSO citation (Brigadier Christopher Vokes), initiated 24 July 1943.”

## CHAPTER 5

### BATTLEWORTHY

*Brigadier Vokes's great ability as a fighting commander was recognized by both his superiors and his men. My sergeant declared that the brigadier was afraid of nothing – "man, beast nor fighting reptile."*

Lieutenant C. Sydney Frost, PPCLI<sup>1</sup>

During his first three weeks in Sicily Christopher Vokes had learned a great deal about the nature of battlefield command. The campaign, however, was by no means over. From 24 July to 6 August 1943, at Agira and in the "badlands" bordering the Salso River Valley, he would face and overcome the toughest technical and human challenges he had yet experienced as a brigade commander. By the time the Canadians were withdrawn from action on 6 August, Chris Vokes would complete his initiation by fire and be as "battle-worthy" as any of his peers in the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division.

During the third week of July 1943, events happened at the strategic level that significantly changed the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division's operational role. It was clear to General Montgomery that XIII Corps' assault on the German positions on the Catania Plain had stalled, while XXX Corps' flanking operation on the left, spearheaded by the Canadians, was gaining ground. Faced also with a shortage of artillery ammunition, which constrained the Eighth Army's ability to continue offensive action on both fronts, Montgomery amended his plan. On 21 July 1943 he ordered all Eighth Army formations, excepting the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division, to immediately assume a defensive posture, and directed that the 78<sup>th</sup> (British) Infantry Division, which was en route to Sicily from North Africa, should reinforce XXX Corps once it became operational in early August. At the

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<sup>1</sup> Frost, *Once a Patricia*, 128.

same time he ordered the Canadians to thrust eastward along Highway 121 from Leonforte towards Adrano in order to pry the Germans out of Catania.<sup>2</sup> As a result of these decisions, the Canadian operation became the Eighth Army's main effort.

Thus it was that on the afternoon of 22 July, Maj.-Gen. Guy Simonds delivered his orders for the capture of Agira, a town located on Highway 121 about thirteen kilometres east of Leonforte (see Map 9 on page 115). He had a total of four infantry brigades at his disposal for this operation. Howard Graham's 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade was given the main task of taking Agira. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade would remain in reserve to the southeast, while the attached 231<sup>st</sup> (British) Brigade – the “Malta Brigade” – would advance on the town from the south. Chris Vokes was told to establish a “firm base” in the Leonforte-Assoro area in order to support the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade's operations, a task that was completed on 24 July.<sup>3</sup> By the end of that day, the PPCLI had occupied Leonforte, the Seaforths and brigade headquarters had been shifted southeast to Assoro, and the Edmonton Regiment had taken up positions at the easternmost intersection of Highways 117 and 121, about two kilometres past Leonforte.<sup>4</sup>

Finding themselves with a welcome break, the officers and men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade conducted administrative tasks and patrolled the surrounding area. Reinforcements were received and the troops got some badly needed rest.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Vokes met with his COs to determine how to incorporate into the brigade's operational procedures the

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<sup>2</sup> IWM, Montgomery Papers, BLM 38/1, “Personal Diary of General Montgomery, 21 July 1943,” 12, and DHH, Stacey, *CMHQ Historical Report No. 135*, 72-73.

<sup>3</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, July 1943, Appendix 11, “Instructions for [Brigade Groups] Covering Period 1800 [hours] 22 July to 1800 [hours] 23 July.” See also Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 120.

<sup>4</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, 24 July 1943.

<sup>5</sup> See for example LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, 25 July 1943 and Volume 15113, Seaforth War Diary, 25 July 1943.

lessons they had learned during their first weeks of battle. This was a standard military activity and was thus not unusual. Nevertheless, the points that came out of it, which were distributed to the units on 25 July, revealed a certain degree of sophistication and even innovation on the technical side of conducting offensive operations. For example, it was announced that “the [Brigade], in future, will proceed with a minimum of three miles between battalions” during an advance; this would keep the follow-on units out of contact with the enemy, and give Vokes more flexibility in their employment. A second major item revolved around the realization that the Germans typically shelled their former positions once they had been forced to withdraw. For this reason, it was decided that the brigade would consolidate its gains “on the reverse slopes with forward slopes under observation of [Observation Posts],” which would offer some protection from enemy fire. Vokes and his COs also looked at other issues, such as the need for the infantry battalions to have some means of carrying out reconnaissance and sniping duties. Knowing that no such organization existed within the infantry battalion war establishment, Brigadier Vokes improvised and ordered that, “a section of Snipers and Observers [be] formed immediately by each [Battalion] under [the] control [of the Battalion Commander].”<sup>6</sup>

While Chris Vokes and his men were preparing themselves for future battles, the struggle to capture Agira had begun. As may be deduced from an examination of Map 9, the surrounding terrain had as much of an influence on the conduct of the fighting as did the actions of the enemy. The town of Agira was situated high atop a cone-shaped mountain, overlooking the Dittaino and Salso River valleys. Connecting Agira and the Canadian positions in the Leonforte-Assoro area was Highway 121, which ran east-west

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<sup>6</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, July 1943, Appendix 6, “Brigade Commander’s Conference as prepared by Major P.R. Bingham, 25 July 1943.”

along a plateau that was, in places, nearly five kilometres wide. About 500 metres past the tiny village of Nissoria, which was midway between Leonforte and Agira, lay the first of several parallel lines of hills that crossed the highway from north to south. A second ridgeline was less than one kilometre further to the east, while a third stretch of high ground, bounded by Monte Crapuzza to the north and Monte Fronte to the south, was about a kilometre west of Agira. From these three sets of hills the enemy, believed to be remnants of the 104<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Regiment, could deny all movement along Highway 121. Their exact locations, however, remained unknown.<sup>7</sup>

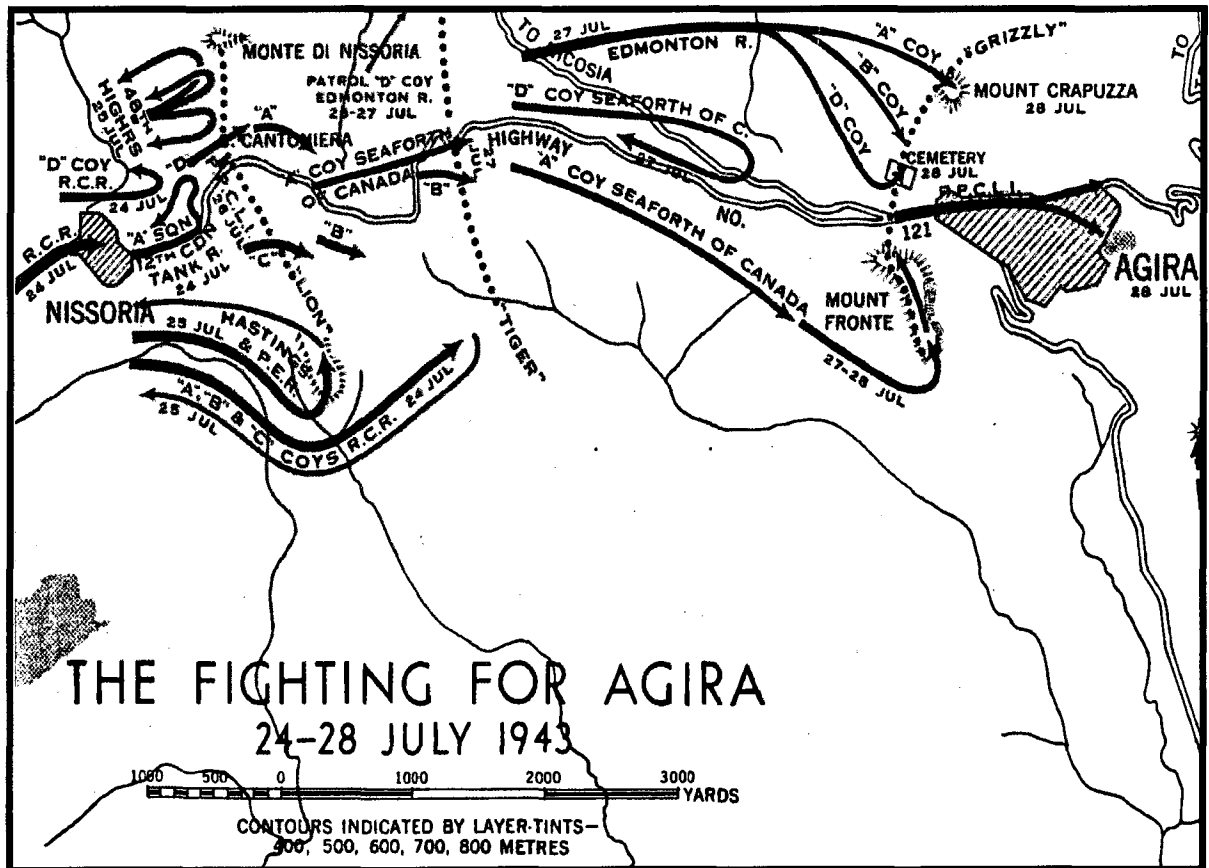
General Simonds had ordered Brigadier Graham to use a single battalion to attack Agira, and at 1500 hours on 24 July that unit (the RCR) crossed its Start Line. Despite a massive artillery and aerial bombardment, however, this assault quickly unravelled. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, because the enemy's positions had not been pinpointed the supporting barrage had to cover the entire corridor along which the RCR was advancing, which was about thirteen kilometres long by five kilometres wide. For this reason, it lacked the concentrated firepower needed to do any real damage to the Germans. Equally important, the fire plan had been rigidly scheduled to roll forward at a prescribed rate of advance. At the time, official doctrine considered such a barrage to be "the simplest and most effective form of covering fire if the enemy's positions are not accurately known."<sup>8</sup> At Agira, though, it did not take long for the RCR's troops, who had to negotiate the battlefield's rough terrain on foot, to become separated from their protective wall of exploding shells. This left them exposed to a withering fire brought down by German troops on the hills east of Nissoria: when radio communications broke

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<sup>7</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 120-131.

<sup>8</sup> The War Office (UK), *The Infantry Division in the Attack*, 45-46.

down and the CO was killed, the attack ground to a halt.<sup>9</sup> Two further attacks, the first launched that same night by the Hast PER, and the second by the 48<sup>th</sup> Highlanders on 25 July, were equally unsuccessful. What had been expected to be an easy victory ended instead with the loss of 171 officers and men killed and wounded, a costly failure that several historians have blamed on General Simonds rather than Brigadier Graham.<sup>10</sup>



**Map 9 The Battle of Agira**

(Source: G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, Map No. 4. Shaded areas depict high features, which were occupied by the German defenders.)

<sup>9</sup> McAndrew, "Fire or Movement," 142. For a good account of the RCR's experience, see Major Strome Galloway, "55 Axis:" *With The Royal Canadian Regiment, 1939-1945* (Montreal: Provincial Publishing Co., Ltd., 1946), 80-83.

<sup>10</sup> See McAndrew, "Fire or Movement," 144; Hayes, "The Canadians in Sicily Sixty Years On," 14; Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, 81; and Cessford, "Hard in the Attack," 192.

