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A Churchill Crocodile of 141<sup>st</sup> Regiment, Royal Armoured Corps,  
moving up towards Brest.

Courtesy of: <https://mikesresearch.com/2018/06/10/141-rac-regiment-crocodiles/>

## A CONCISE HISTORY OF:

# THE BATTLE FOR BREST SEPTEMBER 1944

A concise history of the battle for Brest, in Brittany, France, in September 1944; and the role of 141<sup>st</sup> Regiment, Royal Armoured Corps, and the Churchill Crocodile tanks.

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**A Concise History of the Battle for Brest, September 1944**

Version: V3\_1  
This edition dated: 28 April 2024  
ISBN: Not yet allocated.

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Published privately by: The Author – Publishing as:  
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Dedicated to:

Lance Corporal 6292339 Joseph Albert RAYMAN – known as ‘Jack’  
For whom the battle for Brest in September 1944,  
was more than a footnote in history.

With thanks to the ISAAC family who run the Cobbaton Combat Collection,  
near Barnstaple, North Devon, who inspired this research and the booklet.

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## Contents

	<u>Pages</u>
Introduction	3 – 6
The Allies Close In on Brest	6 – 8
Specialist Armour is Requested	8 – 10
The Armoured Assault	10 – 15
Conclusions & Epilogue	15 – 19
Appendix 'A'	20
Appendix 'B'	21
Appendix 'C'	22
Appendix 'D'	23
Bibliography and Sources	24

## Introduction

In the official history of The Buffs (Royal East Kent Regiment), the battle for Brest in September 1944 merits just over three pages out of over five-hundred, yet for the men involved, it was a defining moment in the Second World War, and their lives in particular.

June 1940 saw the British Army recovering from the shock of the fall of France, and the evacuation from Dunkirk and other ports back to the United Kingdom. This month also saw the raising of several new infantry battalions, including the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Battalions, The Buffs (Royal East Kent Regiment). All three battalions formed at the Regimental Depot at Canterbury, with an initial cadre of one-hundred and fifty warrant officers, non-commissioned officers and men sent by the Initial Training Centre to form the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel T. R. REID. The three battalions formed the 209<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, which joined the Devon and Cornwall Division on anti-invasion duties in those two counties.<sup>1</sup>

In June 1941, the War Office selected the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion to convert into an armoured regiment in the expanding Royal Armoured Corps. Several officers and non-commissioned officers had to attend courses at Bovington, Lulworth, and Tidworth, to learn their new trade and duties. As the new establishment as an armoured regiment was lower than that of an infantry battalion, about two-hundred officers and men had to leave the unit.

By November 1941, the new 141<sup>st</sup> Regiment (7<sup>th</sup> Bn. The Buffs, Royal East Kent Regiment), Royal Armoured Corps came into being at Eastbourne, Sussex; as part of the new 31<sup>st</sup> Tank Brigade. The brigade was equipped with Churchill tanks, and it learnt to use them and fight with them at Eastbourne, Worthing, Lancing and later at Eastwell Park, Ashford. Before the training was complete, Lieutenant Colonel REID was posted as Chief Instructor at the Small Arms School, in Hythe, and he was succeeded by Lieutenant Colonel H. WADDELL of the Highland Light Infantry.

In March 1944, the role and destiny of the regiment changed significantly. The Director Royal Armoured Corps chose the 141<sup>st</sup> Regiment to convert to using the newly developed flame thrower version of the tank, known as the Churchill Crocodile. The flame thrower had a range of eighty yards, and it was intended for use as close support to the infantry. Work commenced on converting the tanks for their new role. The Crocodiles carried a flame thrower mounted in the former hull machine gun position, a 75 mm gun and Besa 7.62 mm machine gun in the turret. The fuel for the flame thrower and the nitrogen propellant were carried in a trailer, towed by the tank. The trailer carried about four-hundred gallons of fuel, which gave about eighty seconds of fire usually delivered in short bursts. The projector had a range of between eighty to one-hundred yards. The fuel was fed through an armoured pipe, from the trailer, along the underside of the tank. If the trailer was hit, it could be jettisoned straight away from within the tank.

<sup>1</sup> KNIGHT, Colonel C. R. B., O.B.E. *Historical Records of The Buffs Royal East Kent Regiment (3<sup>rd</sup> Foot) Formerly Designated The Holland Regiment and Prince George of Denmark's Regiment 1919 – 1948* (London, The Medici Society, 1950) p.363 – 365



*Above – The front of a Churchill Crocodile, showing the nozzle used to discharge the flame from the tank.*

*Author's Collection*

The organisation of the 141<sup>st</sup> Regiment, R.A.C. was amended so that the Regimental Headquarters had four Churchill gun tanks as command vehicles. The command tanks were armed with a 95 mm gun instead of the 75 mm version in the Crocodile tanks. Each of the three Squadrons had three Churchill command tanks, and five Troops with three Crocodiles in each troop, making a total of fifteen Crocodile and three command tanks per Squadron. The Squadrons were lettered in the usual manner, as 'A', 'B' and 'C' Squadrons. The Regiment was to play an unique role in the forthcoming campaign in North-West Europe, where it was usually deployed as independent Squadrons, so the Regimental H.Q. tanks were divided up amongst the Squadrons.<sup>2</sup>

'C' Squadron found themselves deployed during the D-Day landings on 6 June 1944, supporting the British landings and the subsequent operations. The main body of the Regiment had landed by 24 June, to find themselves distributed along the entire front of the Second Army. 'B' Squadron's first deployment came on 7 July, when it supported the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 59<sup>th</sup> Infantry Divisions, and 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Division in their attempts to capture Caen. On 18 July, the Squadron supported the 51<sup>st</sup> (Highland) Infantry Division in the major attack south of Caen, bringing with it the congratulations of the G.O.C. I Corps, Lieutenant General Sir John CROCKER. The cost to the Squadron was two tanks knocked out, with seven men killed and eleven injured.

<sup>2</sup> KNIGHT, Op Cit P.

After this, there was short respite for the Regiment, which allowed tanks to be repaired and replenished, and new tanks and crews absorbed into the Squadrons.



Above – A Churchill Crocodile towing its fuel bowser or trailer.

Author's Collection

After this short period, 'B' Squadron supported the 51<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division again between 5 and 14 August in the fight to close the Falaise pocket, and II Canadian Corps in general. Once the Falaise pocket had been reduced, the Regiment paused for a short time, following which 'A' and 'C' Squadrons moved with II Canadian Corps to support the capture of the Channel ports of Le Havre, Boulogne, Sangatte and Calais.

