

The Canadian Army Battle Drill School at Rowlands Castle – 1942

Part 1 – The story of the School



CANADIAN ARMY PREPAREDNESS

During the inter-war years the Canadian Army reverted from the highly effective fighting force it had become during WWI to a series of local voluntary militias with a small professional core. The principal threat perceived at the time was that of politically motivated civil unrest arising from the rigours of the depression during which one third of the work force was unemployed. As a result of budget cuts the military preparedness was at a very low level in 1939 and when Canada formally declared war on Germany in December, land forces consisted of 5000 regulars, 50000 militia, 16 modern tanks, 4 Anti-Aircraft guns and one anti-tank gun! An urgent need for recruitment and training was therefore recognised and the Canadian 1st Division was raised. Many of the first troops that landed in Britain in early 1940 were essentially raw recruits and had attained only the most elementary standard of training.²

EARLY WARTIME TRAINING

The problem of providing modern training in Britain was initially addressed by setting up the Canadian Army Training School in 1940. Due to lack of available accommodation, it had only been possible to open the Officer Cadet Training Unit. Once the Canadian Army took over Havannah Barracks in Bordon, the newly available accommodation and facilities enabled them, on May 1st 1941, to add 3 further wings, making four wings in all:

- No1 O.C.T.U. (Officer Cadet Training Unit)
- No 2 (Technical) Wing - concentrating on driving and maintenance, anti-gas courses and for a time the training of regimental clerks.
- No 3 (Weapons) Wing - giving training in platoon weapons, 3" mortar, Vickers med Machine Gun and additionally, sniper, assault and range-takers courses.
- No 4 (Regimental Officers) Wing - ran courses for ten company commanders and thirty platoon commanders at a time.

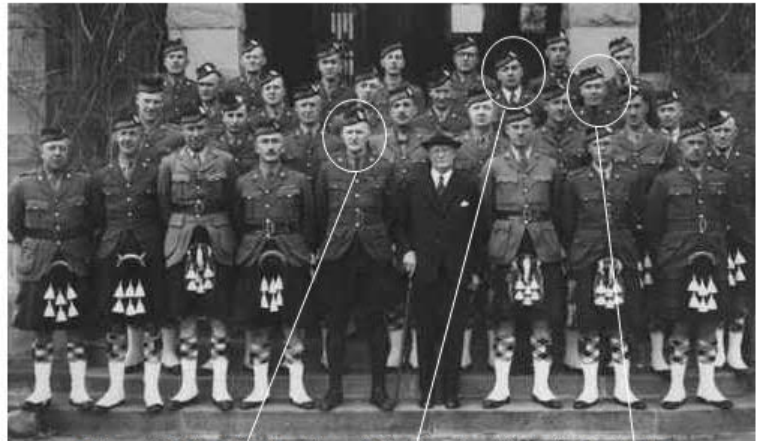
Since the Canadian and British forces would be working closely together and using the same equipment, the Canadian training system closely followed that of the British Army. Before the setting up of the school many officers underwent training in British schools alongside British officers. They were therefore at the cutting edge of current training methods, one of which being "Battle Drill Training".

"1941 saw the inception of a new and much more realistic type of training. This was known as "Battle Drill Training" and was the reduction of military tactics to bare essentials which were taught to a platoon as a team drill, it comprised special physical training, field craft, battle drill proper, battle discipline and "battle inoculation". Battle inoculation was one of the defining points of the scheme and meant exposing the soldier in training to the sights and noises of battle.⁶

In 1941, the 47th (London) Division, a training formation of the British Army, began to demonstrate the new system of training, called "Battle Drill" to officers of the Canadian Army. Lieutenant Colonel J. Fred Scott and Captain John Campbell of The Calgary Highlanders attended a demonstration on 8 Oct, which fired their imagination. Capt. Campbell and two other Calgary Highlanders' officers attended the British battle drill school at Chelwood Gate, Uckfield shortly afterwards on 22 Oct. According to unit historian Roy Farran, "No more fanatical disciples of the new system could have returned to the unit."⁹

CANADIAN BATTLE DRILL TRAINING –“FOUNDING FATHERS” – 1939

Capt J Campbell, the newly appointed Commanding Officer and Chief Instructor of the Battle wing and Lieut W H Buchanan, both from the Calgary Highlanders, arrived at the Officer Cadet Training Unit at Bordon on Apr 6th 1942, with the other officer instructors arriving shortly afterwards. They started setting up camp at Stansted Park on Apr 13th, principally in tented accommodation. It seems that there were some ablution and cooking facilities already on site but they were in such a poor condition as to be unusable. In fact the water supply had multiple leaks due to freezing, implying that the facilities had not been maintained and may have been vacant for some time.



