

Major Raymond Hickey

North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment – Juno Beach

Extracts from his Biography: The Scarlet Dawn

The Scarlet Dawn tells of Father Raymond Myles Hickey's experiences with the men of the North Shore Regiment from 1939 to 1945. Army Chaplain for the Regiment, which was billeted in Emsworth Camp A2 in Spring of 1944, he was awarded the Military Cross for bravery under enemy fire on D-Day on Juno near Saint Aubin sur Mer (the town Emsworth is now twinned with).



Extracts from his Biography for D-Day

Into the night we sailed as silently as thieves bent on their journey under the cover of darkness. Not a light showed in all that vast expanse of boats, but here and there, by the reflection of the water, you could make out the indistinct form of a boat, like a giant whale sleeping. Only the dull throbbing of the engines broke the silence. We went down to our bunks, but it was hard to get sleep. We have been warned to keep our gas masks handy, for, in case of a German air attack, a smoke screen would be laid to blot out the fleet. It was warm and stuffy down there and, of course, the thought of stepping into battle at daybreak wasn't a thought to lull you to sleep; but we weren't jittery. The last I remember before dozing to sleep was Captains Gammon, McQuarrie and LeBlanc shooting a game of dice on the floor near my bunk. I found a shilling in my pocket and, as money had such little value there, I invested the whole of it in the game and dozed asleep.

I awoke with a start. Somebody was saying something about daybreak. The engines had stopped and the boat was still. We rushed up to the deck and there about ten miles away was the coast of France about to awaken to a tragic day. Overhead our planes droned past and in a few minutes the coast lit up with the well-known flares of bombing; then, with a terrific crash, our heavy guns on the destroyers behind us opened up and the air was filled with the whistling of shells speeding on their way to destruction and death. Breathless we stood and watched - and there before us broke the scarlet dawn! No sun come up; the clouds hung low and dark; the waves rose cold and unfriendly like, and along the coast our bursting bombs and shells threw up a crimson curtain.

We lined up on the deck just as we had done on schemes. I took the pyx from my tunic pocket and received Holy Communion; then, as shells screamed and whistled and our planes droned above, I gave my men a general absolution. "To boats," came the command, and in perfect order, groups of thirty stepped into the little gasoline boats on the deck. Slowly they were swung out, then down, down, down, till they struck the water. It was seven o'clock. We pushed away from the "Brigadier" like life boats leaving a sinking ship. The sea was rough. Soon the area was dotted with our little boats bobbing up and down like sea gulls on a choppy sea. We lined up in position and started slowly over the ten miles to shore. The German guns had now opened up and their shells

came screaming back to answer ours. In we moved. The last three miles were to be covered with a burst of speed. The German small arms fire was now reaching us. Suddenly our boat leaped forward with a burst of speed into the jaws of death! No time was lost, the boats dumped as they turned, many were sunk; the water was covered with wreckage. Joel Murray from Cross Point and I landed together in the water but we could reach bottom and made shore. A young lad next to me fell, a bullet got him. I dragged him ashore, and there in that awful turmoil I knelt for a second that seemed an eternity and anointed him - the first of the long, long list I anointed in action. There was a long fifty yards of wide, open beach between the water's edge and the cement wall; if you could make the wall you were safe, for a time at least, from the enemy fire; but ah, so many of our fine young men didn't make it. There on the open beach they lay, dead or dying. It was our duty to get to them, so with our stretcher bearers and first aid men, Doctor Patterson and I crawled back again across that fifty yards of hell.