As the War Diary remarks:

*At times, the Unit was literally scattered over the face of France – at one period indeed it was not only a case of composite Sqns but even of composite Tps. It was in fact a period of considerable strain and fatigue to the Regt, being one of the very few Units (if not the only one) called upon in every port. With the exception of Le Havre the Crocs did yeoman work, not so much in their Croc roles, but as Gun tks.<sup>3</sup>*

Owing to the dispersal of the Regiment, the War Diary took on a different look, with each of the three Squadrons acting independently and submitting their accounts of the actions they were involved to the Regimental Headquarters at the completion of that task. Technically, 141<sup>st</sup> Regiment, Royal Armoured Corps was under command of the 31<sup>st</sup> Tank Brigade, but it remained under operational command of 30<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade until 14 September 1944.

<sup>3</sup> 141 Regt, R.A.C. War Diary September 1944 TNA 171/877

‘A’ and ‘C’ Squadrons were deployed in the operations to capture Boulogne, Calais, Cap Gris Nez and Le Havre, while ‘B’ Squadron was sent to Brest to support the U.S. forces in the capture of that important naval port and U-boat base, which the Germans had garrisoned.

## The Allies Close in on Brest

The U.S. Army spread out across Brittany, liberating large parts of France from German occupation. One of the key objectives was the port of Brest, which the Germans had turned into a large, fortified U-boat base. In addition, the port could be a valuable asset to the Allies, who were requiring additional facilities in order to facilitate their operations. Brest originated as a Roman Fortress, but it was developed in the Seventeenth Century to become France’s major naval base. As such, a series of defensive forts were constructed around the town, to guard against English and Spanish attacks. With the German invasion of France in May 1940, Brest fell to units of the 5<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division on 18 June 1940. The British destroyed much of the harbour facilities before they withdrew, but the German Navy was able to start basing U-boats and other warships there within a few months. A large, concrete set of U-boat pens were constructed by the Germans commencing in January 1941, and other fortifications and anti-aircraft defences were built to protect the base against seaborne or airborne attack.

The Allies landed in Normandy on 6 June 1944, and reinforcements began to arrive to expand the Allied Armies in Normandy. On 1 August 1944, the U.S. 12<sup>th</sup> Army Group became operational, with the U.S. 1<sup>st</sup> Army under Lieutenant General Courtney H. HODGES, and the U.S. 3<sup>rd</sup> Army under Lieutenant General George S. PATTON. The U.S. 3<sup>rd</sup> Army was tasked with capturing Brittany, and the important naval ports in the region. PATTON decided to send the 4<sup>th</sup> U.S. Armored Division to cut the peninsula, while the 6<sup>th</sup> U.S. Armored Division was to drive for Brest. On 12 July 1944, the U.S. 12<sup>th</sup> Army Group assumed command of all the French Forces Françaises de la Interieur (F.F.I.), which commenced operations against the German forces in Brittany.

The German forces in Brittany had been about 100,000 men, with the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Fallschirmjager Divisions, and the 77<sup>th</sup>, 265<sup>th</sup>, 266<sup>th</sup>, 275<sup>th</sup> and 353<sup>rd</sup> Infanterie Divisions stationed in the region. All was not as it appears, as none of the seven divisional formations were up to their establishment. They had few vehicles, and fuel was in short supply, so they were relatively immobile. Following the Allied invasion, elements of five of the formations moved to Normandy, leaving about 30,000 men left in Brittany. In addition, there were about 50,000 naval and base personnel stationed in Brittany. The German forces withdrew into the main ports, Brest, Lorient, St. Malo, and St. Nazaire. Within Brest, were the 2<sup>nd</sup> Fallschirmjager Division, and elements of the 343<sup>rd</sup> Infanterie Division.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Fallschirmjager Division had served on the Eastern Front, where it had suffered heavy casualties. It was moved back to the training centre at Cologne, to rest and refit, and it was located here on D-Day. On 12 June, the division was ordered to move to Brest, even though it was not combat ready and lacked some key elements to bring it up to strength.

Fallschirmjager Regiment 6 was the best trained and equipped regiment in the division, but it was detached to move to Carentan in Normandy, so was not present at Brest. Most of the divisional artillery failed to reach Brest before the U.S. Army closed off Brittany, so at the time of the Allied assault on Brest, the division comprised Fallschirmjager Regiments 2 and 7, plus some divisional troops. At the end of July 1944, it had 162 officers and 7,389 other ranks on its strength.<sup>4</sup>

Lieutenant General Hermann RAMCKE commanded the division, which he deployed around the Brest area. As the U.S. forces advanced, RAMCKE ordered his men to withdraw into Brest itself, with most doing so successfully by 9 August. On 12 August, RAMCKE was appointed the Fortress Commander, and the former base commander, Major General Oberst Hans von der MOSEL, became his Chief of Staff.<sup>5</sup>

The 343<sup>rd</sup> Infanterie Division was deployed in and around Brest at the time of the Allied invasion of Normandy. On 1 June 1944, the division had a strength of 11,021 men, organised into three infantry regiments, an artillery regiment (equipped with Russian guns) and an engineer battalion. Each of the three regiments had one battalion recruited from Eastern Europe, although one of these battalions left before 1 June. The division had little transport, with only:

- 86 motorcycles,
- 176 other motor vehicles, and
- 1,182 horses.

Despite the division's lack of mobility, it managed to send a battalion strength battlegroup to Normandy in late June, and an understrength battalion was sent to St. Malo at the same time. The rest of the division remained in Brest.<sup>6</sup> Major General Josef RAUCH commanded the division, and when RAMCKE became the Garrison Commander, RAUCH assumed command of the Daoulas and Crozon sectors to the south of Brest, across the Rade de Brest.<sup>7</sup>

As the U.S. Army reached Brest, it became obvious that the Germans would not surrender the port and garrison readily. Planning commenced for a coordinated, planned assault on the port. The Germans ordered the civilians to leave the town on 13 August, which eased the military planning for the assault. The task was more than VIII U.S. Corps could manage, as it was spread out across Brittany. Reinforcements in the 2<sup>nd</sup> U.S. Infantry Division and 29<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry Divisions were sent to Brest, and on 18 August, the U.S. Command Post at Lesneven opened to control the battle.<sup>8</sup>

The assault commenced on 25 August, with 2<sup>nd</sup> U.S. Division on the right, 8<sup>th</sup> U.S. Division in the centre, and 2<sup>nd</sup> Division on the left, with the main effort in the centre.