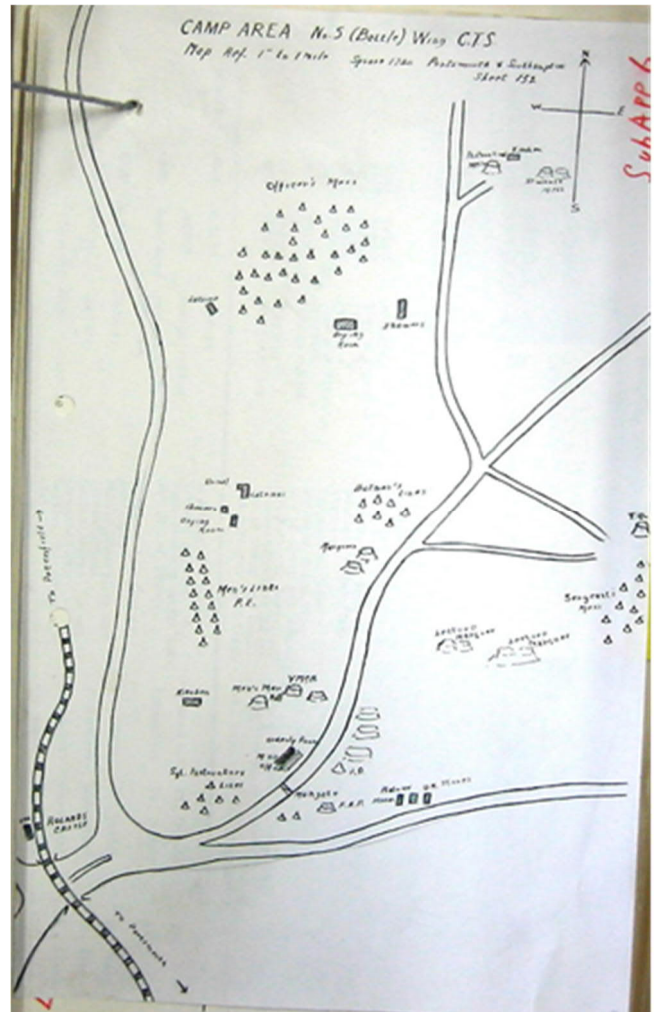
Officers of the First Battalion, Calgary Highlanders, Canadian Active Service Force photographed in Calgary

Lieutenant-Colonel J. Fred Scott, Lieutenant J. Campbell, Lieutenant W. H. Buchanan.

Ref 14

This sketch map of the camp was taken from the training wing’s War Diary. It was produced in the planning stage and showed the proposed layout and the facilities required. When compared to an OS map, the sketch map does leave a lot to be desired but at least it shows the general proposed layout of the camp in relation to the known fixed features such as the roads (Finchdean Rd and Woodberry Lane) and the Lodge House. It also effectively lists the facilities required.

The detailed lay-out of the camp is dealt with in Part 2 of this report.



WHAT WAS “BATTLE DRILL” AND “BATTLE DRILL TRAINING”?

The Battle Drill concept reduced basic military tactics to the bare essentials which were taught to platoons as a “team drill” generally. The objects to be achieved, the principles involved and the task of each member of the platoon were clearly explained so that each member knew exactly what to do and when. The object was to get the platoon to react automatically or instinctively as a team when presented with typical tactical situations. Battle Drill was carried out in a “parade ground” type situation.

Battle Drill Training, on the other hand, was more comprehensive and extended the basic concepts of Battle Drill into the field. It comprised special physical training, fieldcraft, battle discipline and "battle inoculation". Battle inoculation was one of the defining points of the #5 Wing syllabus and meant exposing the soldier in training to the sights and noises of battle. It involved the use of live ammunition both by the soldier himself and by the simulated enemy, represented by "reliable shots" who could place their bullets "realistically close to the troops" without causing serious danger."²

The school was at Rowland's Castle in a still dark period of the war, where our fortunes were in the balance. Singapore had fallen to the Japanese in January and Tobruk had been taken by the Germans in June. August 19th was particularly significant for the Canadians being the date of the ill-fated Dieppe Raid in which 5000 Canadians took part and 3367 were killed, wounded or taken prisoner. However, many valuable lessons were learned and as Mountbatten said "without Dieppe there would have been no D-Day". In October came the start of the Battle of El Alamein at the end of which Churchill famously said:

"Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

TUITION BEGINS

At last, on the April 30th, the first contingent of 89 officer students arrived and were accommodated three to a tent with lectures starting in earnest on 1st May. Training generally took the form of Lectures in the Lecture Marquee or the "Y" (YMCA) tent, followed by a demonstration by the relevant Instructor or by the Demonstration Platoon. The students would then put into practice their new found knowledge. The first part of the course tended to be a refresher in weapons handling followed by "Battle Inoculation". The students then went into the Battle Drill Training programme where they worked as platoons (groups of up to 30 men) putting the Drill into practice. To raise the general fitness level, all activities and transfers between locations had to be carried out "at the double". Towards the end of the course the training took the form of all-day or night exercises utilising all their training to date. These all-day exercises were often what was termed a "Spartan day" where the students went without food and what they probably deemed worse, cigarettes, for the day. The training and exercises were carried out under as realistic conditions as possible, the students being subjected to live rifle and Bren gun fire spiced up with grenade and thunderflash explosions all hidden in a fog of smoke. The training took place over a wide area in and around the South Downs ranging from beach landings at Hayling Island in the south, to Battle Inoculation at Gravel hill (nr Butser Hill) in the north. Urban warfare training took place in a bombed out area of Southampton in the west and mortar and carrier training in the Kingley Vale/Bow Hill area in the East. There were even a number of night attack exercises against Tangmere Airfield to give the students experience of night fighting and to test the preparedness of the RAF Regiment who were the guard force at the time. Some of the local training locations are given in Part 2 and all the place names will be familiar to Rowlands Castle residents.

TRAINING

Over the course of the 5 months at Stansted, the nature of the course evolved and was refined over the eight intakes to reflect current thinking in the British and Canadian Armies. The first three intakes were from infantry units and focussed on infantry tactics. The fourth and fifth intakes were mixed and the course content expanded to involve joint training between Infantry, Carrier and Mortar units. In between, the infantry and mixed intakes there was a special course for senior officers. (see Timeline). The change in intake type was reflected in changes in location for many of the "modules". For example, because of the carrier and mortar components, much more of the training took place at Bow Hill (Kingley Vale), which was already a designated military training area/range where there were few if any restrictions.

The special course for senior officers (ranging in seniority from Captain up to full Colonel!) was run between 17 Aug and 22 Aug, this involved demonstration of the various drills and tactics taught in the school. Of local interest, Carrier and Mortar demonstrations were carried out at the edge of the village in the Bowes Hill area just 500m north of the Station. The fields were probably accessed through Woodhouse Ashes Farm. Full participation by the senior officers in many of the elements the course was invited and accepted. For example many volunteered for the Obstacle and assault courses, some even to being subjected to live fire in the "Battle Inoculation" module. This gave the opportunity for a little dry humour (or maybe relief!) on the part of the unit's war diarist:

"After a lecture by Major Campbell on Battle Discipline, students were taken to Gravel Hill where they were given the opportunity of going through the Battle Inoculation. This was entirely voluntary and the majority of those present availed themselves of the opportunity to experience the effect of being under close heavy fire from both machine guns and rifle. **No casualties were experienced.**" !!!¹

The senior officers were very impressed and most appreciative of the hard work carried out in the school. The hard sell came at the end, when Major Campbell made a plea in his closing address for

the senior officers to allow more time for training in their units. This was because the standard of basic weapons training of many of the students on arrival at the school left a lot to be desired.

The Obstacle and Bayonet Assault courses appear to have been very challenging and claimed by the school to be amongst the most difficult in the country. The bayonet assault course is described in the war Diary as follows:



MIKAN 3262354

“Second period found the right flank undergoing strenuous exercise on the bayonet Assault course. The course is reported to be one of the toughest in any army school and is some 300yds long. The object is Section Leadership by Section Commanders and it was found that the standard of physical fitness of the officers is woefully weak. Under this handicap their powers of leadership are tremendously handicapped. Students are however highly enthused with the course and expressed their desire to do it later on in the syllabus when physical condition had been improved”.

Early in May, the Manager of the brickworks was interviewed by Lt Chandler and two WD Land Agents with a view to using the brickworks as an assault course. There is no evidence that it was ever used for this specific purpose but it was definitely used for the “Students under fire” (ie Battle Inoculation) module for intakes 1 and 2. Until July however, the Obstacle course was located in the camp area (the Sling) but by July it had been developed fully and was relocated to the Aldsworth area which is wet, marshy and has a river running through it. The course is described in the War Diary as “Deeks’ Nightmare” referring to the instructor responsible for the torment! Like the Bayonet assault course it was considered to be one of the toughest in the country.