The beach was sprayed from all angles by the enemy machine guns and now their mortars and heavy guns began hitting us. Crawling along in the sand, I just reached a group of three badly wounded men when a shell landed among us killing the others outright. That is why the report got around that I had been killed in action. Someone saw the shell hit and figured I had got it too. The noise was deafening; you couldn't even hear our huge tanks that had already landed and were crunching their way through the sand; some men, unable to hear them, were run over and crushed to death. A blast shook the earth like an earthquake, it was the engineers blowing the wall. All the while enemy shells came screaming in faster and faster; as we crawled along, we could hear the bullets and shrapnel cutting into the sand around us; when a shell came screaming over, you dug into the sand and held your breath, waited for the blast and the shower of stones and debris that followed; then when it cleared a little, right next to you, perhaps someone you had been talking to half an hour before, lay dead. Others dying, might open their eyes as you reached them. By the little disc around their neck I knew their religion. If Catholic, I gave them Extreme Unction with one unction on the forehead, but whether Catholic or Protestant, I would tell the man he was dying and be sorry for his sins, and often I was rewarded by the dying man opening his eyes and nodding to me knowingly. It was a hard job to get the wounded on the stretchers and carry them to the shelter of the wall. I will never forget the courage of the stretcher bearers and first aid men that morning. If some men are living today, next to Almighty God they can thank men like Lieutenant Hisslip of Vancouver and his stretcher bearers, and I will always remember the bravery of these first aid from our own regiment, Edward Hachey, Buddy Daley and Bob Adair. They stayed with us on the open beach until we carried all the wounded we could to safety behind the wall and gave them what help we could.

Major Ralph Daughney crept along the wall to where I was. "Father," he said, "there's some of our men badly wounded up among the houses." I followed him. A ramp had been placed against the wall by now. Over it we went to what could have been sudden death, for the houses facing us about fifty yards away were still held by German snipers. I often wonder why we both weren't picked off as we came over the wall. I like to think a German sniper spared me; I like to think that a German sniper had me in his telescopic sight, but when he saw by my collar and red cross arm band that I was a chaplain, he stayed his finger - well, I like to think it. Ralph and I never reached those men. Two

stretcher bearers ahead of us stepped on a mine just as they reached them, and a terrific explosion killed the stretchers bearers and all the wounded. The awful concussion drove Ralph and me back; half dazed, we jumped down behind the wall.

Like a hospital patient you lost all idea of time in action. Time meant nothing. We were told after that we had been on the beach for two hours. By now what was left of the regiment was up in the village clearing the German out of their strongholds. It was a hard slow struggle. Doc Patterson and I kept close to each other. We left the beach and, following a little path that led through an apple orchard, we reached the one cobble stone street of Saint Aubin.

The first French people I saw that day were some men, women and children crouching in a little cave near the beach. Up in the village the people had run to whatever protection they could find in cellars and out in the fields; some, unable to get away, were killed, others badly wounded. A man ran across the street, he wanted help; we followed him into his house and there on the floor lay his young wife badly wounded. Doc stopped the bleeding with a first aid dressing, and she tried to bless herself when I told her I was a priest and would give her absolution and extreme unction. Their children, three little girls of about four, six and eight, looked on terrified, maybe as much because of us as their mother. I spoke to them, but it only seemed to terrify them all the more. Then I remembered I had three chocolate bars in my pocket, part of my day's rations. I gave them to the little girls. Oh the power of a chocolate bar! The terror vanished from six brown eyes, and even there as terror reigned, three little girls attempted a smile as I patted their curly heads. "I think she'll live", said Doc. I told the husband what the Doctor had said. "Thank God, thank God and you," he answered and a new light was dancing in three sets of big brown eyes and Doc and I hurried away, feeling we had already made friends in France. I often wonder if the little woman lived. I'd like to go back to St. Aubin and visit that home again. Alexandre Constant, I think, was the family name.

As we came out we were caught in a barrage of German mortars. The handiest shelter was a cellar already packed with civilians. We huddled there for a while until Doc spoke his famous words: "We're no good here Father." How often we were to hear that from the Doc. When tempted to get under shelter and stay there, when we could be of help somewhere else, the Doc would remind us that "we were not good there." So, with that reminder, we started on again. We found B Company under Major Forbes and Capt. McCann in difficulty; they were trying to take a German pill box. A pill box looks just like a beaver's house, but you can't see what's underground. This one, as we learned later, had two underground shelters. They held on there till late in the afternoon; but when our flame throwers went into action over a hundred of them came out and surrendered.