<sup>4</sup> ZETTERLING Niklas *Normandy 1944 German Military Organization, Combat Power and Organizational Effectiveness* (Canada, J.J. FEDOROWICZ Publishing Inc. 2000) p.214-215

<sup>5</sup> MARGRY Op Cit. p.12

<sup>6</sup> ZETTERLING Op. Cit. p.270-271

<sup>7</sup> MARGRY Op. Cit. p.13

<sup>8</sup> MARGRY Op. Cit. p.16-17

The next day, as little progress had been made, the American Corps Commander, Major General Troy H. MIDDLETON, realised the strength and depth of the German defences. MIDDLETON expected the operation to end on 1 September, but on that date, the Americans were still fighting forward slowly, in a series of local battles along the line.

By the end of the first week of September, some progress had been made with 2<sup>nd</sup> U.S. Division capturing Hill 105, but elsewhere, the Germans held firm. Steadily, the U.S. forces tightened their grip, but a shortage of ammunition caused delays.

## Specialist Armour is Requested

The port of Brest and its German garrison was tying down several American formations, that could be ill-spared at this period of the war, so a major assault was planned to finally capture the port and its U-boat facilities. The old forts surrounding Brest were causing major problems for the assaulting American forces, with the VIII Corps Engineer, Colonel Williamson R. WINSLOW recognising their defensive strength. The U.S. Army had very little specialist armour, and in particular, armoured vehicles suitable for assaulting prepared positions. Colonel WINSLOW made a formal request to General BRADLEY for some Crocodile Churchill tanks, so this was passed to Headquarters, 79<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division, who selected 'B' Squadron, 141<sup>st</sup> Regiment, Royal Armoured Corps.<sup>9</sup>

On 2 September 1944, 'B' Squadron was located just short of the River Seine in France, waiting to cross the river, when the orders to proceed to Brest came through.<sup>10</sup> At midday on 4 September, an American Captain arrived at the Squadron's Harbour with five transporters to move the Squadron by road. During the day, more transporters arrived, followed by Royal Artillery Matador lorries to tow the trailers. The whole column, which comprised about one-hundred and twenty vehicles, moved at 22.00 hours under movement instructions from II Canadian Corps.

Major I. N. RYLE, the squadron commander, and Captain COBDEN, went on ahead to meet with the U.S. Army commanders, at Headquarters U.S. VIII Corps, and plan the squadron's involvement in the forthcoming operation. The column had to travel four-hundred miles to reach Brest from their current location, '*with all speed*'.<sup>11</sup> This proved too much for some vehicles, with Major RYLE being able to welcome only five tanks on 7 September at the new harbour location near Lesneven, about eight miles North-North-East of Brest. The rest struggled in during the rest of the day, and the Squadron began prepared for action. The journey was described as 'pleasant enough', with local people throwing onions at the passing soldiers, which were enjoyed either eaten raw with a bit of cheese, or in a rabbit stew.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> u/k *The Story of 79 Armoured Division* (Uckfield, Naval & Military Press, n.d.) p.127

<sup>10</sup> KNIGHT Op Cit p.392

<sup>11</sup> u/k *The Story of 79 Armoured Division* (Uckfield, Naval & Military Press, n.d.) p.127

<sup>12</sup> u/k 'Playboys' 'B' Squadron 141 Regiment, RAC (*The Buffs*) 1944 - 1945 (Uckfield, Naval & Military Press, n.d.) p.47

On his arrival in the Brest area, Major RYLE found that the Squadron's task initially was to support U.S. Forces by penetrating a breach blown in the fortifications by their heavy artillery. He and Captain COBDEN visited the positions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> U.S. and 8<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry Divisions in order to determine the best locations for the deployment of the Crocodile tanks. The terrain was undulating and covered with small fields, bounded by banks of earth to a height of eight to ten feet, and of a similar width, not dissimilar with the countryside in Devon.

Major RYLE decided that the Crocodiles had to be fitted with specially made cutters, called Rhinocerous hedgecutters to enable them to push through the high hedges and banks that were common in this area of Brittany. The Americans had pioneered these cutters during the earlier fighting in the Normandy bocage.<sup>13</sup> The fitting of these new devices was carried out '*with typical American drive and enthusiasm. The cutters were designed, modified and fitted to every tank in the Squadron within three days*'.<sup>14</sup>

The tanks moved forward to Brest on 8 September, attached to the 8<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry Division, and placed under command of the 157<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry Regiment. They stood by at Bour Blanc, and then onwards to a forward harbour at Lambezellec in support of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the U.S. Regiment. The Germans resisted at Lambezellec, but continued pressure by the infantry drove them back into the main fortress of Brest. The defences here were situated behind a moat some forty feet wide, and twenty feet deep. This was followed by a wall about sixty feet high, banked on the German side with earth to a distance of eighty to one-hundred feet. The whole area was covered by German artillery, and machine guns.

Major RYLE decided to attack this wall in two phases, with he, Captain COBDEN, and Lieutenant SANDER to attack this wall from due South, over a distance of three-hundred and fifty yards, supported by one company of Sherman tanks, five M-10 self-propelled guns, and artillery. The artillery plan was to breach this wall with direct fire, with smoke, for the all-out assault to then commence. 'B' Squadron were to get through the wall, supported by the Shermans, and followed up immediately by two companies of 157<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry Regiment. The Crocodiles were to flame the gun positions and pillboxes, for the infantry to follow up and secure. Captain MOSS and Lieutenant WARD were to perform a similar attack on the right, attacking from the North-East over a distance of four-hundred yards. The supporting arms were similar, but with only one company of infantry to follow up.

At the appointed time, the Crocodiles moved forward and came to a halt behind a small hill, about three-hundred yards short of the fort. The bombardment began, with U.S. 240 mm artillery pounding the wall, from a distance of one-hundred yards, for the greater part of one day, but they made no impression on the wall. Without a breach, the attack could not take place, so 'B' Squadron sat and waited for two days.

<sup>13</sup> KNIGHT Op Cit. p.392

<sup>14</sup> War Diary Op. Cit.

After these two days of sustained bombardment, there was no breach in the defences, so 'B' Squadron moved fifty miles to Loc Maria in the western sector, to assist the 29<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry Division in the reduction of Fort Montbarey.