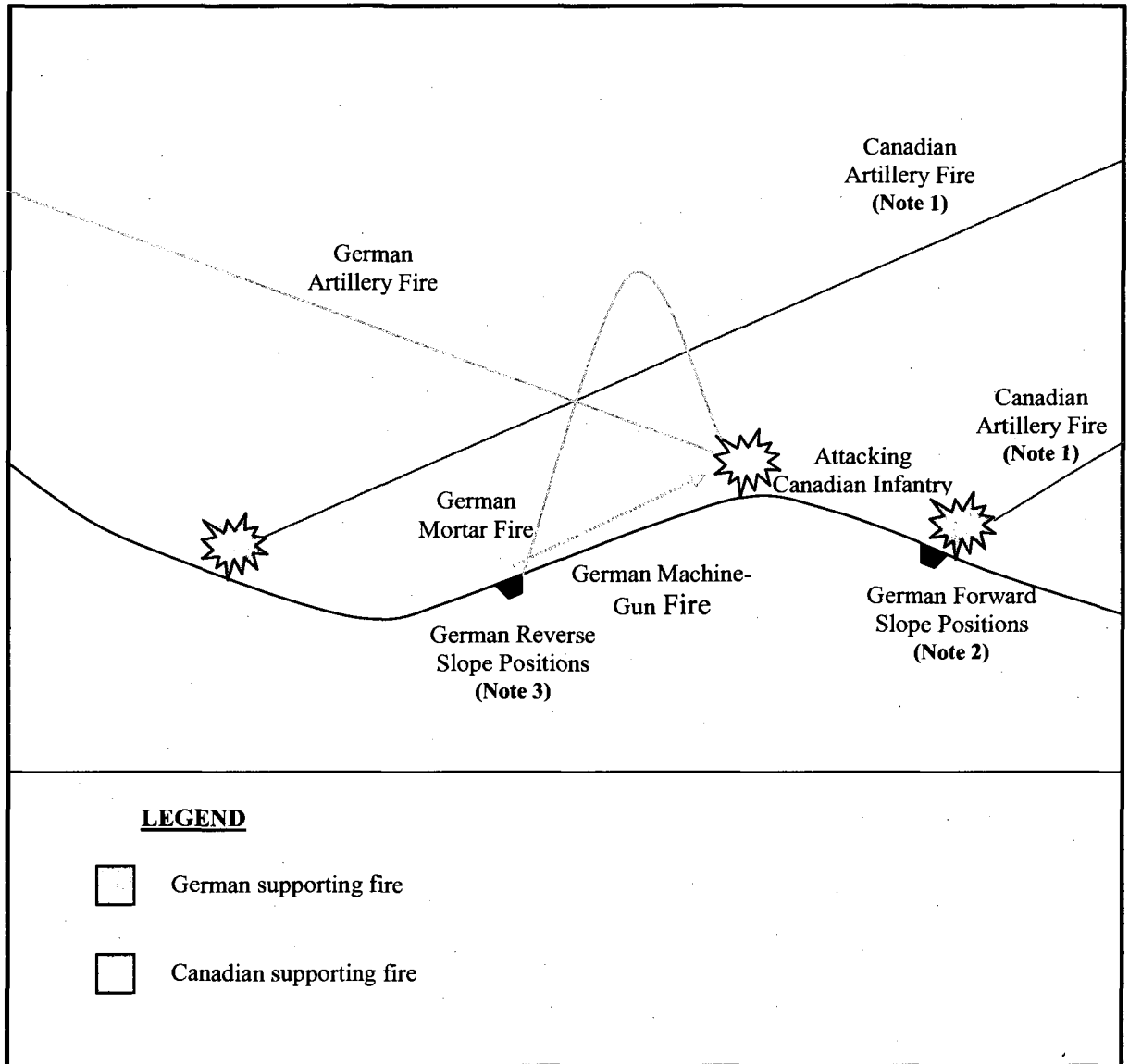
Faced with this unexpected setback, General Simonds convened a divisional "O" Group early in the morning of 26 July, whereupon he ordered Brigadier Vokes to relieve the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade and attack towards Agira at 1800 hours that evening. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's operation was to be conducted in two phases. One battalion was to establish a firm base on the ridgeline immediately east of Nissoria; then, a second battalion would seize the high ground overlooking the western approach to Agira. At the same time, the Malta Brigade would continue its attack from the south. Together, it was believed that these operations would force the Germans to abandon their positions.<sup>11</sup>

Chris Vokes's detailed plan of attack for his brigade's assault at Agira showed that he had learned from the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade's experience. It had become readily apparent that the enemy was holding the two ridgelines east of Nissoria in considerable strength; it seemed very likely that the high ground just west of Agira was similarly well-defended. He was also aware of certain aspects of German defensive tactics thanks to a letter sent to him by his friend, Brigadier Howard Graham. Graham told Vokes that during the 48<sup>th</sup> Highlanders' attack on the 25<sup>th</sup> of July, the enemy appeared to be using reverse slope positions (see Figure 5). This particular technique gave the defending Germans two distinct advantages. Firstly, it provided their infantry with a significant amount of protection from the heavy volume of Canadian artillery fire. Secondly, they would be able to surprise the attacking Canadians as they crested the hills.<sup>12</sup> All this made the German positions in front of Agira very difficult to crack.

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<sup>11</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10981, 2 CIB Reports on battles for Leonforte, Agira and Aderno, "Account of the Battle for AGIRA, as written by Brig. C. Vokes, Comd 2 Cdn Inf Bde, on 29 July 1943," and Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 128-129.

<sup>12</sup> DHH, Stacey, *CMHQ Historical Report No. 135*, 99.



**NOTES**

1. Canadian artillery fire cannot reach German reverse slope positions due to trajectory of artillery rounds.
2. Germans in forward slope positions engage attacking Canadian infantry until ordered to retire.
3. Germans in reverse slope positions do not engage attacking Canadian infantry until they reach the crest of the hill.

**Figure 5 A Reverse Slope Position**

(Source: Adapted from Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, Figure 6.3 on page 98. This figure is reprinted with permission of the Publisher from *The Soldiers' General: Bert Hoffmeister at War* by Douglas E. Delaney © University of British Columbia Press 2006. All rights reserved by the Publisher.)

Chris Vokes put all of this valuable intelligence to good use. Recognizing that he would have to control all three lines of hills in order to advance and take Agira, he based his plan of attack on what he later described as “the leap-frog principle:”

The first phase of the attack, i.e. capture of [the] firm base, was to be carried out by the PPCLI. This involved the capture of two objectives [just east of Nissoria] to be known as LION and TIGER respectively. The barrage would pause for a period of 30 [minutes] after [the] capture of the first objective, to permit [reserve companies] to come up and prepare to [advance] on the second objective. The Seaforth of [Canada] was to be moved to an assembly area within one [hour's] march of TIGER and be prepared to move at 30 [minute's] notice. Their objective was to be the high ground [immediately west of Agira at map coordinates] 456949 – 455962, to be known as GRIZZLY.<sup>13</sup>

Like any prudent commander, Vokes made sure that he had a reserve. In this case it was the Edmonton Regiment, which he intended to use to clear Agira “or such other task as might crop up.” To provide close support for the infantry, he had the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade Support Group, Major “Tiger” Welsh’s 90<sup>th</sup> Anti-Tank Battery, the tanks of “C” Squadron from the Three Rivers Regiment, and the engineers of 3 Field Company. The three regiments of the Canadian divisional artillery and two British artillery units, namely the 165th Field Regiment and the 7th Medium Regiment, would provide indirect fire support.<sup>14</sup>

Chris Vokes’s plan was doctrinally sound, as he had arranged that each attacking battalion would be supported by at least one other.<sup>15</sup> Where it differed somewhat from the approach he had used at Leonforte was in its far greater reliance upon fire support. This, as Bill McAndrew has argued, was largely due to General Simonds’s view that

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<sup>13</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10981, “Account of the Battle for AGIRA, as written by Brig. C. Vokes, Comd 2 Cdn Inf Bde, on 29 July 1943,” and CWM, Vokes, Volume 2, “Recollections of an Army Career,” 272.

<sup>14</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 114, and LAC, RG 24, Volume 10981, “Account of the Battle for AGIRA, as written by Brig. C. Vokes, Comd 2 Cdn Inf Bde, on 29 July 1943.”

<sup>15</sup> The War Office (UK), *Military Pamphlet No. 23, Operations, Part I: General Principles, Fighting Troops and Their Characteristics* (London: The War Office, September 1939, Reprinted in Canada in February 1941), 8.

Agira was part of a main defensive line, a conclusion that his intelligence staff had also reached during the battles at Leonforte and Assoro.<sup>16</sup> In such a situation, British and Canadian doctrine – which was based on bitter experience gained during the First World War – dictated that an attacking force had to suppress the enemy’s defensive fire with firepower in order to retain its mobility. This would also help to conserve manpower, which was an equally important consideration.<sup>17</sup> Achieving these effects was what Simonds had intended with the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade’s assault on 24 July. Vokes sought the same ends by working with Simonds’s staff to ensure that “the biggest barrage yet attempted by [the] Divisional Artillery” would support his troops.<sup>18</sup>

Brigadier Vokes delivered his orders to his COs at Assoro at 0900 hours on 26 July.<sup>19</sup> Battle procedure – that is, the sequence of drills through which plans are made, orders are delivered, and the logistic preparations necessary to conduct an operation are carried out – continued at all levels within the brigade throughout the day. So, too, did staff coordination at brigade headquarters. As was his normal practice, Chris Vokes kept tabs on the essential details that he figured were crucial for success. One of these was the artillery fire plan, which was being prepared by the divisional staff. Upon learning that

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<sup>16</sup> McAndrew, “Fire or Movement?”, 144, and LAC, RG 24, Volume 10879, “1 Cdn Div Intsum No. 5 (Up to 0500 hours 23 July 1943).”

<sup>17</sup> The War Office (UK), *The Infantry Division in the Attack*, 7. For an analysis of how and why firepower dominated British and Canadian doctrine, see Brigadier S. Bidwell and D. Graham, *Firepower: British Army Weapons and Theories of War, 1904 – 1945* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1982). For criticisms of this fire-based doctrine, see McAndrew, “Fire or Movement?”, 140-145, and Cessford, “Hard in the Attack.”

<sup>18</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14434, 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Field Regiment (RCA) War Diary (hereafter 3 Fd Regt), 26 July 1943. See also Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada: The History of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery*, Volume II, 1919-1967 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1972), 150.

<sup>19</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, July 1943, and Volume 15256, Seaforth War Diary, 26 July 1943.

these arrangements could not be completed before the PPCLI launched its attack at 1800 hours, Vokes convened another brigade "O" Group at 1500 hours and imposed a two-hour delay.<sup>20</sup> He seems to have had no viable alternative, but the loss of two hours of daylight would prove to be a significant factor in the forthcoming action.

Promptly at 2000 hours, the artillery barrage began and the PPCLI's two assault companies crossed their Start Line, supported by the tanks of "C" Squadron. At first, everything went smoothly. Eighty Canadian and British guns had pounded the German positions on LION for seventeen minutes, stunning the defenders and allowing the Patricias to take that feature with little difficulty.<sup>21</sup> At this point, however, problems arose. As Lt.-Col. Lindsay later recorded, "there was a half an hour's pause in the lifting barrage to enable the other two [companies], "A" and "B," to get [forward] about 1,000 [yards]. Unfortunately, the last mentioned [companies] lost their way, thereby losing the advantage of the barrage...Neither of the [companies] gained their objectives."<sup>22</sup> Given the poor quality of maps available to the Canadians, combined with the fact that in the darkness one Sicilian hill looked very much like another, getting lost was easy. In this instance, though, the PPCLI's unexpected delay allowed the Germans to recover from their initial shock. Recognizing the danger to their position, they immediately directed a tremendous weight of mortar and machine-gun fire onto the Patricias' position at LION. Such were the unforeseen consequences of losing two hours of daylight.

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<sup>20</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10981, "Account of the Battle for AGIRA, as written by Brig. C. Vokes, Comd 2 Cdn Inf Bde, on 29 July 1943."

<sup>21</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14433, 3 Fd Regt RCA War Diary, July 1943, Appendix 4, "HQ RCA Barrage Notes, 26 July 1943," and Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 129.

<sup>22</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10981, "Statement by Lt.-Col. R.A. Lindsay on the Engagements of the PPCLI from battle at PIAZZA ARMERINA to the battle for AGIRA, given on 30 Jul 43." See also Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, 26 July 1943.

At brigade headquarters, which had moved to a flea-infested gravel pit just off Highway 121 near Nissoria, the situation seemed to be completely enveloped by “the fog of war.”<sup>23</sup> This came as no surprise to Chris Vokes, and he worked through it. He knew that the Patricias had successfully taken LION, and so he “decided to commit the second [battalion] (the Seaforths) for the exploitation task in the hope that aggressive action would clear up the situation in the PPCLI area and permit the formation of a firm base.” It was a risky move, but as Vokes said after the battle was over, “One often has to depend on instinct and chance one’s aim.”<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, at 2300 hours he ordered Lt.-Col. Hoffmeister to advance with his battalion and seize GRIZZLY.

At roughly the same time that the brigadier decided to commit the Seaforths, he had to deal with a request made by Major Pat Mills, commanding “C” squadron, to withdraw his tanks. Although not an armoured officer, Vokes knew that because tank crews could not see well in the dark, the Armoured Corps normally disengaged from battle overnight. Faced with a dicey battle situation, Vokes refused, saying, “If the infantry can stick it up there tonight, so can Mills and his tanks. It will give the infantry confidence to have the tanks with them.” Mills acknowledged the order, but apparently told his CO, Lt.-Col. A.E. Booth, “Tell the old bastard to come up here himself and have a dose of the crap that is flying around!” The brigadier overheard the remark, but ignored it: “That moment was no time for ‘rabbit ears.’”<sup>25</sup> In this instance Chris Vokes showed

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<sup>23</sup> CWM, Vokes, Volume 2, “Recollections of an Army Career,” 272-273.

<sup>24</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10981, “Account of the Battle for AGIRA, as written by Brig. C. Vokes, Comd 2 Cdn Inf Bde, on 29 July 1943,” and “Some Comments and Impressions on the Sicilian Campaign, Brig. C. Vokes, 17 August 1943.”