Somehow, Doc and I lost one another, but our plans told us we were to meet at the church. Sure enough, I found him in the rectory which was already turned into a dressing station. It was filled with wounded civilians and soldiers. We made the rounds, then on we went to catch up to the regiment that was now moving up to attack the German headquarters at Tailleville. The place was an old chateau hidden in a clump of trees; it looked as silent as an abandoned farmhouse, but, when we got in range, every tree spoke with a tongue of fire. Quickly we dug in with the small shovels we carried on our backs. How you can dig when you're digging for your life! Foot by foot our men

advanced through the network of trenches and barbed wire around the chateau. The Germans took their last stand inside the building and fought on till our tanks came up and blasted the side out of the place. Finally, about twenty Germans, with their hands in the air, ran out to surrender. The rest of their garrison lay around the yard or in the chateau, dead. They were the first German prisoners I had seen. They stood trembling with their hands up, you could see they thought we were going to shoot them. And now, when I recollect, I almost think shooting would have been more merciful than the awful barrage of words and tongue lashing they got from Captain McElwain.

The place was a maze of trenches and underground passages. One trench ran right to the beach. We knocked down the door of one underground passage and out trotted a dozen horses, three or four cows and a flock of hens, cackling their indignation. The Germans must have intended to make a stand there. What we were most afraid of now were booby traps. Bobby traps were simply tricky ways of blowing you up. You might innocently open a door and step right into the next world; you might press the starter of a newly acquired German car and go sailing through the air with it. One fellow picked an innocent looking beer bottle off a windowsill and the whole side of the house fell on him with a terrific bang.

All was quiet now. Did some of us foolishly think it was all over"? Maybe we did, but we were to learn. Little did we realize then, as we learned afterwards, that only a few miles ahead, in the gathering dusk, the great German General, Kurt Meyer, now in Dorchester penitentiary, stood with his crack army anxiously awaiting orders from Hitler to strike. That hesitation right there in the gathering dusk is what lost the war for Hitler. We learned, after the war, that Meyer wanted to meet us on the beach and fight us there. Had he been allowed to do it, I'd have little to write about and perhaps I wouldn't be here to write it. But every order had to come from Hitler, and his plan was to let us land and then hit us; but when, on the third night, Hitler gave orders to attack, Meyer's army found us too many and too strong.

Expecting the German artillery to open up, Colonel Buell and I jumped down into a German trench. "How is it going Colonel?" I asked him. "Well, Father, we're not near our objective yet; we should be in much farther than we are," he said, and I noticed a strained look on his face. "Let us thank God we're here at all," I answered, and by way of encouraging him more I added: "And look at all the nice hens and cows and horses we got out of it." Even in that tense moment that smile of his played on his lips. The Colonel doesn't know how much that smile encouraged me, it told me he was master of the situation. Then he was quiet, and I was quiet too, for I began asking myself how I would ever stand perhaps three or four years of this. Something answered and told me not to be foolish, that it could be all over for me very soon; that maybe in the matter of minutes or hours I would be lying with those already gone, for now bits of news were coming in; yes, so and so was killed; another was badly wounded; someone else was missing. Suddenly the booming of guns behind us and the whistling of shells overhead told us our artillery was in; but will you believe it, right there an old French woman made us and our artillery look ridiculous; for, with a pail in her hand, she sauntered cross the field, sat down on her milking stool and calmly milked her cow.

Night came on. All around you could hear the clatter of picks and shovels as each man dug in for himself. I made the rounds of all the companies and returned about midnight and started digging in for myself. "Come in with us Father," someone sang out in the dark. I went over to find Fred Druet of Chatham and John Leet of Bathurst snuggled in a fine trench. There is always room for one more man in a trench you know, so in I crawled; but the part I'll never forget is the can of self-heating soup Fred Druet opened and handed to me. That was the first food I tasted that day. No sir, the Savoy in London never produced the like of it!

An Anxious Night

"Boys, it's dark!" said Leet. "Dark, it's as dark as the inside of a black cow," answered Druet. He hadn't said the words, when from the black distance came the unmistakable "ou-ou-ou" of German planes. Nearer and nearer, they came, when suddenly, right above us, lights began to appear as though a little altar boy were lighting candles in the sky. Earthward they slowly moved and as they did, they expanded and brightened. They were flares, a kind of torch attached to a small parachute dropped from planes to light up the bombers' target. They lit up everything so bright as day. To me that was the most nerve-wracking thing in action. You lay there in a little trench feeling that a German pilot had his eye right on you and that he had private orders from Hitler to get you. Nearer and nearer the flares came; you'd think they were coming right for your trench; you took a breath each time one of them hit the ground and went out. We soon learned to watch for the red flares, for as I heard an old timer tell a newcomer one night: "Look son, them red things up there wasn't hung up there for a colour design". No, as we learned, when everything was lit up with the white flares, a lone plane would come in, choose the target and drop red flares over it; the signal to the bombers coming behind to drop their load.