Major General C. H. GERHARDT, and his staff of the 29<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry Division had requested the support of British specialist armour as the defences of Fort Montbarey seemed well-nigh impregnable. Major RYLE and his Squadron were to work directly with 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, commanded by Major DALLAS, who came from Texas. Together they undertook a series of reconnaissances of the fortifications and its defences, and they commenced their joint planning.<sup>15</sup> 'B' Squadron moved into a new harbour area at Loc Maria, and they prepared for the next assault.

This fortification is located on the western outskirts of Brest, and was an old casemented fort, with walls strengthened with earth. It was surrounded by a moat about forty feet wide, and fifteen feet deep. The German commander had placed a garrison of about two-hundred and fifty men in the fort, and they were equipped with 40 mm and 20 mm guns, as well as personal weapons. There were three separate defence lines, an anti-tank ditch to the north and west of the fort, and a minefield comprising 300 lb naval shells. Altogether, it was an imposing and formidable position, and one likely to inflict heavy casualties on any assaulting force, particularly infantry.<sup>16</sup>

Majors RYLE and DALLAS quickly developed a mutual understanding and confidence between the British and American soldiers. They soon worked out their intended plan of action, and the tanks and infantry held rehearsals in preparation for the impending attack. Their reconnaissance drew fire from the German positions, because the nature of the country meant that they had to get up close to the defensive positions to determine a plan. Fortunately, these recces were made without sustaining any casualties.

## The Armoured Assault

By the evening of 13 September, all preparations were complete, so the Allied assault commenced on the morning of Thursday, 14 September 1944. The American troops of 1<sup>st</sup> Bn. 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment took over the forward positions that evening, and the tanks of 'B' Squadron moved up at 2 m.p.h. on their approach, ready for the attack. The defences of the Fort were strong, with a minefield with a lateral sunken road, an anti-tank ditch, and inside the Fort itself, three lines of defence consisting of infantry, machine guns and anti-tank guns.

The tanks of 'B' Squadron, and some American, M-10 self-propelled guns, laid down some covering fire, under which some U.S. engineers went forward, and under heavy fire, they swept and taped a safe lane through the minefield. Four tanks from the Squadron Headquarters supported these American engineers during this hazardous operation.

<sup>15</sup> KNIGHT, Op Cit. p.392

<sup>16</sup> Ibid p.129

A U.S. infantry company went forward through this gap, and then along a sunken road, but were met with ferocious fire from the defenders about 200 yards short of the fort where they halted. The Engineers placed prepared charges in the anti-tank ditch and the first sunken road. Both the American infantry and engineers suffered casualties in this action.

By midday, the infantry were still within two-hundred yards of the outer wall of the Fort but could not move forward. Captain J. L. COBDEN took his Churchill tank forward under heavy fire to reconnoitre and see if the ditch and sunken road were passable by armoured vehicles, accompanied by an American Engineer Sergeant. He determined that this route was passable by his tanks, so 8 Troop of Crocodiles, led by Lieutenant H. A. WARD, set off towards the fort. The plan was for the tanks to move through the minefield, covered by artillery smoke, closely followed by two infantry platoons. The third platoon and company commander were to move through the minefield with two Squadron H.Q. tanks and support the assaulting wave. The American infantry would then break into the Fort.

The attack started at 14.00 hours. The Crocodiles were covered by fire from the gun tanks in the squadron, plus the self-propelled guns, and some mortars laid down some smoke in the area. An infantry squad accompanied the tanks, to provide a balanced, all-arms attack. Having to negotiate around the numerous craters, Lieutenant WARD made for the one reported crossing in the anti-tank ditch.<sup>17</sup> The second crocodile, commanded by Sergeant L. MORLEY struck one of the 300 lb naval mines, and it was blown up, thereby blocking the way through the narrow lane available for the tanks. The driver, Lance Corporal MOORE was killed, and the rest of the crew wounded.<sup>18</sup> Two of the crew had both legs broken, and they were in hospital for several months. A new safe path had to be swept around the disabled tank by the American Engineers, delaying other tanks coming up in support. Major RYLE and Captain MOSS laid down supporting high explosive rounds, assisted by the American M-10 guns.

Not deterred by this, Lieutenant Tony WARD carried on the advance in his crocodile, crossing all the obstacles and spraying fire onto German machine gun and anti-tank gun positions. His crew took out any snipers identified as well, and his actions were so effective that the U.S. infantry broke through the first two defensive lines around the fort. They penetrated around the back of the Fort to a depth of 900 yards. Lieutenant WARD's tank was fired upon by German 50 mm anti-tank guns, two of which he managed to knock out with his 75 mm gun. His gunner sent a shell through the embrasure, which exploded inside the bunker, blowing its roof off. Lieutenant WARD's tank had by now run out of fuel for its flame thrower, and used all its 75 mm ammunition, and twenty belts of Besa machine gun ammunition. The infantry consolidated its position, and WARD turned his tank around to return to the squadron's harbour position to refuel and rearm. As WARD tried to extract his tank, it fell into a ten-foot-deep crater, which had not been previously discovered.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> KNIGHT Op. Cit. p.392

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/2328324/MOORE,%20DENNIS%20FREDRICK>

<sup>19</sup> *The Story of 79 Armoured Division* Op.Cit. p.129 describes this 'hole' as a tank trap, KNIGHT Op. Cit. p 393 describes this as a bunker full of Germans.

This location contained several German soldiers, who surprised at the arrival of this tank, immediately surrendered, displaying white flags, but they soon realised that the tank was in fact disabled, and the crew in some difficulty due to the escaping petrol and methyl-bromide. They dropped their flags, and they began firing on the tank. Captain COBDEN brought up three gun-tanks, his own, Second Lieutenant HARE's and Corporal BRIGG's, and some Americans Engineers, led by Major DALLAS as a rescue party to extract Lieutenant WARD and his crew. The U.S. soldiers comprised administrative personnel, cooks, drivers, and others, but they managed to subdue the Germans, taking thirty-nine prisoners, and allowed Lieutenant WARD to extract his tank and return to Allied lines.<sup>20</sup>