“In the afternoon the students went over the obstacle course known as “Deeks’ Nightmare”. This course ingeniously laid out by Captain Deeks demands a man to give everything he’s got to finish successfully. Students commence the course by crawling in and out of a slit trench covered with barbed wire, then running some 100yds through trip wires when they arrive at a 10ft wall which has to be surmounted. They then have to swing at arm’s length from one pipe to another suspended 16ft above the ground. Arriving at the end of this obstacle and dropping to the ground they race to a series of ropes by which they are able to clear concertina wire laid on the ground and land in a creek. Wading up this they crawl through a culvert and climb a waterfall. Poles suspended about 8 ft from the water have next to be gone over, then having once more dropped into the water they cross a pond through reeds. Gaining dry land, sandbags swing down on them which have to be dodged or else. A tubular scaffolding 40ft high is next encountered and has to be climbed over after which a 10ft jump lands them in a muddy creek. This creek is crossed by means of balancing on pipes and re-crossed on a rope bridge consisting of two strands one above the other. They then run 150ft on stepping stones arriving at a rope bridge 75ft in length suspended over barbed wire. Finally they enter a smoke filled room through one window and exit through another.

Explosions from grenades, electric charges and live ammunition give a realistic atmosphere and urge the students on their way over this gruelling course.”¹

The Obstacle Course



MIKAN 3262352



MIKAN 3205243



DEEKS' NIGHTMARE !!

- **Through slit trench covered in barbed wire**
- **Run 100yds through trip wires**
- **Climb 10ft wall**
- **Monkey Swing – swing between series of pipes 16ft above** MIKAN 3203271
- **Swing by series of ropes to clear concertina wire**
- **Land in creek**
- **Wade up creek**
- **Crawl through Culvert**
- **Climb waterfall**
- **Go over poles 8ft above water**
- **Cross pond through reeds**
- **Dodge swinging sandbags**
- **Climb over tubular scaffolding 40ft high**
- **Land in muddy creek**
- **Cross creek by balancing on tubular pipes**
- **Recross creek by parallel wires one above the other**
- **Run 150ft on stepping stones to arrive at**
- **75ft long rope bridge above barbed wire**
- **Enter smoke filled room through one window and exit through another.**

All the above carried out **in full battle gear**, under fire **with live ammunition** accompanied by **grenades and explosions** from



The student experience is related by Farley Mowatt who went through Battle Drill training.

We marched or ran a minimum of ten miles a day and twenty on Sundays. We crawled, squirmed and wriggled for endless hours through gorse thickets while the training staff fired live ammunition under, over and all around us; threw percussion grenades between our outflung legs, or heaved gas canisters (which made us puke) under our noses. For variety we practiced unarmed combat with bronzed killers who hit us in the windpipe, kicked us in the testicles, cartwheeled us over their shoulders and belted us across the kidneys with rifle butts.⁵

LIFE AND TIMES AT THE SCHOOL

Some of the following quotations from the School's War Diary give a flavour of life within the camp and school.

The first classic incident took place on the fourth day of the first course:

4th May 1942 "Bayonet assault course proved almost too difficult for most of the students, and obvious lack of physical fitness was more than apparent. Course consisted of wire obstacles, pits containing flaming waste, ending up with grenade attack on a small house. Here the inefficiency on the handling of grenades and weapons was finally brought home by one of the officers dropping his grenade in the pit, resulting in an accident to Major Campbell (*the CO and Chief Instructor!*) who received shrapnel in the elbow and back. He was immediately treated by Lieut. McRae the M.O. who was present with his ambulance. Major Campbell was taken to the 15th General Hospital, Bramshott for dressing and X-ray and after scoring an operation, returned to duty the same night." This gives a further insight into the character of Major Campbell.¹

Another incident, only 6 days into the course, illustrates how "realistic" the training was:

7th May 1942 "In the afternoon the students were given a further baptism of fire when they were made to crawl under a very withering fire from a Bren gun and snipers. Four of the students failed to use proper methods of crawling in this exercise and as a result were slightly injured. Two men received bullets through their haversacks and another had a hole blown in his hand by a grenade blast. The fourth received rather a unique wound getting hit in the buttock by a piece of mess tin when the haversack received a direct hit. Medical assistance was given and two of the students were removed to hospital."¹