<sup>25</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 114-115. For an account by one of Mills’s troop commanders, see Jack Wallace, “Shermans in Sicily: The Diary of a Young Soldier, Summer 1943,” David Pratt ed., *Canadian Military History*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Autumn, 1998), 66.

both an appreciation for morale and a willingness to overlook the frustrated response of a good subordinate. As it turned out, Vokes's decision proved to be a good one. The next morning, Major Mills's tanks destroyed a number of enemy panzers and anti-tank guns.

It was also at this point that Chris Vokes learned that the PPCLI's two follow-on companies had gotten lost en route to TIGER. Frustrated by this mishap and realizing that his overall plan was in jeopardy, Vokes radioed Lt.-Col. Hoffmeister to postpone the Seaforth Highlanders' assault on GRIZZLY in order to consider his options. It was a good move on his part, for the Seaforths would likely not have gotten very far if the German positions on TIGER had remained intact. Vokes did not dally in evaluating the changed situation. At around midnight he confirmed his original order, but gave Hoffmeister the additional task of capturing TIGER.<sup>26</sup> Chris Vokes evidently trusted that the Seaforths would not let him down, and subsequent events proved him right. At daybreak on 27 July, Hoffmeister informed the brigadier that his unit had taken TIGER.<sup>27</sup> With this welcome news, Vokes could breathe a bit easier.

With Phase One of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's operation successfully completed, the next task was to seize GRIZZLY. During this stage of the battle, as popular historian Daniel Dancocks aptly put it, "Chris Vokes was at his hard-driving best."<sup>28</sup> Knowing that the divisional staff had arranged for an air strike on both Agira and GRIZZLY at noon, he went forward and met Hoffmeister on TIGER at about 1100 hours to discuss the tactical situation. The Seaforths, they agreed, would attack at 1400 hours, with plenty of artillery

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<sup>26</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10981, "Account by Lt.-Col. B.M. Hoffmeister, OC Seaforth of C on the part that his Bn played in capture of AGIRA, as recounted by him on 31 Jul 43 at 'GRIZZLY', AGIRA." See also Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 129.

<sup>27</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, Intelligence Log, 27 July 1943, 0115 hours. See also Vokes, *My Story*, 115, and Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 130.

<sup>28</sup> Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, 83.

and air support. While they spoke, Vokes looked at the objective and began to wonder if Hoffmeister's battalion could take GRIZZLY on its own:

The "Grizzly" objective seemed now too wide for an assault by only one battalion if, as was probable, it was held in strength by the enemy. There was no real indication it was indeed so held, but I could not prove the Germans would *not* (original italics) be holding it. I thought they would be, because there was excellent defensive ground to delay us on the way to Agira just beyond.<sup>29</sup>

After telling Hoffmeister that he would meet him again shortly to check his plan Brigadier Vokes returned to his headquarters, which had moved out of the gravel pit during his absence to a position "just 1000 yards to the rear" of where the two had been conferring. Upon his arrival he met his brigade major, Peter Bingham, who told him that General Simonds had arrived and was "giving [him] a hard time because the brigade [was] not moving fast enough." Telling Bingham not to worry, Vokes took the impatient divisional commander forward to the hill that he and Hoffmeister had just vacated. There, under German artillery fire, he explained his plan to Simonds, who "quickly agreed with it. He went off smartly, [and] left me alone."<sup>30</sup> It seems reasonable to conclude that General Simonds's behavior during this brief encounter was a good sign that Brigadier Vokes had earned his trust and respect as a combat commander. Such was not always the experience of Vokes's peers, Brigadiers Howard Graham and Howard Penhale, both of whom had difficulties with their icy superior in Sicily.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 116.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> At Grammichele, Simonds had tried to micro-manage Graham's handling of the battle, which led to a spat in which General Montgomery had to intercede on the latter's behalf. Granatstein, *The Generals*, 158, and Graham, *Citizen and Soldier*, 158-164. Mike Cessford has speculated that Simonds did not give the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade more demanding tasks because Penhale was unfit and had little command presence. See "Hard in the Attack," 163-164. Of the three brigadiers, only Vokes obtained a divisional command.

After briefing General Simonds, Chris Vokes returned to his headquarters, whereupon he ordered Lt.-Col. Jefferson to move his troops from their positions northeast of Leonforte to a location just behind that of the Seaforth Highlanders near TIGER.<sup>32</sup> It was a prudent decision: if a second battalion was needed to take GRIZZLY, then a fresh one would be readily available and the brigade's assault would not lose momentum. The Edmonton Regiment, however, was not at full strength because one of its rifle companies had been detached to reinforce a fighting patrol that Vokes had ordered established about three kilometres to the north to interdict German traffic along the Agira-Nicosia road. Setting up this minor blocking operation proved to be another smart move on Vokes's part, for it resulted in the destruction of three enemy tanks that might have been used against his brigade at Agira.<sup>33</sup>

While Lt.-Col. Bert Hoffmeister was busy preparing his battalion for action on the morning of 27 July the Germans were bringing in fresh troops to relieve the 104<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Regiment, which had been severely battered after a week of bitter fighting and was incapable of offering further resistance. These men belonged to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Regiment, which had been temporarily detached from the 29<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Division.<sup>34</sup> The newcomers, though, had relatively little time to get settled in, for at precisely 1400 hours the Canadian artillery opened up and the Seaforths, accompanied by "C" Squadron's tanks, advanced towards their positions on GRIZZLY.

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<sup>32</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary Intelligence Log, 27 July 1943, serial 78, 1334 hours. See also LAC, RG 24, Volume 10981, "Account by Capt. E.H. Pritchard, Edmn R, 18 Aug 43."

<sup>33</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15113, LER War Diary, 27 July 1943; Volume 10981, "Account of the Battle for AGIRA, as written by Brig. C. Vokes, Comd 2 Cdn Inf Bde, on 29 July 1943;" and Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 130-131.

<sup>34</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10879, "1 Cdn Div Intelligence Summary No. 8 (based on information up to 0500 hrs 30 Jul 43)," and Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 131.

Enemy shells were still falling when Chris Vokes and Guy Simonds joined Bert Hoffmeister on a piece of high ground at about 1455 hours to watch the assault go in.<sup>35</sup> The southern part of GRIZZLY, Monte Fronte, was overrun within a few hours, but on the northern side of the highway a company of Seaforths had been stopped cold by German troops dug in at a cemetery located on a prominent high feature. Recognizing that “Cemetery Hill” was too tough a nut for one infantry company to crack by itself, Lt.-Col. Hoffmeister focused on reinforcing the success at Monte Fronte.<sup>36</sup> All these events confirmed in Vokes’s mind that his hunch that GRIZZLY might be too much for one battalion had indeed been correct. At 1924 hours he signaled Lt.-Col. Jefferson, telling him to “attack [the] left section [of GRIZZLY at] 2100 [hours] under full concentration [of artillery fire] before occupying [the] town.”<sup>37</sup>

The Edmonton Regiment set off from its nearby assembly area immediately, with Lt.-Col. Jefferson leading his men in a wide flanking movement to an FUP just north of Monte Crapuzza (see Map 9 on page 115). In the growing darkness this took a great deal of time; thus when the unit arrived at its Start Line, the supporting barrage that Vokes had arranged had long since ended.<sup>38</sup> Despite the lack of fire support, the Edmontons carried on with their assault. One company made for Monte Crapuzza while two others stormed “Cemetery Hill.” Both objectives fell to the Canadians after several hours of bitter

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<sup>35</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15256, Seaforth War Diary, 27 July 1943.

<sup>36</sup> Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada*, 184-187, and Delaney, *The Soldiers’ General*, 64-65.

<sup>37</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, Intelligence Log, 27 July 1943, serial 111. See also LAC, RG 24, Volume 15113, LER War Diary, 27 July 1943.

<sup>38</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10981, File 263C2.011 (D1), 2 CIB Reports on battles for Leonforte, Agira and Aderno, “Account of the battle for AGIRA giving details of part played by the Edmn R – as told by Captain E.H. Pritchard, Adjutant, on 31 Jul 43.” See also Stevens, *A City Goes to War*, 241-242, and Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 132.

fighting. At 0915 hours on 28 July, Lt.-Col. Hoffmeister radioed Vokes that the “whole of Grizzly [is] in our hands. Nearly all enemy killed. Survivors [are] retreating north. We have lost contact with them. All approaches [are] safe.”<sup>39</sup>

With two battalions holding the high ground dominating Agira, all that remained was to take the town itself. Vokes selected the PPCLI – which had formed a firm base to support the Seaforths early on 27 July and remained out of action ever since – for the job. At 1430 hours the Patricias began their advance. The townsfolk in the outskirts of Agira warmly welcomed them, but towards the centre of town troops came across isolated pockets of Germans determined to make a fight of it. Several hours of house-to-house fighting followed, but the enemy, knowing that the battle was over, eventually withdrew eastward. By about 1800 hours on 28 July the town of Agira was declared secure.<sup>40</sup>

Most Canadian historians of the Sicilian campaign agree that Agira was the most difficult and costly battle fought by the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division during its twenty-seven days of combat.<sup>41</sup> To a great extent it was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade’s victory, a fact that historians have also recognized. Early authors such as J.B. Conacher and G.W.L. Nicholson attributed this success to Brigadier Vokes’s use of more than one battalion at critical moments, namely the Seaforths’ attack in support of the Patricias at TIGER and

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<sup>39</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, Intelligence Log, 28 July 1943, serial 35; Volume 15256, Seaforth War Diary, 27 July 1943; and Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 133. The division’s war diary says that this message was received at 0855 hours. Such discrepancies between war diaries were common.

<sup>40</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10981, “Statement by Lt.-Col. R.A. Lindsay on the Engagements of the PPCLI from battle at PIAZZA ARMERINA to the battle for AGIRA, given on 30 Jul 43;” Volume 10981, “Account of the Battle for AGIRA, as written by Brig. C. Vokes, Comd 2 Cdn Inf Bde, on 29 July 1943;” and Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, 28 July 1943.

<sup>41</sup> See for example Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 134; Cessford, “Hard in the Attack,” 180; Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, 84, or David Bercuson, *Maple Leaf Against the Axis: Canada’s Second World War* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1995), 150.

the Edmonton Regiment's assistance to the Seaforths at GRIZZLY, both of which sustained the momentum of the brigade's assault and swung the balance in favour of the attacking Canadians.<sup>42</sup> More recently, Geoffrey Hayes has asserted that Vokes's plan of attack afforded "a much better balance of firepower and manoeuvre warfare" than that which had been imposed on the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, a comment that echoed Bill McAndrew's lament that General Simonds's reliance on an attack doctrine based on firepower rather than manoeuvre had inhibited initiative on the part of some of the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade's lower-ranking commanders and resulted in lost opportunities.<sup>43</sup> All this reflected well on Chris Vokes's tactical judgment and his ability to "read" the progress of an ongoing battle.

Daniel Dancocks has taken a different approach, arguing that "Brigadier Vokes himself was the biggest difference between the [the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's] operations. Several years younger than Howard Graham, Vokes also had a much more forceful personality. And, his preparations were characteristically sound."<sup>44</sup> It is true that Vokes and Graham were very different characters, but it would be difficult to assess the degree to which the factor of personality affected the outcome at Agira. What *does* seem quite clear is that Vokes's personal style of command paid huge dividends, especially during the assault on GRIZZLY. His pre-positioning of the Edmonton Regiment should it be needed to assist the Seaforths was exactly the right thing to do, and it might not have happened had he not reconnoitered the objective for himself. Still, it is important to remember that brigade commanders do not fight and win battles on their own. Chris

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<sup>42</sup> J.B. Conacher, "The Battle for Agira, July 24-8, 1943: An Episode in Canadian Military History" (*The Canadian Historical Review*, March 1949), 2-21, and Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 134.

<sup>43</sup> Hayes, "The Canadians in Sicily Sixty Years On," 15, and McAndrew, "Fire or Movement?", 144.

<sup>44</sup> Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, 81.

Vokes knew this, which explains why he had worked so hard to promote teamwork and initiative while his men were undergoing training in England. It was an approach that paid off time and again in Sicily. So, too, did Vokes's efforts to build solid relationships with his unit commanders. This allowed him to tell his COs *what* he wanted them to achieve rather than *how* to do it, and it left him confident that they would do the right thing. Indirectly, Geoffrey Hayes paid tribute to Vokes's team-building efforts when he wrote that, "the Canadians' second battle for Agira showed the strength of a tactical doctrine that hinged on the boldness of young officers on the ground."<sup>45</sup> For his part, Vokes made a point of recognizing the contributions of such officers, ensuring that Lt.-Col. Bert Hoffmeister was awarded the DSO for his immense courage and leadership.<sup>46</sup>

It seems clear that Vokes's tactical judgment, combined with the efforts of a team of talented subordinates, were major factors leading to the Canadian victory at Agira. Equally important, as Mike Cessford has pointed out, was good intelligence regarding the location of the enemy positions and the nature of their defensive tactics. Possessing this vital information was why Vokes's artillery concentrations were far more effective in neutralizing the enemy's defences than had been the barrage in support of the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade during that formation's ill-fated attacks on 24-25 July.<sup>47</sup> One could argue that Vokes and his men were to some extent lucky that they were not the first to assault Agira.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's success came at a cost, but one that was lighter than that of Leonforte six days earlier. The PPCLI took twenty-three battle casualties, of which only twelve had been sustained in capturing the town. The Edmonton Regiment lost a total of

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<sup>45</sup> Hayes, "The Canadians in Sicily Sixty Years On," 15.