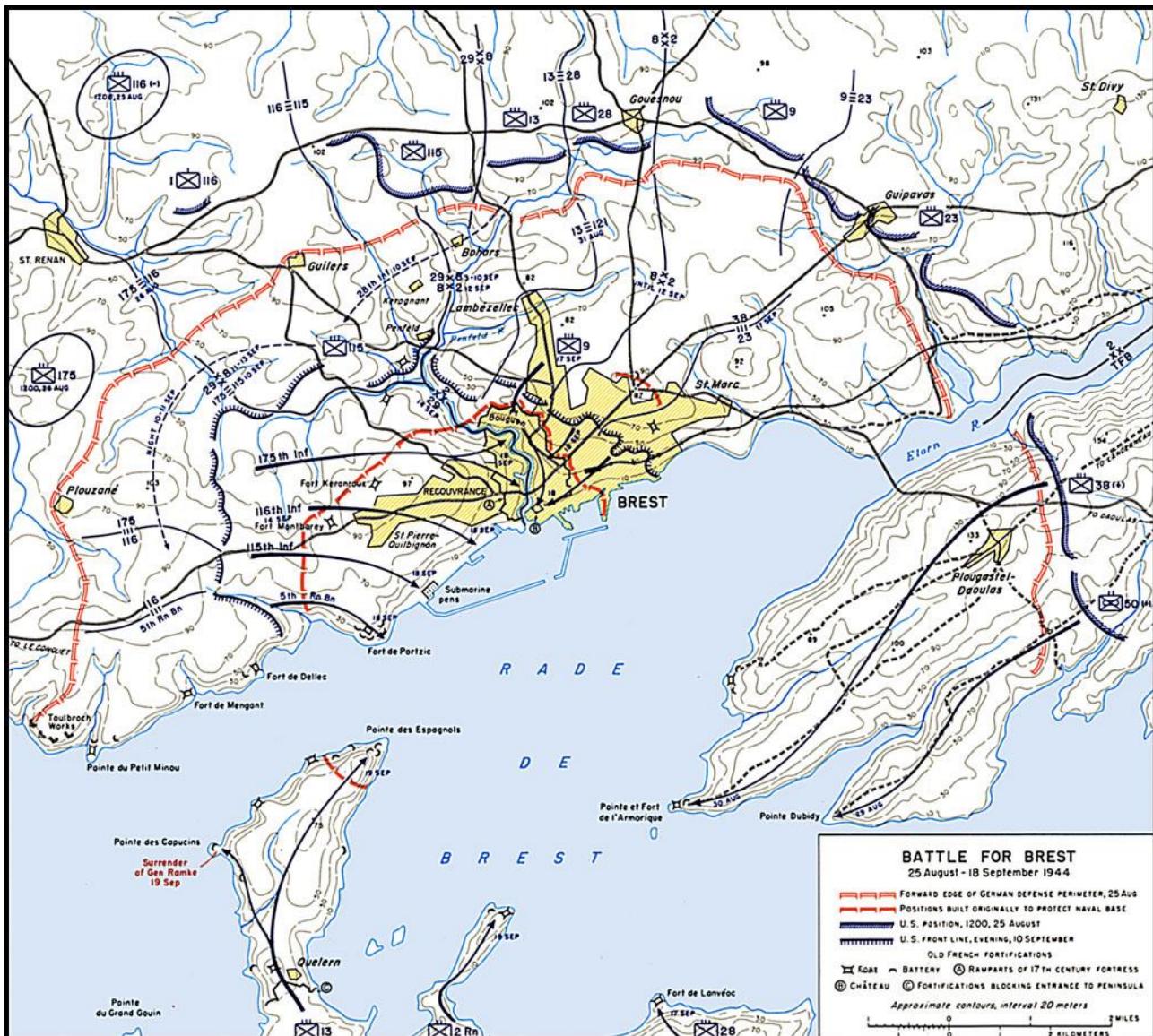
The first Crocodile, commanded by Corporal BRIGGS, burst through the minefield in the North-West corner of the fort. Having got through the minefield, Cpl BRIGGS dismounted to look for the tracks made by Lt WARD's tank. Having found the tracks, the force set off again, but unfortunately, Cpl BRIGG's tank fell into another crater, which turned out to be a concealed cesspool. At the same time, Captain Harry COBHAM's tank shed a track, and the third (commanded by Second Lieutenant H. L. HARE) became stuck in a crater as well. However, the U.S. soldiers managed to take thirty prisoners, making the total for day six officers, and one-hundred and sixteen other ranks. In addition, the Allied attack had taken out two 50 mm guns, a 105 mm field gun, and two strongpoints, but the fort was still held strongly.

Sgt NORRINGTON went forward to assist the three tank commanders in extracting their tanks from the battlefield. He got Capt COBHAM's tank back on its tracks, and so he ran over to Cpl BRIGGS, to discuss a plan of action. There were 40 mm and 20 mm guns sniping at the Crocodiles from the Fortress constantly. 2<sup>nd</sup>/Lt HARE was contacted by visual signals, and he made his way over to his colleagues. Then Troopers NEALE and JOLLY rolled up their sleeves and plunged into the liquid filling the cesspool. Shouting, '*eyes down, look in*', they managed to attach a tow rope, and the Crocodile was pulled out of the pit.

Captain COBHAM led the tanks back, with his tank bedecked with prisoners, comprising six officers and one-hundred and sixteen other ranks. He and Corporal BRIGGS managed to negotiate the gap through the minefield safely, but Second Lieutenant HARE's tank hit a buried 300 lb shell on the way back. The turret of the Churchill was blown off and sent flying through the air. The driver, Trooper GUY was killed instantly, and the co-driver, Trooper FRUDD, died the next day. The turret crew had a most amazing escape, being blown out with the turret, but falling to ground separately. HARE, Serjeant COWE, and Lance Corporal RAYMOND all survived, even though they had serious injuries, including RAYMOND having a broken thigh.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> KNIGHT Op. Cit. p.393. This account, through broadly similar to that in The Story of 79 Armoured Division p.129, does differ in some respects, with 'Playboys' stating that Lieutenant WARD took the Germans prisoner himself armed with a revolver and a Bren gun, before the arrival of the rescue force.

<sup>21</sup> The Story of 79 Armoured Division p.179 states that the driver and co-driver were killed, which is confirmed by the War Diary (Op. Cit.). KNIGHT Op. Cit p.394, relates that only one man died during the entire operation at Brest. On the C.W.G.C. website, three men are listed who died while serving with this Squadron at Brest.



The next day was spent clearing the minefield, and bulldozing approaches to the fort. The tank commanders used the opportunity to undertake fresh reconnaissances of the area, and they agree the best routes for attack. Three tanks of the Squadron H.Q. moved up again to the Fort, facing occasional sniper and machine gun fire. Major RYLE insisted that the minefield gap be cleared completely, and the outer parts of the Fort bulldozed. This took the remainder of the day to achieve, but it allowed each tank commander to come up and view the approach.