Here follows a description, taken from the school's War Diary, of the "Students under Fire" or the "Battle inoculation" part of the course, this took place on the first full day of the second (all officer students) intake's course, the map reference given corresponds with the brickworks quarry:

"The spectacular exercise "Students under Fire" was highly commented upon by students. This exercise, under Capt Buchanan subjects the students to all types of fire and explosions while they crawl along underneath the S.A.A fire. The realisation that bullets can come so close to a man and still not hurt him, instilled a sense of confidence in the officers which hitherto they had not been able to gain. An unfortunate accident occurred during the latter part of the exercise when Lieut J.A.Wilson - 48th Highlanders of Canada, was shot in the forehead. It is worthy of mention that Lieut Wilson though seriously wounded crawled the last 20yds of the course before collapsing. It is spirit like this that should be a model for every Canadian soldier (!!). Lieut Wilson was removed at once to 15th General Hospital Bramshott and thence to No 1 Neurological Hosp. Basingstoke."¹

Jeffery Williams gives a graphic first-hand account of the incident in his book.

"The battle inoculation sessions were too close to the real thing for comfort. During one I was the leader of a section of eight men crawling down a hill under fire. When I got to the bottom, I looked back to see three of my men lying on the hillside wounded. One chap from the 48th Highlanders had a bullet through the front of his helmet which exited from the back but had done nothing more than crease the left side of his skull. There are

two degrees of luck – tough to be hit, but fortunate to survive. Of the other two, one had a bullet through the calf of a leg, another a grazed buttock.”³

Another personal account of Battle Inoculation is given by Harold MacDonald

“Have had one tough week. We never walk we DOUBLE. Spent Monday running and took our inoculation of fire.....when it comes to your turn you are so intent on getting to the bottom of the hill(on your stomach all the way) that you are oblivious to the the explosions in , over & under you and the rifle firing coming at you & the Bren guns from the sides a ft. off the ground. Those instructors are very good shots & thank God they don't see double...”⁴

Although many varied incidents occurred while the school was at Rowlands, perhaps the most poignant was that of the crash of Flt Sgt Jenssens' Spitfire which occurred just ½ mile from the camp and to which their emergency team were first on the scene. This is covered in more detail in Appendix 1(2).

An indication of the size of the operation is given in the Training Report for May where two 20 day courses were run, the starts being staggered by 1 week. The maximum number of students during the overlap weeks was 95 Officers and 90 NCOs i.e.185 students, 6 below the planned capacity. So together with the permanent staff, the camp could be accommodating perhaps 300 or more personnel at full capacity. After the July reorganisation to accept mixed rifle, carrier and mortar wings, the total course intake was even higher - 46 officers, 138 NCOs and 43 men totalling 227, raising the capacity of the camp by about 40. There is every reason to believe that the sketch map gives an accurate number of tents so we end up with 73 Bell tents and 14 Marquees. So all in all the whole enterprise was pretty substantial and would have had a significant impact on the village and Estate.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LOCAL COMMUNITY AND LIFE IN BRITAIN GENERALLY

As stated previously, a good relationship existed between the school and Lord Bessborough and his family. After the initial invitation to Capt Campbell and Leut Buchanan, regular invitations for Sunday Lunch at Stansted House were extended to other, small groups of Officer Instructors from the school. Lord Bessborough probably had a keen interest in Canadian affairs because he was the Governor General of Canada from 1931 to 1935. This may have influenced the choice of Stansted as a base by the Canadian Training School. There may be correspondence around that may emerge in due course to clarify this part of the story.



Extracts from the School's War Diary and the Daily Orders issued from CMHQ, from OCTU Bordon and Locally, give a flavour of what life was like for the students and the interaction between the Canadian Army and civilians generally. Daily orders address discipline, dress, hygiene and a wide range of other issues from the mundane to the more prosaic, for example:

Daily Orders Apr 22nd '42

“Discipline – All personnel are warned that leaving or entering camp by climbing over the wall is prohibited.”

This must have been to prevent illicit visits to the local hostelrys. There are two pubs within 200 yards! It is however rumoured that they used the dry river bed of the Lavants to surreptitiously visit the George at Finchdean which is just under a mile to the north of the camp.

Another interesting observation which may be relevant, is the location of the Sergeant Instructors' tents between the main camp and the Village Pubs. Was this a dual purpose choice of location, to keep the students from the pub and be convenient for the Sergeants to visit?

“Firearms – All personnel are warned that the discharging of firearms in the camp area is strictly prohibited”

“Railways – Personnel are warned of the great danger to anyone touching the live rail which powers trains running through this section of the railway. Anyone crossing the line must do so by the proper means provided”.