As we lay there the red flares came on. I thought they were coming right for our trench; you always think that. It was the beach they were after where men and equipment were still pouring off the endless line of boats. We were about a mile from the beach then, but that's not a comfortable distance in a bombing. The first German bombs came whistling down and, as they did, as though someone pressed an electric button, a curtain of ack ack fire from our guns leaped heavenward for miles and miles along the coast. Even in its awfulness it was pretty, as our guns, like so many fountains, sprayed the clouds with golden nuggets, and the red tracer bullets, like giant sparks from Vulcan's chimney, rocketed skywards.

Morning dawned - none too soon. It was quiet now, so quiet you could hear the lark singing as the sun started to come up just down at the water's edge where we landed yesterday it seemed. I received Holy Communion. I doubted of every seeing my Mass kit again. Yes, we washed and shaved and set about preparing our "Compo" breakfast. Who will ever forget the twenty-four-hour compo package with its two squares of oatmeal which, when soaked in water, produced something like the paste mother used to make for wall papering and the stick of gum on which, Montgomery said, a good soldier could march all day, and the "boiled sweets," a half-brother to the old-fashioned Christmas candy of 1880? One lad, stirring away at the magic porridge, sang out to me: "Father, this porridge should be treated like you treat Newfoundland flippers." To my question: "And what are flippers?" he looked surprised and said "Well, them's the side

paddles on a seal, and the best way to prepare them is, you open the flipper and nail it to a board; then you hang it out in the sun for a day; then you take it in, take it off the board, then you throw away the flipper and eat the board." Yes, there was humour even though death lay around and stalked us on every side; it had to be that way, for when a man lost his sense of humour in action he was done.

Then came the darker side of war as we set about to bury yesterday's dead. One by one we identified them, wrapped them in their blanket and lowered them into their narrow grave. On some of the German dead I found rosaries and badges of The Sacred Heart. Quietly the men gathered around and stood bare headed as I blessed the graves and said, for the first time in action, the prayer I was to say so often: "*Requiem aeternam dona eis Domine*" - "Eternal rest grant to them, O Lord."

An excerpt from The Scarlet Dawn (1949), by Rev. (Major) R. M. Hickey, MC Roman Catholic Chaplain for the North Shore Regiment who landed on the shores of St. Aubin sur Mer on June 6 1944, pages 192-203.

Military Cross Citation:

H/Captain Raymond Myles Hickey...accompanied the Battalion Headquarters in the reserve company wave in the assault on the beach of St Aubin-sur-Mer at H plus 20 minutes on the 6th of June 1944.

Captain Hickey rendered first aid to the wounded and spiritual comfort to the dying without any apparent regard for his own safety. In one instance, two men hit by mortar fragments stumbled into and fell amongst a number of booby traps and mines. Although warned, Captain Hickey went into the field, applied first aid, and returned with these men despite the fact that fire on this exposed area was heavy. On another occasion, when stretcher bearers were called for, the Padre walked up and exposed himself as the quickest means of getting to the wounded men, again despite the crossfire. Having rendered first aid, he managed to make these men as comfortable and safe as the circumstances permitted, and then walked across the beach to a light section of the Field Ambulance, RCAMC, to notify them of the location of the wounded.

This conduct, courageous, effective and without thought of personal safety, was an inspiration to all ranks. Even in the strife and strain of our baptism of fire, our admiration for our Padre was further heightened.

(Major) R. M. Hickey, MC died on 14th Sept 1987 in Normandy, France while in company with other veterans of the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment on a Normandy Battlefield Pilgrimage primarily to attend the September 13 dedication at Carpiquet of a monument honouring members of the Regiment who lost their lives in World War II, as well as the valiant people of Normandy.