<sup>46</sup> Delaney, *The Soldiers' General*, 66. Hoffmeister won three DSOs during the war.

<sup>47</sup> Cessford, "Hard in the Attack," 181-182.

thirty-seven officers and men – most of them in the attack on “Cemetery Hill” – while the Seaforths counted forty-eight dead and wounded.<sup>48</sup> Once again, though, the enemy had paid a far greater price. At the time, it was estimated that some 200 men of the 104<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Regiment and another 125 of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Regiment had been killed, and that between 125 and 150 others had been captured.<sup>49</sup> More importantly, the Germans lost a key defensive position, which necessitated their further withdrawal to the town of Regalbuto, about thirteen kilometres east of Agira.

To maintain the momentum of the Canadian offensive, General Simonds ordered the Malta Brigade to take over the advance eastward along Highway 121. The 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade followed, while the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade moved through the Dittaino Valley, a few kilometres to the south.<sup>50</sup> Chris Vokes’s formation remained at Agira for the next three days, during which time the troops rested, welcomed reinforcements replacing the fallen, and prepared for further operations. There was even a bit of time for some simple entertainment. On 30 July the Pipes and Drums of the Seaforth Highlanders played in Agira’s town square, an event that was recorded by CBC Radio correspondent Peter Stursberg and subsequently re-broadcast by the BBC to the entire world. Chris Vokes attended this concert, an act that showed his sincere respect and appreciation for the men who were largely responsible for his brigade’s victory.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Stevens, *Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry*, 86-88; Stevens, *A City Goes to War*, 241-242, and McDougall, *A Narrative of War*, 41.

<sup>49</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10879, “1 Cdn Div Intelligence Summary No. 7 (based on information up to 0500 hrs 28 July 1943),” and Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 134. The Canadians never met these formations again in Sicily.

<sup>50</sup> Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, 90.

<sup>51</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15256, Seaforth War Diary, 30 July 1943; McAndrew, *Canadians and the Italian Campaign*, 55; and Peter Stursberg, *The Sound of War: Memoirs of a CBC Correspondent* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 113.

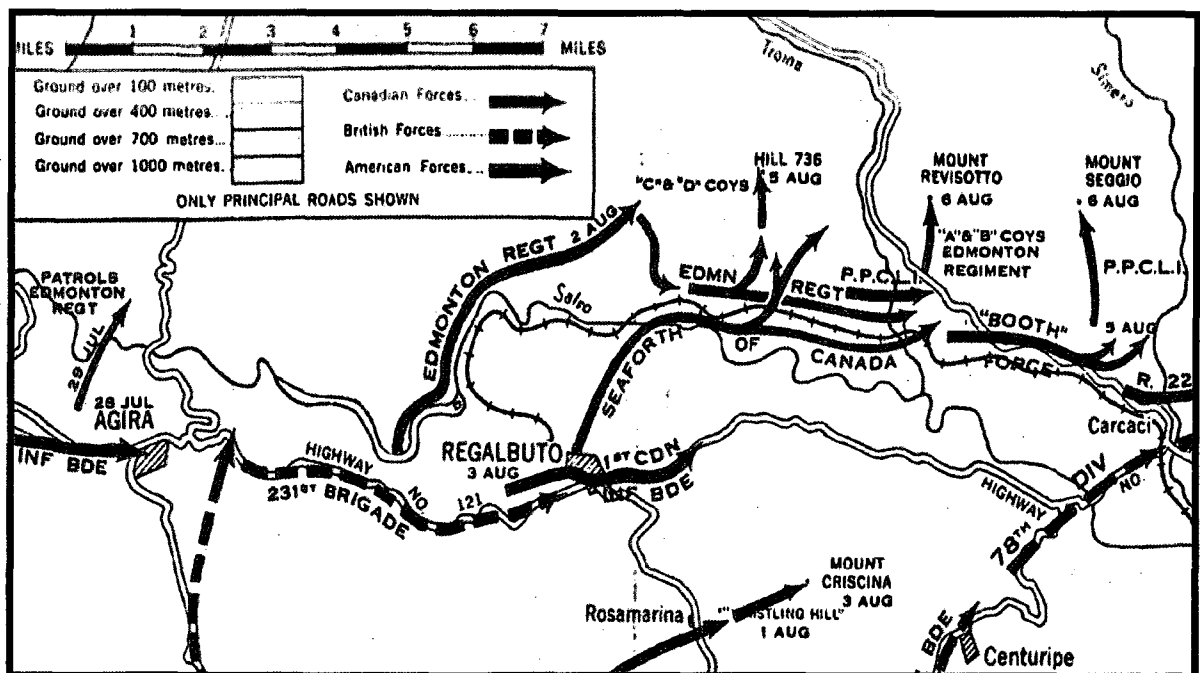
As he had done after Leonforte, Brigadier Vokes met with his COs on 30 July in order to identify lessons learned at Agira. This meeting resulted in the publication of a one-page document entitled "Points to be Observed in Subsequent Actions" and a second, more detailed paper called "Notes on Lessons of Recent Fighting." One topic that was covered in both papers concerned methods for improving coordination between the artillery and infantry. Given the difficulties that the PPCLI had experienced on the night of 26 July, Vokes decided that during night actions the barrage should advance at a rate of one hundred yards every four or five minutes, and that pauses should be no less than forty-five minutes in duration to allow follow-on companies to get forward. A second major common point revolved around the ongoing problems with the radios: "All units are now alive to the difficulty of passing back [information]. Every means must be explored and alternatives to [radio transmission] automatically laid on." To provide for better radio communications, a pool of more powerful (but heavier) No. 22 sets would be established, "to be distributed in accordance with requirements by the [Brigade Commander]." Other topics included the employment of snipers and scouts, the need to dig in anti-tank guns, and recognizing recently observed enemy tricks such as luring an attacker into the open by ceasing fire.<sup>52</sup>

While the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade was resting at Agira, the Sicilian campaign entered its final stage. On 25 July General Alexander had decided to launch two major assaults, both of which would begin on 1 August. General Patton's Seventh Army was to advance along

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<sup>52</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10981, File 263C.011 (D1), "Notes on Lessons of Recent Fighting, issued by 2 Cdn Inf Bde on 30 Jul 43," and Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, Appendix 5, "Brigade Commander's Conference – Points to be Observed in Subsequent Action, 30 July 1943." The No. 22 sets were to be provided by Division on the scale of six to each brigade. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 127.

Sicily's northern coast towards Messina and also from Nicosia to Randazzo, while the Eighth Army drove towards Adrano. This latter offensive, code-named Operation HARDGATE, called for a Canadian push along Highway 121 to Regalbuto, and then through the Salso River valley (see Map 10), while the newly-arrived 78<sup>th</sup> (British) Division would follow a similar path several kilometres to the south of the Canadians. More or less simultaneously the Germans, who realized that it was only a matter of time before the Allies captured the whole of Sicily, began planning their evacuation from the island.<sup>53</sup> To gain time in order to execute such a potentially hazardous operation, the enemy continued to fight hard for key positions. Regalbuto was one such strongpoint.



**Map 10 The 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's Operations in the Salso River Valley**

(Source: G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, Map No. 5, Close-Up of the Salso Valley)

<sup>53</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 139-146, and DHH, Steiger, *Army Historical Report No. 14*, paragraph 32.

The task of taking Regalbuto fell to the Malta Brigade (which was still attached to the Canadian division) and the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade. Chris Vokes's mission, which he received from Maj.-Gen. Simonds on 31 July, was to support their actions by securing the high ground northeast of the town.<sup>54</sup> A quick glance at Map 10 shows why this seemingly unglamorous task was important to the division commander's plan. Just beyond Regalbuto the Salso valley broadened considerably, eventually spanning a breadth of about three kilometres where the Salso and Simeto Rivers met. The valley could thus be used to approach Adrano but the high ground had to be secured in order to do so safely. Three features were particularly significant. The first, known then as Hill 736 (it was 736 metres high), overlooked the confluence of the Salso and Troina Rivers, about eight kilometres east of Regalbuto. The other two, Monte Revisotto and Monte Seggio, lay further to the east of Hill 736. Brigadier Vokes's task was to capture and hold all three positions while the rest of the division rolled through the Salso Valley.<sup>55</sup>

For the next several days the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's operations were conducted mostly at the battalion level, and in the wildest country the troops had yet seen. On the night of 31 July the Edmonton Regiment sent reconnaissance patrols to Hill 736, which they found unoccupied.<sup>56</sup> At 1030 hours the next morning Vokes ordered Jefferson to seize it that night under cover of darkness. Owing to the rough nature of the terrain, he arranged for the unit to be provided with pack mules to transport supplies and its 3-inch mortars.<sup>57</sup>

The Edmontons' approach march, however, was slower than expected. By first light on 2

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<sup>54</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, 31 July 1943.

<sup>55</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 153, and Stacey, *From Pachino to Ortona*, 68.

<sup>56</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10981, "Account by Capt. F.N. Pope, IO, 2 Cdn Inf Bde, on the battles of LEONFORTE and ADERNO."

<sup>57</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15113, LER War Diary, 1 August 1943, and Vokes, *My Story*, 118. The mules belonged to the divisional Mule Transporter Company.

August they were still some distance from their objective when they came under heavy mortar and artillery fire from elements of the 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Division, which had re-occupied Hill 736. With the battalion out of radio contact with brigade headquarters, Vokes only became aware of these events when a corporal from the unit appeared and gave him a marked map. Radio communications were re-established later, on 3 August.<sup>58</sup>

In the meantime the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade had taken over the assault on Regalbuto, which finally fell to that formation on 2 August. That same day, Vokes received orders from General Simonds to send another battalion into the high country on the north side of the Salso Valley. Selecting the Seaforths, Vokes warned Lt.-Col. Hoffmeister to be prepared to move by 0700 hours on 3 August: in fact, this operation did not begin until that evening.<sup>59</sup> The Seaforths' mission was to push through to the Troina River, whereupon the Patricias would pass through them and consolidate a bridgehead on the far side. By 1930 hours on 4 August, both units had taken their objectives. That same day, the Germans finally abandoned their positions on the Catania Plain and withdrew northward to their final defensive line around Mount Etna. With the need for speed more important than ever, XXX Corps ordered the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division to gain a bridgehead across the Simeto River and to seize Monte Seggio on the night of 5-6 August.<sup>60</sup>

To accomplish the former task and link up with the 78<sup>th</sup> Division (which was closing in on Aderno from the south), General Simonds decided to rush an all-arms task force through the Troina bridgehead. He gave the job of organizing this attack to Chris Vokes. In a letter dated 4 August 1943 Simonds told the brigadier that he wanted this

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<sup>58</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, 2 August 1943.

<sup>59</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15256, Seaforth War Diary, 2-4 August 1943.

<sup>60</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 158.

force to be led by Lt.-Col. A.E. Booth, the CO of the Three Rivers Regiment, whose unit would be placed under the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade for the operation. In addition to his Sherman tanks, Booth was to be provided with an infantry battalion (Vokes chose the Seaforths), a squadron of the divisional reconnaissance regiment (the 4<sup>th</sup> Princess Louise Dragoon Guards), a battery of self-propelled guns, and some anti-tank guns. Apparently, Vokes had already formed a similar idea, for on Simonds's letter he wrote, "This letter arrived after 2300 hours on 4 Aug 43. Almost identical orders had already been issued by me and arrangements were already under way. No alteration was necessary. The attack was successful."<sup>61</sup> Indeed it was. Both Generals Simonds and Montgomery, who watched the assault, later described it as a model of tank-infantry cooperation.<sup>62</sup>

While "Booth Force" was roaring down the Salso valley, the Edmonton Regiment and the PPCLI were preparing to capture Monte Revisotto and Monte Seggio (see Map 10). Earlier in the day two companies of the Edmontons had taken Hill 736; that night, the other two proceeded to Monte Revisotto. At the same time, Lt.-Col. Lindsay sent two companies of the Patricias to take Monte Seggio, leaving his remaining troops to support the Edmontons' attack. Both features fell on the morning of 6 August 1943.