On the morning of 16 September, Major RYLE went forward with Major DALLAS and stayed with him at his command post, about 50 yards from the Fort. No. 9 Troop, commanded by Serjeant DECENT was brought up to lead the assault. Captain MOSS commanded the assault, acting in close liaison with Major RYLE. The Fort was subjected again to direct fire, and then Serjeant DECENT with his Troop crept up to the fort, supported by direct fire from other gun tanks and self-propelled artillery. The Crocodiles of Captain MOSS and Serjeant W. DECENT flamed the German strongpoints, while a gun tank came up and pounded the main gate.

Three German soldiers came out and surrendered, with one of the prisoners (nicknamed Herman the German) being sent back by Major DALLAS to call upon his colleagues to surrender. He did not wish to go back willingly but having been given the choice of being shot or going back in, he *'took the line of least resistance'*. The Germans refused to surrender, as the German commander stated he needed a better sample of fire and destruction before he would consider surrendering.

Therefore, two more Troops, 6 Troop led by Lieutenant Cliff SHONE, and 10 Troop by Second Lieutenant Terry CONWAY, came forward to keep the initiative in the attack. They flamed other German positions, and fired high explosives into the Fort, with artillery (firing phosphorous shells) and mortars being used as well. U.S. engineers went forward again, supported by Lieutenant SHONE, and successfully blew a hole in the wall of the fort. Under the cover of smoke, and with an intense barrage of fire and flame, the American infantry stormed into the Fort through the hole in the wall. When they got into the Fort, they were greeted by an Officer Cadet holding a white flag. He and fifty men were prepared to surrender as they were being asphyxiated by the smoke from the flame and the phosphorous. The outhouses of the Fort were now ablaze, but the American infantry faced some hand-to-hand fighting to clear the Fort completely.



*Above - A Crocodile tank using its flame thrower illustrating the effect, both physical and psychological of the flame.*

*Author's Collection*

The scene inside the fort was one of death and destruction. The officer who surrendered explained that his men were being suffocated by the smoke and phosphorous, and his men's morale was decimated by the use of the flame throwing tanks. The flame penetrated the casements easily, with the defenders being burned alive.<sup>22</sup> Eighty-three Germans came out at the final surrender, and they gave themselves up to the U.S. soldiers. These comprised seventy-nine other ranks, three officers, one officer cadet and one warrant officer.

During the latter part of the assault, Captain MOSS sustained a wound while engaging the enemy in the Fort at a distance of about fifty yards. He continued to fire his tank until having to be carried out of it through loss of blood and faintness. This action finished at about 18.30 hours.

On 17 September, Captain COBDEN and Lieutenant BARROW went for a reconnaissance with the 115<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry Regiment, and Major RYLE went to see the 8<sup>th</sup> Ranger Battalion to support an attack by them planned for 18 September. Both these attacks proved unnecessary, as enemy resistance in Brest collapsed. With this key defensive position taken, the U.S. forces were able to make progress on the western flank of the Brest defences. 'B' Squadron then prepared for deployment to another sector of the Brest garrison, but the German resistance was crumbling, and on 18 and 19 September, about thirty-thousand German service personnel surrendered. The Brest Garrison had 619 men killed, 1,965 wounded, and 2,799 missing (mainly prisoners of war) during the battle for the port.<sup>23</sup> The American casualties numbered 9,831.<sup>24</sup> The port was destroyed and unusable for many months.

'B' Squadron spent another day in Brest on salvage and recovery operations, then moved back to Lambezellec to await their transport back to the British sector, their job at Brest – done. 'B' Squadron returned to Belgium, under the command of the 30<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade. They assisted the Canadians in their attacks on the Scheldt pocket.

## Conclusions & Epilogue

Although it is difficult to determine how much influence the action of 'B' Squadron had in the surrender of the Brest garrison, they did play a significant role in capturing a key defensive position and opening up the northern sector for the U.S. forces to advance on the port.

'B' Squadron lost one command tank and three Crocodiles during the Brest operation. Three members of the Squadron died at Brest, one in Serjeant MORLEY's tank (driver MOORE), and two in second Lieutenant HARE's tank (driver and co-driver). Twenty-one-year-old, 7951476 Lance Corporal Dennis Frederick MOORE, son of Edward Dennis and Lilian Gertrude MOORE of Countesthorpe, Leicestershire, died on 14 September. Lance Corporal MOORE now lies in Grave XVIII F.12 of the Bayeux Cemetery in Normandy.

<sup>22</sup> *The Story of 79 Armoured Division* Op.Cit. p.131

<sup>23</sup> ZETTERLING Op. Cit. p.215

<sup>24</sup> MARGRY Op. Cit. p.27

The two members of Second Lieutenant HARE's tank who died were 14403324 Trooper Eric GUY aged twenty years, who died instantly on 14 September. His body was either not recoverable, or was buried on the battlefield at Brest, and could not be found when the Graves Registration Unit came to reinter the deceased in the Bayeux War Cemetery. In consequence, he is commemorated on Panel 1 of the Groesbeek Memorial in the Netherlands, which contains about 1,000 names of men whose died after the Normandy fighting, and whose bodies were not identified and buried in Imperial War Graves Commission cemeteries. Trooper GUY came from Bowes, Barnard Castle, in County Durham.

Twenty-one-year-old 2764220 Trooper Albert FRUDD was wounded on 14 September, but he died the following day from his wounds. A son of Mr. and Mrs. Harry FRUDD of Darfield, Yorkshire, he lies in Grave XVIII. F.11. of the Bayeux War Cemetery in Normandy.<sup>25</sup> Captain MOSS, Second Lieutenant N. L. HARE, Serjeant MORLEY and three other ranks were wounded.

Major General C. H. GERHARDT, the General Officer Commanding 29<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry Division wrote:

*The flame thrower tanks were an important factor in the capture of Fort Montbarey. Their successful use can be attributed to ... splendid cooperation between the infantry battalion commander and the flamethrower Squadron Commander... ; to the great courage displayed by the British Flame Thrower unit and the American infantry which took part in this attack; the skilful employment of the flame thrower tanks..... and the effective use of their 75 mm and machine guns against the enemy in the fort and outlying positions.<sup>26</sup>*

He sent a letter to Major Nigel RYLE, the Officer Commanding 'B' Squadron, which was routed through the Commanding General, 12<sup>th</sup> Army Group. It stated:

1. *I desire to commend you and the members of your command for the superior service while serving with this Division during the final stages of the siege on the Fortress Brest, France, September 1944.*
2. *Upon attachment to this Division your Squadron conducted an intensive training programme with the infantry battalions of the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry, then entered into combat and elements of your command were instrumental in the reduction of Fort Montbarey, a very difficult task. Your troops continued to perform most creditably with this regiment, and also the 115<sup>th</sup> Infantry and the 5<sup>th</sup> Ranger Battalion. Troops of this Division were always most enthusiastic as to your combat efficiency.*

<sup>25</sup> See Appendix 'B'.