The students will not have experienced live rail trains in Canada so this warning was essential because the main London – Portsmouth line ran through the centre of the training area and some of the training activities may have involved crossing the tracks.

Shortages of materials such as rubber for tyres and vegetable oils for soap also prompted orders:

“Speed Limits & Driving Regulations – In consequence of the vital importance in conserving supplies of rubber, and the very definite relationship of rubber between vehicle speeds and wear of tires, it has been decided that a reduction must be effected in the maximum speeds laid down for Cdn. Army vehicles where the speed limits imposed by civilian law are not applicable.”

The order goes on to specify, at great length, the maximum permissible speed limits for various vehicle types. (Why use one word when you can use two?)

Daily Orders April 24th ‘42

“Soap Coupons – Coupons for week ending 25th April will be available at the orderly room at 1230hrs today.”

Surprisingly, it looks like the troops were subject to rationing and had to use coupons just like the local civilians. Soap rationing was introduced in Britain on Feb 7th. I have no details for 1942 but in 1945 the civilian allowance was 4 coupons a month, one coupon allowing the purchase of one 3 oz (85g) bar of toilet soap or one 4oz (112g) bar of hard soap.

And on another soap related subject:

“Showers – Although showers are not yet ready for use all ranks must see to it that their feet are washed regularly.”

Probably essential after the 20mile forced route marches!!

And getting down to the real “nitty gritty” of sanitation:

Daily Orders April 27th ‘42

“Sanitation – All men are warned that latrine buckets are being used as urinals. This must cease forthwith as urinals are provided in the adjacent enclosure.”

“Laundry – All those wishing to send out their laundry are advised that the Hygiene Laundry, Havant will call at the camp on Tuesdays at 1700hrs. Laundry will be handed in to the QM stores by 1600 hrs properly tabbed. It will be handed in on a cash basis the rate being 10d for 6 articles.

“Weekly Respirator Period – It is drawn to the attention of all ranks that respirators will be worn each Tuesday between 1000hrs and 1030hrs. This applies to all personnel irrespective of how and where they are employed.”

Daily Orders July 13th ‘42

“Smallpox – An outburst of smallpox has occurred in this country and leave has been cancelled until such time as it is ascertained that personnel have been successfully vaccinated since Sept 1939”

Wing Orders Aug 3rd ‘42

“Area Village Green – Owing to damage caused to surrounding property the throwing of baseballs, rugby balls etc or the playing of games on the village green is strictly forbidden.”

It’s surprising that they still had the energy or time to play games considering the physical intensity of the course.

There were of course wartime romances, oral history given to SHW volunteers by two sisters from the village related how

“some Canadian soldiers approached us and asked if we had any sisters. They were utterly delighted when we said we had five!”²

Subsequently two of their elder sisters, met Canadian Officers who were students at the school, they married at St Peters Church in Petersfield and eventually emigrated to Canada and settled down happily there.

THE END OF A BEAUTIFUL RELATIONSHIP

The use of Stansted for Battle training was only considered as a temporary expedient for the summer months of 1942 and new permanent quarters were needed before the winter set in. In July, Maj Campbell together with officers from CMHQ and the 1st Canadian Army investigated three potential sites as permanent quarters. The new site had to accommodate 150 permanent personnel and 225 students, be close to a suitable training area and have road and rail links close by. So the scale of the training was expected to increase substantially over when the school first opened at Stansted. The three potential locations were Windlesham House School (Washington), Wiston House (Steyning) and Coombe Place (Lewes). In the end, Windlesham House with its proximity to Training Area #7 and Amberley Station was finally selected.

The last course at Stansted came to an end on 19th September and on the 21st an advance party was sent to Windlesham House to make any necessary preparations while the remaining personnel took down the canvas and generally cleaned up the camp. The main party left on the 24th.

AFTERMATH

The Battle wing was still at Windlesham House in Dec 1943 but there had been a reorganisation involving the setting up of a separate Anti-Gas training wing. There was much emphasis placed on gas training because it was thought that Hitler would, in due course, unleash gas attacks against the invasion Assembly and Embarkation areas when the “second front” was launched. Previously Anti-Gas training had been incorporated in the syllabus for OCTU #2 Wing.

In April 1942 Col. Fred J Scott was, at 43 considered too old for battlefield command and returned to Canada to be CO of the newly formed Canadian Battle School at Vernon, British Columbia where he introduced Battle Drill Training incorporating all the lessons learned to date.