Despite these two successes, Chris Vokes was an extremely unhappy man. His orders had been to take Monte Revisotto and Monte Seggio by no later than first light on 6 August; in fact, neither attack had even begun by that time. In his memoirs, Vokes described his "amazement" when he learned about these delays. He grudgingly accepted the explanation provided by the CO of the Edmontons: as that unit had met stiff

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<sup>61</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, August 1943, Appendix 11, "Letter from Major-General Guy Simonds to Brigadier Chris Vokes, 4 August 1943."

<sup>62</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 159-161.

opposition during assault's early stage Jefferson decided to hold in place until artillery support could be arranged, which was only possible by first light. The brigadier also took into account the fact that the Edmontons had been fighting at Hill 736 since the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August, and all ranks were undoubtedly tired. On the other hand, Vokes believed that:

There was no excuse for the Patricias. They were fresh and had seen no action in contact with the enemy during the operations in the Salso Valley. I felt they had missed an opportunity to deal the enemy a telling blow...I blamed Lindsay and the two company commanders for the cancellation of the operation without my permission and I made up my mind really to houseclean the regiment's officers when the battle cooled. And I did.<sup>63</sup>

On 9 August Chris Vokes fired Lt.-Col. Lindsay and replaced him with the unit's second-in-command, Major C.B. Ware.<sup>64</sup> This was his most controversial act while serving as a brigade commander. In order to appreciate why, one must look at both sides of the story, which is by no means clear-cut. Indeed, Lt.-Col. Lindsay's explanation of the events surrounding Monte Seggio reflected the confusion of the Sicilian battlefield.

At 1900 hours on the evening of 5 August, Lindsay gave his orders to the two company commanders he had picked to take the feature, Captains D. Brain and W. de N. Watson. Because they had to launch their attack before dawn on the 6<sup>th</sup> they had no time to conduct a reconnaissance, so they set off almost immediately. At about 2300 hours they linked up with the Seaforths, who were on a piece of high ground on the west bank of the Simeto. They met briefly with Lt.-Col. Hoffmeister who told them that he believed Monte Seggio was held in strength, although it had been quiet for some time. The PPCLI ignored the latter point, knowing that the Germans often ceased fire in order to lull their attackers into a false sense of security – a tactic that had been mentioned at Vokes's

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<sup>63</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 120.

<sup>64</sup> Ware was promoted to Lt.-Col. Eight other PPCLI officers were reassigned to other units. LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, 9 August 1943.

conference of 30 July. They left Hoffmeister's command post, hitching a ride with a squadron of tanks that was on its way to relieve a second squadron that was attached to the Seaforths. The tanks, however, got lost in the dark. The Patricias dismounted; by the time they found their way back to the Seaforths' lines, it was 0230 hours on 6 August.

According to Captain Brain, there was then a brief conference:

It was decided to wait until first light before advancing up Mt. SEGGIO. It was hoped at this time to get some support from fresh [tanks] as well as from a F.O.O. to deal with the enemy posts which had been engaging the Seaforths the previous evening. In the morning the [tanks] failed to appear, but a F.O.O. did come along and immediately registered on targets indicated by the Seaforths, and other suspected [positions]. A number of enemy could be seen well up on the hill, but when the attack was put in, supported by [artillery, medium machine-guns] and 4.2 Mortars, there was no opposition and the hill was taken without casualties.<sup>65</sup>

To the members of the PPCLI such actions seemed entirely reasonable given the circumstances, and they were shocked by what appeared to them as an impulsive act on the part of Brigadier Vokes. In their view Lindsay's firing was unjust, especially given that the Edmontons' attack on Monte Revisotto had also been postponed. Moreover, they argued that the CO had known nothing about the decision to delay until after Monte Seggio fell on the morning of 6 August. This was a crucial point, for if Lindsay *had* known and failed to tell Vokes he would have been derelict in his duty. At the time, Vokes was unable to confirm if Lindsay knew or not, and no evidence has been found proving that he did.<sup>66</sup> Sydney Frost, who fought at Monte Seggio as a lieutenant, has said that "a senior officer who was with the Regiment at the time" told him the CO could not

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<sup>65</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10981, File 263C2.011 (D1), "Sicilian campaign – The Advance to MONTE SEGGIO, by Maj D. Brain, n.d.."

<sup>66</sup> See LAC, RG 24, Volume 10981, "The Advance to MONTE SEGGIO, by Maj D. Brain, n.d." and "Account by Major R.C. Coleman, M.C., second-in-comd PPCLI, given in bn conc area near MILITELLO in VAL di CATANIA on 17 Aug 43"; Stevens, *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry*, 193-194; and Vokes, *My Story*, 119.

have known because the companies had no communications with Lindsay's headquarters. For this reason, Frost believes that Lt.-Col. Lindsay got "a raw deal."<sup>67</sup>

Historian David Bercuson agrees with Frost, saying that Lindsay's dismissal "was an error of judgment that reveals [Vokes] as a martinet rather than a good commander."<sup>68</sup> In his view, Lindsay was fired because of a personality clash between him and Vokes. Some circumstantial evidence exists that supports this argument. During his brief tenure as the PPCLI's CO, Vokes had blamed Lt.-Col. Lindsay for what he felt was a lack of unit discipline. In Sicily, Lindsay fell afoul of Vokes when he was apparently reluctant to carry out an order to shoot three civilian snipers that his men had captured.<sup>69</sup> At Agira, two PPCLI rifle companies had gotten lost on their way to capture TIGER, which had forced Vokes to amend his plan. The delayed attack at Monte Seggio might have been the last straw. Still, if a personality conflict between Vokes and Lindsay did exist, the former's policy, upon which he reflected after the war, was simple: "If there is a clash of personalities or a lack of mutual confidence, then you must get a new subordinate."<sup>70</sup>

For historians, the controversy over Brigadier Vokes's firing of Lt.-Col. Lindsay raises a number of questions. Particularly troublesome is the matter of communications between the companies at Monte Seggio and Lindsay's headquarters. It will be recalled that the need to find alternate methods to maintain communications had been raised at Vokes's conference on 30 July; moreover, as recently 3 August the Edmontons had used a runner to inform the brigadier of their actions at Hill 736. Curiously, there is no

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<sup>67</sup> Frost, *Once a Patricia*, 534-535,

<sup>68</sup> Bercuson, *The Patricias*, 194.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, and Vokes, *My Story*, 97. According to Bercuson, some PPCLI veterans say that Lindsay actually did execute the Italians, while Vokes recalled that they were given a sound beating instead. It is not certain which account is the true version of events.

<sup>70</sup> Vokes, "Some Reflections on Operational Command," 9.

indication that any similar effort was made by Captains Brain or de N. Watson to inform their CO of the situation and obtain his approval to delay the attack. While their No. 18 man-pack radios were likely next to useless in the rough terrain, the PPCLI companies seem to have been relatively close to the Seaforths' command post which, according to that unit's war diary, was equipped with a more powerful No. 22 set.<sup>71</sup> That unit's FOO, whose services the PPCLI used to support their attack, would have had the same type of radio in order to communicate with the far distant gun batteries. Would it not have been possible to send a runner to Hoffmeister's location and get a message to Lt.-Col. Lindsay using one of these means? In fact, this very option *may* have been used at 2250 hours on 5 August when Brain and de N. Watson met with Hoffmeister, because Vokes's staff recorded a message from the PPCLI's command post that said "B" Company had met the Seaforths and that the enemy to the north (i.e. at Monte Seggio) was "in more strength than anticipated."<sup>72</sup> How could the PPCLI possibly have known this if they had not received a message from either their two companies or the Seaforths' headquarters?

Equally curious is the time that the company commanders said they had decided to delay the attack. At 2300 hours on 5 August Lt.-Col. Hoffmeister had told them that Mount Seggio was well defended, yet it was not until 0230 hours on the 6<sup>th</sup> that they opted to wait until daybreak in order to get artillery support. If fire support was essential, why did the PPCLI captains not arrange it while they were with the Seaforths' CO? And, to be fair, the lack of response by Vokes's headquarters to these messages is also rather puzzling. There is no indication in the brigade's message logs that any direction was

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<sup>71</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15256, Seaforth War Diary, 4 August 1943.

<sup>72</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, Intelligence Log, 5 August 1943, serial 102, 2250 hours.

provided to the PPCLI when that unit reported that the enemy was holding Monte Seggio in greater strength than originally expected. Was it assumed that the unit could still take the hill by a silent attack, as the Edmontons had done at “Cemetery Hill” near Agira? Nor does it seem that Brigadier Vokes was informed, as there is no mention of this message in either the brigade’s After Action report or Vokes’s memoirs.<sup>73</sup> Equally curious is that the fact there was still no reaction when two further messages arrived *after* first light giving the location of the PPCLI as being in the area of the Seaforths.<sup>74</sup>

Chris Vokes presumably asked similar questions at the time, but it is not known if he obtained answers to them. Gaining such knowledge is even less likely for modern-day historians as most of the participants are deceased. Even if they do, it will do little to erase the deep hurt that members of the PPCLI felt – and still feel – at seeing their CO relieved of his command. Vokes was likely aware of how his decision would be seen by the Patricias; indeed, Sydney Frost believes that it bothered him in his later years.<sup>75</sup>

Despite this, the brigadier seems to have considered that he had no choice but to take drastic action. In his view, the main issue was that the PPCLI’s attack had been “cancelled without my permission,” although as Sydney Frost points out it had actually been postponed.<sup>76</sup> For Vokes this detail was immaterial. Two company commanders had unilaterally decided to delay an attack for which their CO was responsible, which made it seem that Lt.-Col. Lindsay had lost control of his battalion. If such was really the case it constituted a serious failure on Lindsay’s part, for as stated in *Kings Regulations and*

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<sup>73</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, August 1943, Appendix 8, “The Battle of Aderno, n.d.”, and Vokes, *My Story*, 119-121.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, Intelligence Log, 6 August 1943, serials 3 (0621 hours) and 23a (0705 hours).

<sup>75</sup> Frost, *Once a Patricia*, 534-538.

<sup>76</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 120, and Frost, *Once a Patricia*, 534-535.

*Orders*, as a commanding officer he was responsible to “supervise and control all duties performed by those under his command.”<sup>77</sup> And while Vokes strongly encouraged initiative on the part of all ranks, he believed that no commander could allow subordinates to drastically change the battle plan without his authority because that would lead to utter chaos. This was what seemed to have happened at Monte Seggio.

In Chris Vokes’s opinion, the problems within the PPCLI were attributable to:

[a] lack of drive, leadership and military skill on the part of the CO and some of his company commanders. The younger officers and the NCOs were of good calibre. It was my opinion then, any division, brigade or battalion or the equivalent, was just as good as the officer who commanded it. If the man in command is unfit for command, his command; division, brigade or unit; usually puts up a poor performance in battle. One cannot put up with it when men’s lives are at stake. After the fighting ended for us in Sicily I arranged that the CO and all the company commanders be replaced. Cammy Ware became CO, and under his command the Patricias soon became an efficient unit in battle.<sup>78</sup>

It is important to note that Vokes’s memory regarding the fate of Captains Brain and de N. Watson was faulty, for despite his fury over their actions at Monte Seggio neither officer was relieved of his command. In fact, both men remained with the regiment, were subsequently promoted to the rank of major, and fought with great distinction in Italy.<sup>79</sup> It seems likely that the PPCLI’s new CO, Lt.-Col. Ware, convinced Vokes to keep them, as both officers had by this time earned solid reputations as effective combat leaders.

Instead, Lt.-Col. Lindsay was relieved because the circumstances surrounding the Monte Seggio incident reflected badly on *his* fitness for command. While this may seem unfair, Vokes’s judgment was based on a central military tenet that remains valid to this

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<sup>77</sup> *The King’s Regulations and Orders for the Canadian Militia, 1939*, 7.

<sup>78</sup> RMC, McAndrew Papers, Vokes-McAndrew Interview, June 1980.