<sup>26</sup> This is a précis of the letter, which is contained in the War Diary, as most of its contents repeat the circumstances of the action at Brest.

The Regimental Commander made a series of 'Regimental Mentions' for the action at Brest.

*The Commanding Officer commends Captain R. R. MOSS for showing coolness and courage in action against the enemy.*

*On the 16<sup>th</sup> September, 1944, during the final stages of the battle for Fort Mont Barey, Captain R. R. MOSS was commanding a tank which was firing at very short range into the fort itself. He received a wound from either a bounce back from his own gun, or from something from within the fort. He continued to command his tank although in considerable pain, only ceasing to command when he saw that the infantry had begun to enter the fort.*

*The Commanding Officer commends Captain H. A. COBDEN for showing coolness and courage in action against the enemy.*

*On the 14<sup>th</sup> September, 1944, during the action at Fort Mont Berey, Brest, Lieut WARD with his tank for a time was isolated. Captain H. A. COBDEN took out three more tanks to try and go to Lieut WARD's assistance. The area round the Fort was heavily cratered and subsequently proved to be impassable, as a result, all three tanks became bogged. Captain H. A. COBDEN showed great qualities of leadership by personally supervising under fire, the recovery of these vehicles and led them back across the minefield.*

*The Commanding Officer commends the undermentioned for showing coolness and courage in action against the enemy.*

2/Lieutenant N. L. HARE  
6292777 Cpl BRIGGS, R.  
3320494 Tpr NEALE, A.

*At Fort Mont Berey on 14<sup>th</sup> September, 1944, the above named showed coolness and devotion to duty in the face of the enemy, in covering their tanks whilst under heavy fire.*

*The Commanding Officer commends 6294277 Sjt NORRINGTON for showing coolness and courage in action against the enemy.*

*At Fort Mont Berey on 14<sup>th</sup> September, 1944, Sjt NORRINGTON showed great courage and initiative in assisting in the recovery of three tanks. In order to do this, he volunteered to get out of his tank under heavy fire and guided a tank back which had run off its tracks.*

*He had on several other occasions shown great coolness in the face of the enemy.*

Major General GERHARDT showed his appreciation of the role and conduct of the Squadron by recommending several men for American decorations. Lieutenant Hubert WARD was awarded the U.S. Silver Star Medal for gallantry. His citation reads:

*Lieutenant Hubert A. WARD, 299727, Squadron B, 141<sup>st</sup> Regiment (The Buffs), Royal Armoured Corps, for gallantry in action against the enemy in Brittany, France. On 14 September 1944 Lieutenant WARD, in command of a troop of three tanks supporting an American rifles company attack, was assigned the mission of neutralizing a series of strongly-defended concrete pillboxes near Font Montbarey. During the advance, the second tank of the column was disabled by an enemy mine, blocking the forward movement of the rear tank. Despite the loss of his two tanks, Lieutenant WARD, with complete disregard for his own safety, continued forward in the face of intense enemy fire probing enemy positions.*

*Without infantry support, Lieutenant WARD remained well forward with his flame throwing tank attacking the enemy positions until all fuel from the flame thrower was expended and all 75 mm cannon ammunition fired. At this time his tank overturned into ditch. Undaunted, Lieutenant WARD and his men dismounted, removed a machine gun from the tank, and continued to attack the enemy. As a result of this action thirty-nine of the enemy were driven into the lines of the advancing infantrymen where they were taken prisoner.*

*The intrepidity, aggressiveness, and devotion to duty displayed by Lieutenant WARD reflect great credit upon himself and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Armed Forces.<sup>27</sup>*

Hubert WARD was a former clerical officer in the Ministry of Labour, and he was commissioned as recently as 7 November 1943. In addition to the award made to Lieutenant WARD, thirteen members of the Squadron were awarded the U.S. Bronze Star Medal, namely:

151573	Temporary Major Ian Nigel RYLE
261944	Temporary Captain Reginald Roy MOSS
232515	Second Lieutenant Neil Lewis HARE
6294232	Sergeant Leonard Henry MORLEY
7919115	Lance Sergeant Arthur Strachan COWE
14399498	Lance Corporal Stanley HARRIS
6292339	Lance Corporal Joseph Albert RAYMAN
6293221	Trooper Henry ADAMS
6300090	Trooper George Edward CLARE
14384786	Trooper Alan LYNN
14528208	Trooper Thomas PARRY
14324905	Trooper Peter Guy THORNE
14399742	Trooper Leslie George Richard WORTHY. <sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> The National Archives WO 373/147

<sup>28</sup> Supplement to the London Gazette 7 December 1944 Page 5616

‘B’ Squadron, 141<sup>st</sup> Regiment, Royal Armoured Corps rejoined the rest of the regiment in the Netherlands, to be involved in operations around Breskens in October 1944. Amongst the regiment, the squadron became known as the ‘Playboys’, as they enjoyed seven day’s leave in Antwerp, while the rest of the regiment fought in the Netherlands.<sup>29</sup>

Captain Roy MOSS went on to be awarded an immediate Military Cross for his conduct at Xanten, in early 1945. On 8 March 1945, MOSS was in command of two Troops of Crocodiles in support of the 4<sup>th</sup> Bn. The Somerset Light Infantry. During the latter stages of the attack, MOSS’s command tank was the only one left fighting having managed to get through the obstructions in the narrow streets of the town. There were pockets of enemy snipers, and soldiers equipped with ‘Panzerfaust’ hand held anti-tank weapons. These were holding up the British infantry, but with the presence of the one tank from the 141<sup>st</sup> Regiment, R.A.C., the Somerset Light Infantry eventually secured the town, and the position was secured.