Capt. J Campbell ⁹

Capt. John Campbell was appointed Acting Major shortly after the school opened in Stansted. Eventually he left the Battle training School, and went on to rejoin the Calgary Highlanders on active service. As commander of “A” company, he went to France with the Highlanders in July 1944 one month after the D-day landings. In the ensuing Battle for France he was wounded by a sniper on July 25th. After recovering, he returned to the Highlanders as commander of “C” company. He took part in Operation Veritable (the winter offensive between the Maas and the Rhine) where sadly, he was killed by a sniper at Wyler, a German border village, on 8th February 1945. This was only three months before the cease-fire was ordered.

Although controversial, Battle Drill Training gave morale in the Canadian Army a tremendous boost at a time when it was flagging and the men who experienced it were proud to have been through the

course and most felt that it had given them the necessary fitness and confidence for the challenge that lay ahead.

Battle Drill, in the end, prepared platoons and companies for battle, but the Canadian Army would have to look beyond simple battle drill to prepare their brigades and divisions for combat.²

Quotes from soldiers who had experienced battle drill training confirm the personal benefits:

Red Anderson:

*"When you went into action, you knew that you would be in good shape and know what to do."*⁹

Robert Bingham:

*"We didn't like that kind of tough training, but it was all for the good. When you got into battle, everything felt so simple."*⁹

So, by hosting the School in its infancy, this is another up till now forgotten way in which Rowland's Castle and Stansted Park played their part in the war effort.

Appendix 1 (1) - Sources, References and Links

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15. All MIKAN references: <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/second-world-war/faces-second-war/Pages/faces-second-world-war.aspx>
16. English Heritage
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Map and LiDAR sources:

18. LiDAR Images - Secrets of the High Woods Project
19. Open Street Map
20. Ordnance Survey

The Canadian Army Battle Drill School at Rowlands Castle – 1942

Part 1 – Appendix 1 (2)



In Memory of Flight Sergeant Sigurd
Gerhardt Jenssen
129 (Mysore) Squadron



One of the interesting but poignant stories unveiled by the research into the Canadian Training School was that of Flight Sergeant Sigurd Jenssen.

Sgt Janssen, a Norwegian pilot, joined the RAFVR and flew with 129 (Mysore) Squadron which was based at Thorney Island. The events relating to Stansted centre around the Dieppe Raid of 19th August 1942. This was a dark period in the war, Nazi Germany was extremely strong, occupying most of Europe. Singapore had fallen in January and we were faring badly in North Africa having lost Tobruk in June. The Germans were well entrenched along the continental coast and in Europe our activities were restricted to Commando raids.

On the 18th August, 129 Squadron were on a sortie in the Cherbourg area when Sgt Jenssen's aircraft was hit and most of the port aileron was shot away making the aircraft very difficult to fly and very vulnerable. He successfully made it back to base at RAF Thorney even though the returning squadron was pursued to within 30 miles of the coast by a number of FW-190's. To quote the Operations Record Book Sgt Jenssen "made a brilliant landing in spite of this."

On the 19th August the air activity was in support of the Dieppe Raid (Operation Jubilee). The object of the operation was to carry out a "raid in force" to see whether a channel port could be taken and held for a short period of time ie 48 hours. It was carried out by a predominantly Canadian force comprising some 5000 Canadians, 1000 British and 50 US Rangers. It was very costly for the Canadians 3367 of whom were killed, wounded or taken prisoner. The role of the RAF was to achieve air superiority over the area and to attack defensive positions.