<sup>79</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15156, PPCLI War Diary, 9 August 1943. Major Brain was killed near Ortona in December 1943. Major de N. Watson survived the war, and was awarded both the DSO and the Military Cross. Frost, *Once a Patricia*, 537-538.

day, namely that commanders are accountable for the actions of their subordinates. Such was – and is – the price of command. Put in this light, it seems evident that Chris Vokes had little choice but to prove to his superiors – and especially to the men of his brigade – that he would not tolerate what seemed to be an obvious failure on the part of one of his COs to exercise the appropriate degree of control over operations. Indeed, taking the principle of a commander’s accountability for his men one step further, it is also clear that had Vokes *not* taken action against Lt.-Col. Lindsay for what he believed to be unacceptable conduct, he would have been derelict in *his* duty to ensure that his COs were up to their jobs. Given Vokes’s views on personal leadership and his deep concern for the lives of his soldiers, this was something that he would not permit himself to do. Moreover, Chris Vokes was undoubtedly aware that his superior, Maj.-Gen. Simonds, had equally strong views on accountability. Several months later Simonds expressed these opinions in a document entitled “Efficiency of Command,” which was issued when he took command of II Canadian Corps in February 1944. He emphatically stated that:

I regard it as a first duty of every commander and commanding officer to see to it that the command of his subordinate formations or units is in fit, competent and energetic hands. In this matter there can be no compromise and I consider a commander or commanding officer who tolerates ineffective subordinates is himself unfitted for the responsibilities of command.<sup>80</sup>

These were not idle words, for in August 1944 General Simonds fired his protégé George Kitching, then commanding the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Division, for the latter’s failure to control his formation’s actions during Operation TRACTABLE in Normandy.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Lt.-Gen. G.G. Simonds, “Letter to All Formation Commanders of 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Corps, ‘Efficiency of Command,’ 19 February 1944,” in Terry Copp, *Guy Simonds and the Art of Command* (Canadian Defence Academy Press: Kingston, 2007), 18.

<sup>81</sup> See Foster, *Meeting of Generals*, 369-370, and Kitching, *Mud and Green Fields*, 203-205.

It seems fair to conclude that Brigadier Vokes's dismissal of Lt.-Col. Lindsay had more to do with upholding his responsibilities as a commander than satisfying a personal grudge. Vokes knew that to be an effective leader he would sometimes have to make difficult decisions that were in the best interests of his brigade, and that he would have to see them through even if they were unpopular. In this instance, Chris Vokes believed that replacing Bob Lindsay with "Cammy" Ware would promote good operational discipline and ensure that the Patricias had the best available officer to lead them in future battles. All this was undoubtedly one of the reasons why Vokes later reflected that having an operational command was a lonely job for the commander.<sup>82</sup>

On 6 August the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division was withdrawn from battle and moved to the Catania Plain to spend the rest of the month preparing for the forthcoming invasion of mainland Italy, codenamed Operation BYTOWN.<sup>83</sup> Messina fell on the 17<sup>th</sup>, but not before the Germans evacuated some 40,000 troops, 9,600 vehicles, 47 tanks, and 94 guns. In this rather disappointing way, the Sicilian campaign came to an end.<sup>84</sup>

With his men out of action, Vokes, as he had done in England, found himself dealing primarily with human issues. At a brigade conference convened on 7 August he laid down his policy for the next few weeks. One of his main concerns was discipline. In a "Letter to All Ranks" issued the same day, Vokes wrote, "In action discipline in dress and saluting is relaxed. Out of action we must tighten up. Don't mar our splendid

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<sup>82</sup> Vokes, "Some Reflections on Operational Command," 9.

<sup>83</sup> IWM, Montgomery Papers, BLM 39/1, Personal Diary of General Montgomery Diary, 6 August 1943, 13. The Eighth Army landed in Italy on 3 September 1943.

<sup>84</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 168-173. See especially the views of Brian Holden Reid, "The Italian Campaign, 1943-45: A Reappraisal of Allied Generalship," *Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol. 13 (1990), 136, and Carlo D'Este, *Bitter Victory: The Battle for Sicily* (London: Collins, 1988), 522.

fighting reputation by bad behaviour, slackness in dress and appearance, and failure to pay compliments to Officers. Let us set the standard in all Military Qualities for the rest of the Army.”<sup>85</sup> Training was another priority. Units were to focus on basic tasks such as making company, platoon, and section commanders “proficient in [the] use of ground:” at the same time, he ordered his COs to ensure that “any personnel found ‘wanting’ ...[were] weeded out.”<sup>86</sup> Vokes also paid attention to morale. He authorized the publication of a brigade newspaper called “The Grizzly Ba’ar” and – as did the other brigades – he organized a formation sports competition, which was won by the Seaforth Highlanders.<sup>87</sup> Swim parades in the Mediterranean, too, were a regular occurrence.

Directly tied to Vokes’s concerns for discipline and morale was his worry over the rapidly growing incidence of venereal disease (VD) among his men. To be fair, the same sort of thing was happening throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division during this rest period, but the formation’s chief medical officer, Lt.-Col. C.H. Playfair, was more focused on malaria, which had also assumed epidemic proportions.<sup>88</sup> Considering VD to be equally damaging to operational effectiveness, on 17 August Vokes warned his troops that he would consider any soldier contracting VD as having sustained “a self-inflicted wound” and would treat it as a disciplinary matter.<sup>89</sup> This direction fell in line with General Montgomery’s own orders, which made all Sicilian towns strictly out of

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<sup>85</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15248, 2 Cdn Inf Bde Sp Gp War Diary, August 1943, Appendix 9, “Letter from Brigadier C. Vokes, 7 August 1943.”

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., Appendix 12, “Bde Comd’s Conference Held 2000 hrs 7 Aug 43;” and Appendix 18, “Training Instruction No. 1, 12 August 1943.”

<sup>87</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, 17 and 28 August 1943.

<sup>88</sup> By 31 August 1943 there had been 1,184 actual or suspected Canadian cases of malaria. See W.R. Feasby, ed., *Official History of the Canadian Medical Services, 1939 – 1945*, Vol. 1, *Organization and Campaigns* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1956), 147.

<sup>89</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 14074, 2 CIB War Diary, August 1943, Appendix 6, “2<sup>nd</sup> Cdn Inf Bde Routine Orders, 17 August 1943.”

bounds for Eighth Army troops, and placed military and regimental policemen at the entrances of all known brothels.<sup>90</sup>

Chris Vokes, however, was a realist, and he knew that neither orders nor the presence of the military police would totally dissuade his troops from seeking out female companionship. As he later wrote, "The young men I had in the brigade were vigorous, in the prime of their lives and their life expectancy, they assumed, was rather brief. With luck they would survive, but the personal view of a private soldier in war is 'I'm here today and gone tomorrow and I should not lose any opportunity for any recreation I can find!'"<sup>91</sup> In order to provide safe "recreation" for his soldiers Vokes decided to establish a brothel, which was to be supervised by one of his unit Medical Officers and controlled by Canadian military police. Some of his officers were bemused by such a suggestion. Major Tom de Faye wryly called it "another Christopher Vokes idea," but noted that not everyone was in favour of the brigadier's plan: "The padres ganged up on him...He would be condemned by every wife and mother in Canada."<sup>92</sup> According to Vokes, the Eighth Army took an equally dim view of his proposition, which was expressed in a rather emphatic message that said, "**THERE WILL BE NO BROTHELS. NO BROTHELS PERIOD. NO BROTHELS OF ANY KIND, OPENED ANYWHERE IN THE EIGHTH ARMY AREA.**" As Vokes later recalled, "My officers and men in the next few hours, even days, as they digested the outcome, were a saddened lot."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 15656, 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division Assistant Director of Medical Services War Diary, August 1943, Appendix 18, "Casualty Breakdown and Control of Disease, 9 August 1943."

<sup>91</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 123.

<sup>92</sup> University of Victoria, de Faye-Hill Interview, 17 June 1985. See also Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, 110, and Vokes, *My Story*, 128.

<sup>93</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 127.

This story is one of the most famous surrounding Chris Vokes while he was in Sicily. It reveals a man who was somewhat of a “character,” a senior officer who could relate to his soldiers, and while he had a duty to enforce discipline, empathized with them, and was prepared to bend the rules in order to look after their best interests. As much as his proven ability to win battles, this human quality mattered to his men. Some surviving veterans who served under Vokes in Sicily, even those of the PPCLI who were angered by his firing of their CO, still feel a sense of affection for the man. One such old soldier is Sydney Frost. For him, Vokes was not just his brigade commander: he was “Uncle Chris.”<sup>94</sup> Such a term of endearment was never applied by the troops to Guy Simonds, who had far greater tactical skill than Vokes. Simonds, like many senior Canadian officers during the Second World War, lacked the “common touch.”<sup>95</sup>

At the end of the fighting in Sicily, and in his later years, Chris Vokes reflected on what he and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade had accomplished in their first campaign. He was immensely proud of his men, writing that, “It was a joy to see my splendid brigade in action...I wouldn’t have traded my command for a kingdom.”<sup>96</sup> He had every reason to feel such pride. His soldiers had beaten some of Germany’s best troops while learning on the job, and they had done so in conditions that favoured the defenders. At the time, Vokes had no doubt about why his brigade had done so well: “The results of the campaign just completed have proved the value of our three years of training in England. Our troops took to fighting like ducks to water and speaking for my [Brigade] I

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<sup>94</sup> Frost, *Once a Patricia*, 531.

<sup>95</sup> Granatstein, *The Generals*, 3. Geoffrey Hayes has argued that the Canadian Army viewed senior officers as “military managers,” not heroic leaders. See Hayes, “The Development of the Canadian Army Officer Corps, 1939 – 1945,” PhD dissertation, University of Western Ontario (1992), 244-252.

<sup>96</sup> CWM, Vokes, Volume 2, “Recollections of an Army Career,” 264.

can say that their teamwork was first class and almost unbelievable under some of the difficult circumstances into which they were occasionally thrown.”<sup>97</sup> Success, however, came at a price. Forty-one officers and 542 men belonging to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade were killed or wounded in Sicily; put another way, the formation lost the fighting strength of nearly one infantry battalion in just twenty-seven days of actual combat. The Seaforth Highlanders had suffered the most, losing 250 officers and men. The Edmonton Regiment was also hit hard, with 205 casualties of all ranks, while the PPCLI had 128 killed and wounded. These figures offer clear evidence of hard fighting: certainly for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, the Sicilian campaign had been no cakewalk.<sup>98</sup>

It is a matter of record that the Canadian performance in their first campaign of the war made a very positive impression on senior British officers. During his visit to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade on 20 August 1943, the Eighth Army’s commander, General Montgomery, used the word “magnificent” four times in one sentence to describe the Canadian accomplishments in Sicily.<sup>99</sup> XXX (British) Corps’ commander, Lt.-Gen. Leese, was equally effusive, calling the capture of Leonforte and Agira “the crowning achievement” of the Canadians in Sicily. Given that the 2nd Brigade took both towns, General Leese’s comments may also be construed as an indirect compliment to Chris Vokes and his men. Such recognition was a clear sign that Vokes and his troops had learned their trade well.

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<sup>97</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10981, “Some Comments and Impressions on the Sicilian Campaign,” Brig. C. Vokes, 17 August 1943.”

<sup>98</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10879, File 233C1.065 (D1), Casualties – 1 Cdn Inf Div, “Statement of Casualties in Operations in Sicily, 10 Jul – 7 Aug 43,” n.d. The 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division lost a total of 2,310 officers and men.

<sup>99</sup> LAC, RG 24, Volume 10775, File 223B30.011 (D1), OP HUSKY, “30 Corps Operations in the Battle for Sicily, July and August 1943, by Lt.-Gen. Sir Oliver Leese, n.d.” Montgomery’s remarks are found in LAC, RG 24, Volume 15113, LER War Diary, 20 August 1943, and Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 177.

All this was high praise, indeed. But it seems probable that the most personally significant recognition Vokes received for his performance in Sicily came from his own countrymen. Brigadier Bruce Matthews praised him for being “always close to the battle, large or small.”<sup>100</sup> Major Tom de Faye was of the opinion that he was “determined to keep his casualties as low as possible,” an observation that likely stemmed from Vokes’s emphasis on careful planning, simplicity, and his liberal use of indirect fire support, practices that his troops undoubtedly appreciated.<sup>101</sup> A PPCLI sergeant was impressed by Vokes’s courage, saying that the brigadier was “afraid of nothing – “man, beast nor fighting reptile.”<sup>102</sup> Maj.-Gen. Guy Simonds, who was by all accounts a demanding superior, evidently agreed with such views. Vokes recalled that in late August 1943, Simonds paid tribute to his performance in the following manner:

Guy Simonds took me aside...“If I become a casualty,” he told me, “command of the division will come to you.” He took me by surprise. I was not the senior brigade commander. “I hope that won’t happen,” I said to him. “A promotion for you would be another matter, though.” He nodded. “There’s one thing I might say,” I added. “I have no doubt about the officer best suited to succeed me. He’s Bert Hoffmeister of the Seaforths. But he is now the brigade’s senior battalion commander, so there’s no need to tell him. I appreciate your confidence in me, Guy.”<sup>103</sup>

Clearly, in the eyes of his troops and his superiors, Christopher Vokes had proven himself “battle-worthy” as the commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade.

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<sup>100</sup> Letter from Brigadier Matthews to Daniel Dancocks, 26 October 1989, quoted in Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, 69.

<sup>101</sup> University of Victoria, de Faye-Hill Interview, 17 June 1985.

<sup>102</sup> Frost, *Once a Patricia*, 128.