Reginald Roy ROSS was born in Welling, Kent, on 18 May 1919, and was educated at Upton College, Bexleyheath. He was commissioned in 1939 and served in France and Flanders in 1940. He played second row forward at rugby and was called up for the Army team. During the battle for Brest, he was wounded in the arm, however, he returned to active service with the Squadron in the Netherlands. Towards the end of his career, MOSS commanded the Armoured School at Bovington in Dorset, being awarded the O.B.E. He retired in 1979 and settled in Wiltshire. He died on 13 March 2009, to be survived by his wife Monica, and their daughter.<sup>30</sup>

Lance Corporal 6292339 Jack RAYMAN was one of those awarded the Bronze Star Medal. His citation states:

*During this most vital and dangerous operation, Lance Corporal RAYMAN displayed outstanding aggressiveness and exemplary devotion to duty, which contributed materially in the reduction of this enemy fort. His actions reflect great credit upon himself, and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Armed Forces.<sup>31</sup>*

His family understand that he was the radio operator in a Crocodile tank that hit a mine on the return from action, probably the one commanded by Serjeant MORLEY although this is not confirmed. Joseph Albert RAYMAN was born in Stepney, London, in the last quarter of 1916. Jack RAYMAN was seriously injured in the Battle for Brest, and he died early in March 1952 in Bromley, Kent, from complications related to his injuries. Aged just thirty-five years, he was survived by his wife and three children.

<sup>29</sup> Email from family of Joseph Albert RAYMAN.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/military-obituaries/army-obituaries/5280353/Colonel-Roy-Moss.html>

<sup>31</sup> WO 373/147/38

**Appendix 'A' – Churchill Crocodile at the Cobbaton Combat Collection**

## Appendix 'B' – Specifications of the Churchill

### Churchill Mk. VII and VIII

Manufacturer	– Vauxhall Motors
In production (All Marks)	– 1941 to 1945
Number Built (All Marks)	– 7,368
Overall Length	– 25' 2"
Overall Width (With Louvres)	– 10' 8"
Width (Without Louvres)	– 9' 2"
Length of Tracks on Ground	– 12' 6"
Width over tracks	– 9' 1"
Clearance under hull	– 1' 8"
Gross Weight	– Approximately 41 tons

Engine – Bedford Twin-Six 12 cylinder Horizontally opposed.

Nominal Brake Horse Power – 350 at 2,200 r.p.m.

Oil in Engine	– 11 gallons
Water in Cooling system	– 26 gallons (13 each side)
Patrol Tank Capacity	– 150 gallons
Effective Range	– About 50 miles
Maximum Speed	– 15 m.p.h.

Crew – 5 (Commander, Gunner, Loader/Radio Operator, Driver, Co-Driver/Hull Gunner)

Armament – 1 x 75 mm (or 1 x 95 mm), 1 x 7.92 mm Besa machine gun, 1 x flamethrower

## Appendix 'C' – Fatalities

### Fatalities – 141<sup>st</sup> Regiment, Royal Armoured Corps

1 – 30 September 1944

1.	MOORE <sup>32</sup>	Dennis Frederick	21	14/09/44	Lance Corporal	7951476	Bayeux War Cemetery	XVIII F.12.
2.	GUY <sup>33</sup>	Eric	20	14/09/44	Trooper	14403324	Groesbeek Memorial	Panel 1
3.	FRUDD <sup>34</sup>	Albert	21	15/09/44	Trooper	2764220	Bayeux War Cemetery	XVIII F. 11.
4.	BRAILSFORD <sup>35</sup>	Alfred Reginald	24	18/09/44	Trooper	6292247	Calais Canadian War Cemetery	3. E. 8.
5.	LLOYD <sup>36</sup>	George Seymour	19	18/09/44	Trooper	14552277	Calais Canadian War Cemetery	3. E. 9.
6.	WALKDEN	James Watson	30	18/09/44	Lance Corporal	3710098	Calais Canadian War Cemetery	3. E. 11.
7.	ADKINS <sup>37</sup>	Leslie Frederick	33	19/09/44	Trooper	6294175	Calais Canadian War Cemetery	3. A. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Son of Edward Dennis and Lilian Gertrude MOORE, of Countesthorpe, Leicestershire.

<sup>33</sup> Son of Frederick and Phyllis Annie GUY, of Bowes, Barnard Castle, County Durham.

<sup>34</sup> Son of Mr. and Mrs. Harry FRUDD, of Darfield, Yorkshire.

<sup>35</sup> Son of Thomas Alfred and Rose Louisa BRAILSFORD, of North Kensington, London.

<sup>36</sup> Son of Charles Edgar and Annie Mary LLOYD, of Garthmyl, Montgomeryshire.

<sup>37</sup> Son of Walter Frederick and Winifred Clarissa ADKINS, of Ilford, Essex.

## Appendix 'D'

### Casualties – 141<sup>st</sup> Regiment, Royal Armoured Corps 1 – 30 September 1944 (From War Diary)

#### Officers – Brest

323515	Second Lieutenant N. L. HARE	Wounded on 14 September
261944	Captain R. R. MOSS	Wounded on 16 September

#### Officers – Elsewhere

315646	Second Lieutenant K. J. MACKSEY	Wounded on 18 September
304702	Second Lieutenant F. S. L. B. PHILPOT	Wounded on 19 September
269003	Lieutenant C. D. GREGORY	Wounded on 19 September
261962	Lieutenant H. R. SMITH	Wounded on 25 September

#### Other Ranks – Brest

14403324	Trooper E. GUY	Killed in Action 14 September
7951476	Lance Corporal D. MOORE	Killed in Action 14 September
2764220	Trooper A. FRUDD	Wounded 14 September, Died of Wounds
6294232	Sergeant L. MORLEY	Wounded 14 September
6293221	Trooper H. ADAMS	Wounded 14 September
7919115	Lance Sergeant A. COWE	Wounded 14 September
6292339	Lance Corporal J. RAYMAN	Wounded 14 September
14324905	Trooper P. THORNE	Wounded 14 September
14399742	Trooper L. WORTHY	Wounded 14 September
14528208	Trooper T. PARRY	Wounded 14 September

#### Other Ranks – Elsewhere

6294175	Trooper L. ADKINS	Wounded 17 September, Died of Wounds
6292247	Trooper A. BRAILSFORD	Killed in Action 18 September
14552277	Trooper G. LLOYD	Killed in Action 18 September
3710098	Lance Corporal J. WALKDEN	Wounded 19 September, Died of Wounds
14513395	Trooper G. DAVIES	Wounded 18 September
6296957	Corporal F. HARRIS	Wounded 18 September

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[Accessed 29 April 2024]

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[www.BritishMilitaryHistory.co.uk](http://www.BritishMilitaryHistory.co.uk)

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Published by: The Author.

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