

Plan to deceive public hatched before Dieppe raid

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As the bodies of his Canadian mates piled up on the main beach of Dieppe, cut to pieces by withering fire from German mortars and machine guns, Jack Poolton knew he was in the middle of a debacle.

Moments after he and surviving members of the Royal Regiment of Canada assault force surrendered by waving a white undershirt on the end of a bayonet, Mr. Poolton remembers telling an officer: "We've been wasted, sir. Whoever planned this was an idiot."

The ill-fated raid on the German-held Channel port of Dieppe in 1942 was Canada's bloodiest day of the Second World War, claiming 907 lives -- nearly three times the number of Canadians who died on D-Day.

With another 2,400 wounded or taken prisoner, the over all casualty rate was an appalling 67 per cent.

Yet back home, early newspaper headlines celebrated a bold thrust against the might of Germany. War correspondents played up tales of courage and heroism by Canadian soldiers under fire, while playing down casualties. And military authorities stressed the strategic success of the raid because of the "lessons learned" for future cross-Channel attacks.

Only later did the truth gradually emerge. The ambitious, amphibious assault on Dieppe -- badly conceived and poorly executed -- was perhaps the greatest disaster in Canadian military history.

Now, more than 60 years later, a University of Victoria graduate history student from Powell River, B.C., has uncovered a key document disclosing for the first time that the deception after the battle was deliberate, mapped out three days before the raid took place.

The key culprits were not Canadian military leaders, although they reluctantly went along, but Britain's Combined Operations Headquarters, or COHQ, headed by Lord Louis Mountbatten who planned the Dieppe raid and stoutly defended it after the fiasco.

"There was a clear plan by COHQ to deceive the public, and portray any failure as a victory," said Timothy Balzer, who discovered the document while combing Canadian military archives in Ottawa for his master's thesis titled: *Selling Disaster: How the Canadian Public was Informed of Dieppe*.

The COHQ document, containing minutes of a meeting held before the raid, lays out a five-step, public-relations strategy to be followed "in case the raid is unsuccessful."

In particular, the minutes say, military communiqués must "stress the success of the operation as an essential test in the employment of substantial forces and heavy equipment."

Further: "We then lay extremely heavy stress on stories of personal heroism -- through interviews, broadcasts, etcetera -- in order to focus public attention on BRAVERY rather than OBJECTIVES NOT ATTAINED."

Mr. Balzer, who has completed his master's degree, devised his thesis after noticing that almost none of the numerous books and articles on Dieppe paid attention to how the raid was presented to the public. He was shocked by what he found.

"Of course the military would want to put the best possible spin on something, but I think this went beyond the pale of what was acceptable," he said. "It was total deception. That's crossing the line."

Prominent Canadian historian Jack Granatstein congratulated Mr. Balzer for his revealing discovery. "No one else has dug this up before. Good for him."

He said it was not surprising that military leaders would try to cloak the raid's failure. "They had jobs and careers to protect. And no one wanted to say 'disaster' to the Canadian people."

Mr. Granatstein added that justifying the raid on the grounds that valuable lessons were learned for the D-Day landings continue today.

But he argued that the only lesson learned that was not already obvious was perhaps to stay away from port cities in a future invasion. "They went in over open beaches, so they did learn from Dieppe that seizing a port was unlikely to work."

For Mr. Poolton, now 86 and battling cancer, Mr. Balzer's discovery adds to a belief that the raid was designed to fail in order to show Stalin, who was demanding a second front, how difficult an all-out landing would be.

"Officers are never supposed to put their men at a disadvantage. But we were fired upon with machine guns and mortars on an open beach. There was barbed wire everywhere. Ridiculous. Our regiment lost 227 men. That's a lot of bodies out of the 500 that went over."

Bitterly, he recalled Lord Mountbatten's words before they left for France. "He said: 'Give 'em one for me, boys.' "

Nor did Mr. Poolton, who has written his own book about Dieppe, think much about the plan to emphasize individual heroics after the raid. "You knew you were facing death just for setting foot on that beach. The simple fact that you landed was bravery enough for anyone."

Closely following the strategy outlined in the COHQ document revealed by Mr. Balzer, the first day's military communiqués portrayed a difficult but successful battle.

In Canada, newspaper cartoons depicted huge Canadian soldiers confronting a cowering Hitler. While The Globe and Mail was one of a few papers more cautious about the outcome,

most, such as the Montreal Star, trumpeted the battle: "Success of Operation Proves Jolt for Nazis."

Correspondents such as the legendary Ross Munro of The Canadian Press filed stories about officers and enlisted men saving comrades and storming German positions. Afterward, Mr. Munro said Dieppe was the only time he felt he "cheated" the Canadian public.

Only when the complete casualty lists were published a month later did the enormity of the disaster sink in. There was no way to cover up 134 pages of names. Canadians were stunned, even if many continued to accept the military's line that the "lessons learned" were worth the slaughter.

Unease about the raid remained. When Mr. Poolton returned to Canada after nearly three hellish years in German prison camps, he found that no one wanted to talk about Dieppe.