<sup>103</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 120-121. On 1 November 1943 Guy Simonds was transferred to command the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Division, while Vokes and Hoffmeister were promoted to major-general and brigadier, respectively. See Lt.-Col. C.P. Stacey, *Canadian Military Headquarters, Historical Section Report No. 111*, “Situation of the Canadian Military Forces Overseas, Autumn, 1943,” 31 December 1943.

## CODA: AFTER SICILY

The Sicilian campaign was not the end of the war for either Chris Vokes or the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade. On 3 September 1943 the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division landed at Reggio, located at the toe of the Italian boot. Initially involving more marching than fighting, by November the Italian campaign had degenerated into a bitter slogging match, one that for the Canadians – which by January 1944 included the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Division and I Canadian Corps headquarters – lasted until February 1945.<sup>1</sup>

On 1 November 1943, after having led the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade for sixteen months, Chris Vokes was promoted to major-general, whereupon he replaced Guy Simonds as the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division. He was just 39 years of age.<sup>2</sup> For the next year, General Vokes led his division through some of its toughest battles, most notably at Ortona in December 1943 and the decisive battles at the Hitler and the Gothic Lines, in May and September 1944, respectively. During this period he became one of the leading Canadian figures in the “Spaghetti League,” as the Italian campaign came to be known.

In November 1944 Christopher Vokes was transferred from Italy to northwestern Europe, where he led the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Division until the war’s end. After commanding the Canadian Army Occupation Force in Germany he finally returned to Canada in August 1946, where he served as a major-general until his retirement on 30 March 1960.<sup>3</sup> Vokes died in Oakville, Ontario, at the age of 80, on 27 March 1985.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, 165. In March 1945, I Canadian Corps was reunited with First Canadian Army in northwest Europe.

<sup>2</sup> Vokes, *My Story*, 140. After briefly leading the 5<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division in Italy, Simonds assumed command of II Canadian Corps, which he led until the end of the war.

<sup>3</sup> LAC, Military Personnel File of Major-General Christopher Vokes, “Statement of Service, October 15<sup>th</sup> 1958,” and “Certificate of Release, 30 March 1960.”

## CONCLUSION: CHRISTOPHER VOKES AND BRIGADE COMMAND

*A general may succeed for some time in persuading his superiors that he is a good commander: he will never persuade his army that he is a good commander unless he has the real qualities of one.*

General Sir Archibald Wavell<sup>1</sup>

In the study of military command one is often presented with the thorny matter of defining success or failure, a task that can be as difficult as trying to determine the best method with which to study it. One might be tempted to use a “balance sheet” approach and thus focus on battlefield statistics. Did the commander win more battles than he lost? What were the human and material costs associated with these engagements? Was the price of victory worth it? Such a clinical methodology may have its place, but balance sheets alone cannot further our understanding of the complexities involved with military command. This thesis has proceeded from the theoretical basis that it is more appropriate to gauge a commander’s performance by the manner in which he dealt with the technical and the human aspects of command.

It seems clear from this analysis of Chris Vokes’s actions during the period of June 1942 to August 1943 that he was a far better commander than his countrymen have thus far credited him. Vokes had a good grasp of the technical skills involved in running a brigade and he worked well with his subordinates, peers, and superiors alike, abilities that were enhanced by his practical nature and personality traits such as a willingness to trust others, an appreciation for the subtleties of human nature, and an empathy for the common soldier. Combined with a philosophy of command based on personal leadership

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Archibald Wavell, *Generals and Generalship: The Lees Knowles Lectures delivered at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1939* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company of Canada Limited, 1941), 19.

and teamwork, Vokes led his troops from one success to another, both during training in England and especially in the harsh combat environment of Sicily. Contrary to the manner in which he has often been portrayed, Brigadier Vokes's temper and crude language did not adversely affect his ability to effectively command an infantry brigade.

On the "technical" side, Vokes was a meticulous planner who devised workable solutions featuring a well-defined mission statement and a simple concept of operations. Such tendencies stemmed from Vokes's realization that, in the confusion of battle, his tired soldiers stood a better chance of success by following a simple plan, which speaks to his practical nature and understanding of the human element. Significantly, Vokes – like Field Marshal Montgomery – did his own planning, although in Sicily he adopted the Eighth Army's policy of consulting subordinate commanders in the course of developing his plan. This showed both a willingness to learn and an appreciation for the subtleties of human behavior that thus far has not been fully appreciated. In this latter regard Brigadier Vokes differed radically from his technically more brilliant superior, Maj.-Gen. Guy Simonds: Simonds rarely sought input from others and, as was the case at Agira on 24 July 1943, sometimes produced plans that his troops could not successfully execute.<sup>2</sup>

Chris Vokes was equally skilled in giving clear and concise orders, regardless of whether they were delivered in a written or oral format. Here, too, his approach changed as he gained battle experience. To his credit, Vokes made the Eighth Army's practice of using oral orders his own, recognizing the psychological importance of "selling" his plan to men who were about to risk their lives. His ability to do this well helped to instill

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<sup>2</sup> Simonds did the same thing in Normandy during Operation TRACTABLE, when he devised what Harry Foster described as "one of the strangest attack formations ever dreamed up...What looked good to Guy's precise engineering mind seldom worked in practice once the human element was added." Foster, *A Meeting of Generals*, 368.

confidence among his troops in both the plan and in his abilities as a commander. If his troops were to win battles for him, such confidence was absolutely essential.

Brigadier Vokes's skills at planning and delivering orders were matched by his ability to direct operations at the brigade level. Because he went forward to see things for himself, Vokes was able to appreciate both the immense challenges posed by the ground his troops were fighting over and the frontline combat situation. This was why he was usually able to penetrate the "fog of war" that frequently enshrouded his headquarters, and in several instances – most notably during the battle of Agira, when he moved the Edmonton Regiment forward in case the Seaforth Highlanders needed assistance in taking the GRIZZLY position – it directly contributed to his brigade's tactical successes. Moreover, Vokes showed good tactical judgment, acting decisively and boldly when the situation required. His use of a small assault force to "gate-crash" the enemy's positions at the bridge at Leonforte and his employment of two battalions at crucial moments during the battle of Agira to keep the momentum going are good examples of his tactical abilities. Clearly, Brigadier Vokes must have had both the intellectual capacity to retain much of the tactical doctrine that he had learned (which would belie the commonly held view of Chris Vokes as being unintelligent), and the practical ability to apply that knowledge to a particular situation. Such talents were not equally shared amongst his peers within the 1st Canadian Infantry Division. In particular, Maj.-Gen. Simonds believed that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade's Howard Penhale had "failed to demonstrate decisive and effective leadership" in Sicily, an opinion shared by several of that brigade's officers, which was a major reason why he was transferred to a staff job in November 1943.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cessford, "Hard in the Attack," 164, and Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers*, 142.

Chris Vokes's technical abilities were not limited to the battlefield, for he was particularly adept in the conduct of training. It seems clear from reviewing the evidence that such success was largely based on his personal involvement and leadership in virtually every aspect of training within his formation. Vokes established the brigade's training objectives and developed the training plan himself. He personally briefed his officers and NCOs to ensure that they all understood what was required of them, and he supervised exercises to make certain that they were being conducted in accordance with his high standards of performance. When his troops made mistakes – as he knew they would – Vokes had them repeat the exercise until the faults were corrected, and then ensured that the lessons were captured in the brigade's operational procedures.

Brigadier Vokes's attention to detail, his determination to teach his officers *how* to plan and conduct training events, and his efforts to instill confidence in the brigade's leadership by ensuring that leaders at all levels of command – especially the junior ones – got the training they needed, made him stand out in the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division. None of his peers replicated ideas such as an NCOs school within their own formations. Indeed, Brigadier Charles Foulkes of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade was well known for his lack of attention to training matters: in Vokes's view, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade had been “the worst brigade in the division in Sicily” because its standard of training was “just awful,” a deficiency he blamed on Foulkes rather than Penhale.<sup>4</sup> Historians have mostly overlooked this aspect of Vokes's performance, but it was largely because of his methodical and innovative approach to training that his men were able to meet and overcome the challenges of combat in a harsh physical environment that they encountered in Sicily.

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<sup>4</sup> Granatstein, *The Generals*, 175, and Vokes, *My Story*, 140-141.

Christopher Vokes's technical abilities were complemented by his human skills. He related easily with soldiers of all ranks, and despite some occasional bullying, he worked in harmony with practically everyone. He got on well with his superiors, which was no mean feat given that Major-Generals Harry Salmon and Guy Simonds both had well-earned reputations as demanding taskmasters. Vokes was considered a good friend by his fellow brigadiers. Perhaps most importantly, Brigadier Vokes showed that he was a senior officer who empathized with the rank and file, and cared deeply about their well-being. Within Canada's volunteer Army, such human consideration mattered to the men. In fact, Vokes's concern for the lives of his soldiers sometimes got the better of him: such was the case when he temporarily gave in to despair during the battle of Leonforte.

Directly connected to Chris Vokes's ability to employ good human skills was his philosophy of command, which revolved around the twin precepts of providing personal leadership and promoting teamwork at all levels within his formation. This approach represented the third key element that underpinned Vokes's success as a commander. That a man who was best known for his "tough guy" persona had such a human-based philosophy might seem a bit surprising, but his actions while serving as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's commander speak to the validity of such a conclusion. Vokes led from the front, both in training and in combat, and he picked officers for senior appointments within the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade that he believed would do the same. In this regard Vokes proved to be a good judge of character, as his selection of men like George Kitching, Bert Hoffmeister, and Dick Malone suggests. He quickly formed the opinion that these men, along with Lt.-Col. Jim Jefferson who led the Edmonton Regiment, were strong leaders. Rightly or wrongly, Vokes was much less convinced about the leadership abilities of the PPCLI's

CO, Lt.-Col. Bob Lindsay. It was mostly for this reason that he relieved the latter from his command at the end of the campaign in Sicily.

Brigadier Vokes also put his considerable human skills to good use in his efforts to promote teamwork at all levels of command within the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade. He made a point of establishing good working relationships based on mutual trust and respect with his unit COs and principal staff officers, primarily because he knew that he needed their support in order to do his job in the most effective manner. Vokes then followed through by taking the time to get to know his unit commanders. He did so by watching them with their troops, and in the course of doing so, Vokes taught some of them valuable lessons about the art of military command. Vokes's initial interview with Bert Hoffmeister, wherein he challenged the latter to excel but did not tell him *how* to do it, was a good example of his preferred method of dealing with subordinates. Moreover, Vokes stood up for his COs when the situation demanded it, such as when Maj.-Gen. Guy Simonds had wanted to fire Lt.-Col. Jim Jefferson and Major "Tiger" Welsh: in this way, he proved to everyone in the brigade that he would be loyal to those serving under him. All this promoted a high standard of teamwork between Brigadier Vokes and his senior officers, a happy state of affairs that was evident in both England and Sicily.

To Chris Vokes's mind, building an effective fighting team meant more than just getting his senior officers on side. His objective was to promote teamwork at every level of command, which was another reason why he spent so much time in developing the leadership skills of junior NCOs and officers. The same principle held true for his efforts to boost morale and promote a sense of brigade identity among the troops. This was why Vokes emphasized sports competitions and initiated a brigade emblem contest in

England, and a formation-level newsletter in Sicily. Even his demand for high standards of discipline and operational performance, which were obviously essential for success in battle, had the dual purpose of instilling teamwork. To Brigadier Vokes, teamwork was everything. He knew that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade would never be capable of defeating battle-hardened German troops if its officers and men could not work together in harmony.

In his memoirs, Field Marshal Montgomery wrote that his own philosophy of command could be summarized with one word – leadership – which he defined as “the capacity and the will to rally men and women to a common purpose, and the character which inspires confidence.”<sup>5</sup> Was Chris Vokes able to accomplish such things as an infantry brigade commander? Perhaps the best way to answer such a question would be to use Douglas Delaney’s approach, and look at what Vokes’s *followers* did.<sup>6</sup> In this regard, the evidence clearly shows that they responded positively to his unceasing efforts to promote teamwork and confidence in the brigade’s leadership. During their last year in England the officers and men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade pulled together and became a highly efficient fighting team. Indeed, virtually every time that Vokes challenged his men to excel they rose to the occasion: the alternative, as Captain Norman Pope recalled, was to be banished from the brigade, a fate that no self-respecting soldier could accept.<sup>7</sup> Similarly Vokes’s offer of trust and respect to his senior officers was repaid in kind, while his sincere concern for the welfare of his troops earned him their respect and the nickname “Uncle Chris.”<sup>8</sup> Combined with his boisterous manner and his frequent

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<sup>5</sup> Montgomery, *Memoirs*, 80.