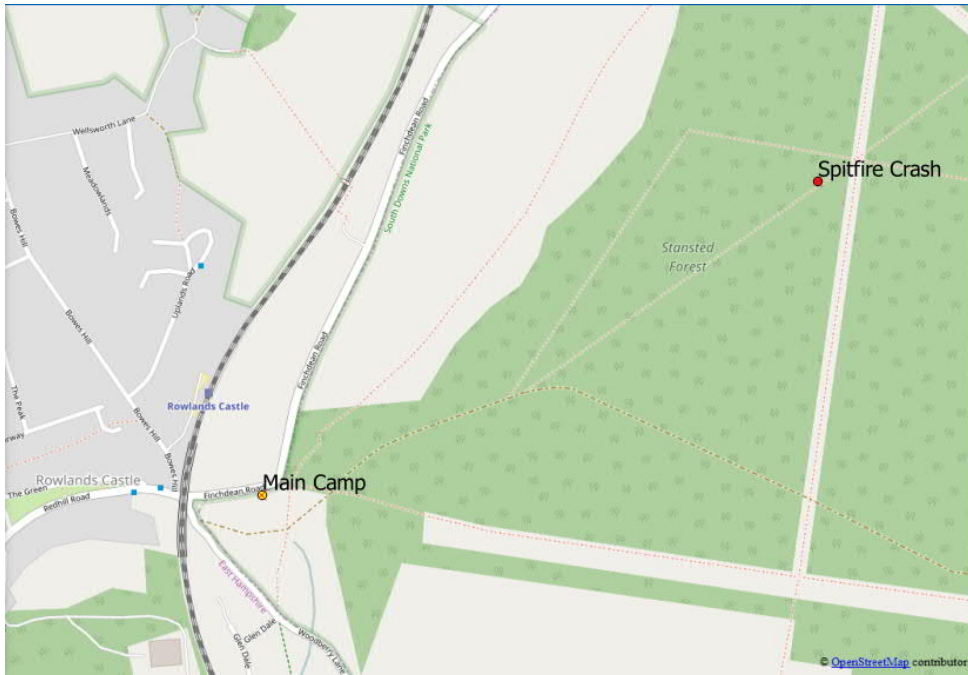
129 Squadron carried out four sorties that day, the first involving only two aircraft which attacked a lighthouse which was being used as an observation post for the defending gun positions.

The second sortie was carried out by 12 aircraft, with the objective of destroying gun position "Hess" to the W of Dieppe which was causing major problems on the invasion beach. The guns were successfully silenced.



Spitfire Mk Vb as flown by Sgt Jenssen

Sgt Jenssen did not take part in this probably due to the damage to his aircraft resulting from the previous day's activity. He did however take part in the third sortie. This was probably not in his own aircraft, because the previous day's damage was considered unrepairable on site. So he was probably flying one of two planes borrowed from 130 Squadron. The objective of the third sortie was to provide cover for the "Cannon" Hurricane ground attack aircraft of 43 Squadron while they attacked gun position "Bismarck" on the Eastern headland at Dieppe. The Operations book states that there was no "interference" and all the Hurricanes were safely escorted back. Sgt Jenssen also took part in the fourth sortie which was to provide air cover for a flotilla of A.L.B. (Assault Landing Boats?) returning from Dieppe. The weather had closed down by the time they were due to land and the cloud base was down to 500ft or less. Pilots from the squadron landed wherever they could at various local bases eg, Tangmere, Ford, Westhampnett as well as their home base Thorney. Sadly, Sgt Jenssen didn't make it back and crashed in Stansted Forest. The crash took place very close to the Ladies Ride in the forest and it is possible that he was attempting to land there.



Crash Site

The Canadian Battle Training School was located in the Sling and surrounding forest, personnel from the camp were therefore at hand and were first on the scene. They recovered Sgt Jenssen's body and effects from the site. This is described in the Training School's unit war diary:

"At approx. 1630 hrs a single seater fighter plane crashed in Stansted Forest map ref. Sheet 132 1" to 1mile 178308. It appeared that the pilot was attempting a crash landing, as he landed in a narrow avenue bordered on either side by dense forest. The plane was a complete wreck and the pilot was killed instantly. The local police and C.T.S were notified and a guard placed on the site of the accident."

"Articles recovered from the dead pilot included:

1 revolver Smith & Wesson No 836343, 2000 francs in notes, 2 maps, 1 portion of rubber, these articles being in a cloth envelope marked with the name CUNLIFFE. Also a portion of Mae West jacket, 1 fountain pen, 1 pencil, 2 keys and 3 pieces of gold chain. At 2100 hrs, these articles were handed over to F/Lt S Bull, RAF Thorney who, with another officer arranged for the removal of the body.

The fact that the articles were in an envelope marked CUNLIFFE would seem to confirm that Sgt Jenssen had been flying one of the aircraft which were on loan from 130 Squadron, whether this had any influence in the incident we will never know.

So, this is the story of yet another brave young man who lost his life in Stansted Forest. It is said that for many years a wreath was placed at the crash site by an unknown person. Perhaps in time, there could be some sort of permanent memorial set up?

Brian Tomkinson

tomkinson.brian@btinternet.com

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| References: | WO 179/1616 | Training School |
| | AIR27-934-25 | 129 Squadron Operations Record Book |
| | AIR 27-934-26 | 129 Squadron Operations Record Book |
| | AIR-28-815 | Operations Record Book – Tangmere |
| | | www.aircrewremembered.com |