<sup>6</sup> Delaney, “Looking back on Canadian Generalship in the Second World War,” 14, and Delaney, *The Soldiers’ General*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> University of Victoria, Pope-Bell Interview, 10 June 1982.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Frost, *Once a Patricia*, 531.

expressions of faith in his subordinates' soldierly abilities, Vokes inspired confidence among all ranks within the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, and morale throughout the formation was never higher. If one uses Field Marshal Montgomery's definition of leadership as a benchmark, it seems rather evident that Brigadier Vokes was entirely successful as a leader of fighting men.

It is true that Chris Vokes's philosophy of personal leadership, with its emphasis on the human element, was not unique within the Canadian Army. Daniel Spry and Bert Hoffmeister, who ultimately rose to command the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry and 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Divisions respectively, also led from the front, as did many officers and NCOs serving at all levels of command. But neither was such an approach the norm, especially among the ranks of the Army's senior commanders. As a group, they tended to conduct themselves more like battlefield managers than heroic leaders: one could never describe officers like Harry Crerar, Charles Foulkes, or Howard Penhale as being inspiring figures. Even Guy Simonds, whom historians tend to describe as Canada's best general of the Second World War, had a very different outlook on military command from Chris Vokes. While both men expressed strong opinions about the subject, when Vokes spoke about command he typically concentrated on *leadership* – that is, the human side of the equation – just as Field Marshal Montgomery did.<sup>9</sup> Simonds, on the other hand, sought only to *command*. Put another way, Simonds focused his energies on mastering the *technical* aspects of his profession, an approach that may have been his way for compensating for his difficulty in relating to and motivating his subordinates.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Montgomery, *Memoirs*, 80.

<sup>10</sup> Delaney, "Looking Back on Canadian Generalship in the Second World War," 19.

Christopher Vokes could never compete with Guy Simonds on a purely technical level: no officer serving in the Canadian Army during the Second World War could. The evidence, however, shows that he had no need to do so. As historian J.L. Granatstein astutely noted in his study of the Canadian Army's senior leadership of the Second World War, *The Generals*, Vokes "perhaps had less academic brilliance [than intellectuals like General Harry Crerar or Lt.-Gen. Tommy Burns] but more leadership potential, more of the ability to make officers and soldiers follow [him] and carry out [his] bidding."<sup>11</sup> In other words, Chris Vokes's success as a brigade commander stemmed from his ability to maintain a good balance of technical *and* human skills. For this reason, Brigadier Vokes deserves to be remembered by his countrymen as one of Canada's more successful wartime brigade commanders, despite the fact that he had some admittedly unsavoury personality traits. Many of the fighting men he led into battle in Sicily during the summer of 1943 certainly thought so, and for this reason the final word regarding his performance as the commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade properly belongs to one of them: "'Uncle Chris'...was undoubtedly the 'fightin'est' Canadian general."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Granatstein, *The Generals*, 145.

<sup>12</sup> Frost, *Once a Patricia*, 531.

## APPENDIX 1

### CANADIAN ARMY ORGANIZATIONS AND RANK STRUCTURE, 1939 - 1945

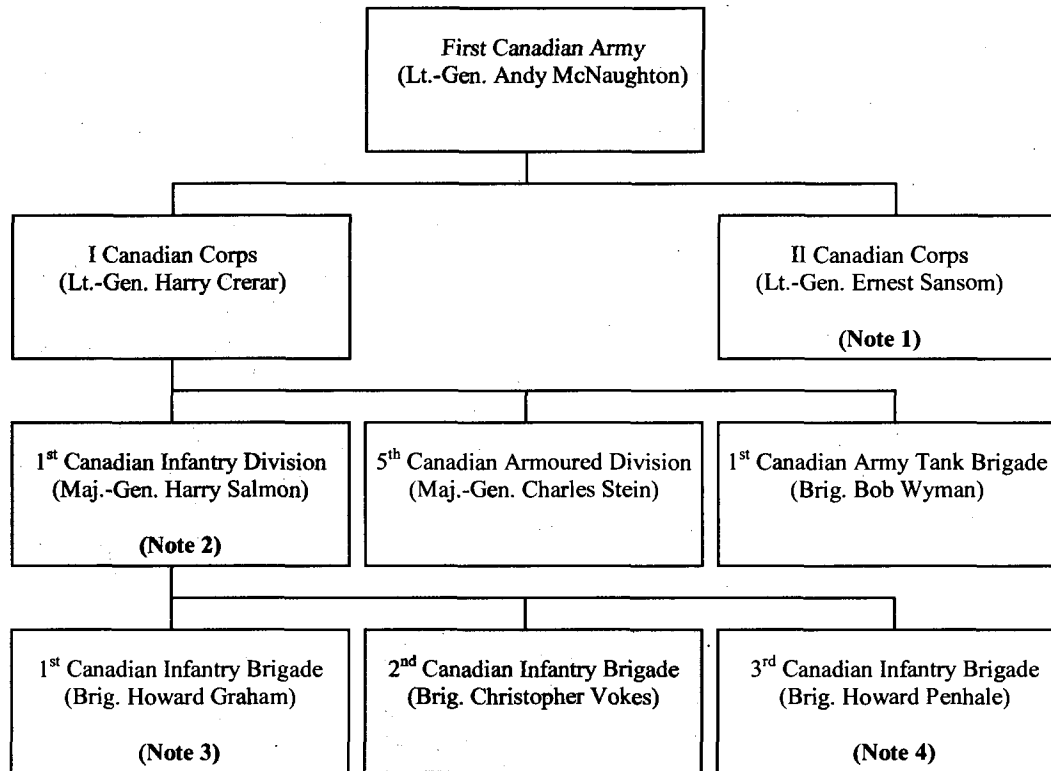
Level of Organization	Composition (Note 1)	Commanded By (Note 2)
Army	Two or more corps, plus Army-level artillery, signals, engineers, medical, and logistics units. An Army varied from 100,000 officers and men and upwards, depending on the number of corps assigned to it.	General
Corps	Two or more divisions (normally a mix of infantry and armoured), plus Corps-level artillery, signals, engineers, medical, and logistics units. The strength of a corps varied considerably, from 40,000 all ranks and upwards, depending on the number of divisions assigned to it.	Lieutenant- General
Infantry Division	Three infantry brigades, divisional support battalion, divisional reconnaissance regiment, three field artillery regiments, one anti-tank regiment, one anti-aircraft regiment, plus divisional signals, engineers, medical and logistics units. The strength of the 1 <sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division was 917 officers and 17,158 men.	Major- General
Infantry Brigade	Three battalions, brigade support group, and brigade headquarters, comprising roughly 2,650 officers and men.	Brigadier
Infantry Battalion (Note 3)	Four rifle companies, headquarters company, support company, and battalion headquarters. The established strength of a battalion was 38 officers and 812 men.	Lieutenant- Colonel
Company (Note 4)	Three platoons and company headquarters, totalling 5 officers and 120 men.	Major
Platoon (Note 4)	Three sections and platoon headquarters, comprising one officer and 36 men.	Lieutenant
Section	Ten soldiers, including at least one lance-corporal.	Corporal

#### Notes

1. The composition of the infantry division and below describe here is based on war establishments as of 31 May 1945, and does not account for changes to those organizations that occurred throughout the war. Strengths for corps and army are approximate only. Also, it should be noted that in action, units were rarely manned to full war establishment, due to casualties, illness, and other reasons.
2. It was not uncommon for a command position to be under-ranked at times, as a result of casualties or otherwise unavailability of personnel holding the appropriate rank.
3. The infantry also called a battalion a "regiment," a seemingly confusing practice that stemmed from the regimental system inherited from the British Army. The armoured and artillery branches always called battalion-sized organizations a regiment.
4. In an armoured or artillery unit, a platoon was called a "troop;" a company-sized organization was known as either a "squadron" (armoured) or a "battery" (artillery).

## APPENDIX 2

### First Canadian Army Chain of Command, 24 April 1943



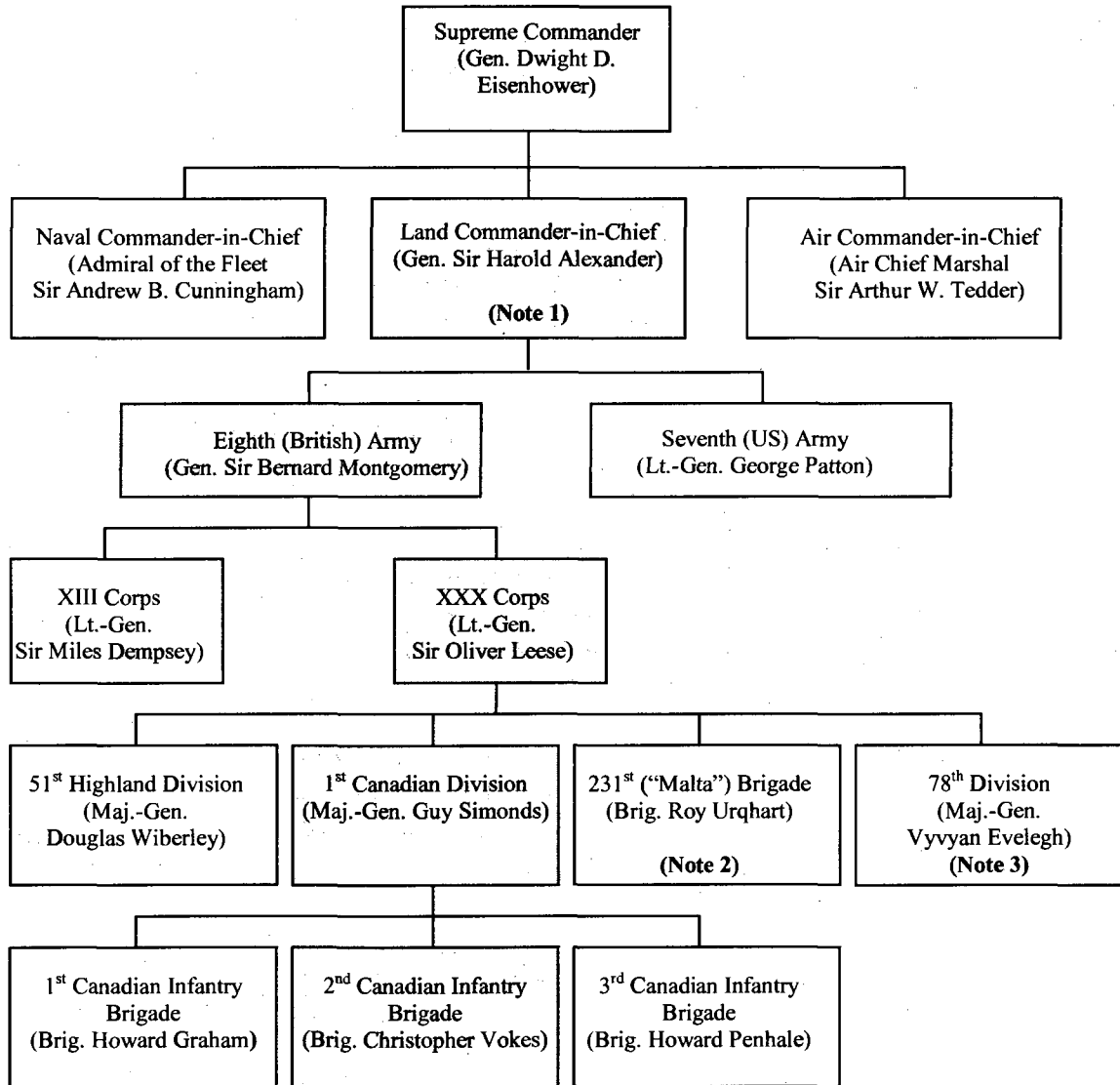
#### NOTES:

1. The major formations of II Canadian Corps were the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Divisions, the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Division, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Armoured Brigade.
2. Maj.-Gen. Salmon was killed in an airplane crash on 29 April 1943. Maj.-Gen. Guy Simonds succeeded him as divisional commander.
3. Brigadier Graham's predecessors were Brigadiers Rod Keller (31 July 1941 to 7 September 1942) and Guy Simonds, who commanded the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade from 11 September 1942 to 14 January 1943.
4. Howard Penhale assumed command of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade on 8 April 1943, having taken over from Charles Foulkes who had been the formation's commander since 1 August 1942.

*Reference: Grodzinski, Operational Handbook for the First Canadian Army, 41-75.*

## APPENDIX 3

### The Allied Chain Of Command for Operation HUSKY



**Notes:**

1. Command of Allied land forces was exercised through Headquarters 15<sup>th</sup> Army Group. General Alexander was "double-hatted" as General Eisenhower's Deputy.
2. The 231<sup>st</sup> Brigade fought under Canadian command during the latter part of the Sicilian campaign.
3. The 78<sup>th</sup> Division did not initially land with XXX Corps, as it was held in reserve in North Africa. It landed later, and became operational on 30 July 1943.

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