

CANADA IN ACTION: THE DIEPPE RAID

At 0500 on August 19th, 1942, the men from the Royal Regiment of Canada were approaching the beach of Puy, a small seaside village two kilometres east of Dieppe. They were already behind schedule and, as the sun rose, their presence was detected. The Germans took aim at the landing crafts that were still ten metres from the shore. At 0507, the first LCA lowered its ramp. Canadian soldiers dashed forward in the noise of machine-gun and mortar fire that targeted them. They fell, mowed down by bullets, hit by mortar shells. Some tried to reach the seawall bordering the beach, hoping to find shelter. They were to be made prisoner after a few hours of useless resistance.



Dieppe's pebble beach and cliff immediately following the raid on August 19th, 1942. A scout car has been abandoned.

A few kilometres away, to the left near Berneval and to the right near Dieppe, Pourville and Varengeville, other battalions landed, more men were killed by machine-gun fire and struck by mortar shells. Several platoons managed to break through enemy defence lines and closed in on their targets. Their determination was no match for the formidable might of the German army. Order was given to pull back at 1100; Navy personnel did the utmost to retrieve as many assault troops as possible. The raid was over. As the tide rose, the wounded who remained on the beach were carried away by the waves with the dead.

Why Dieppe?

In 1942, the Combined Operations Headquarters had good reasons for attempting a raid on Dieppe: on the eastern front a decisive battle was pitching the advancing German troops against the resistance of the Red Army and the Russian people. Stalin asked Churchill and Eisenhower to help the USSR by opening up a Western front in continental Europe, to prevent Hitler from throwing all the might of his armies against the Soviets. As a result, Great Britain planned a series of major raids against German defence installations along the Channel. Only one such operation was actually conducted: Dieppe.

The Allies' long-term goal was to get a foothold on the continent and set up a bridgehead from where ground forces could move into Europe. But before it could attempt a large-scale landing, the Combined Operations Headquarters had to test some of its assumptions in real action. Would it be possible to capture a fortified seaport large enough to be used afterwards by invading troops, and that, without destroying its infrastructures? Amphibious landing techniques had been successfully tested in previous operations but how would the new barges designed to carry tanks and heavy artillery behave? There was a need to test the complex combination of land, naval and air manoeuvres required by a large-scale invasion in real action conditions, in order to check the efficiency of new equipment, communication lines and chains of command. The August 19th, 1942, raid was to answer all those questions.

Dieppe was a seaside resort in Normandy, built along a long cliff that overlooked the Channel. The cliffs are cut by gaps through which the Scie and Arques rivers flow to the sea. The city boasted a medium-sized harbour that carried a special significance for French Canadians as it was a departure point for ships sailing off to New France. In 1942, the casino on the boardwalk had been partially demolished by the Germans to facilitate the defence of the coast. They had set up two large artillery batteries in Berneval and Varengeville. For the British Commanders, Dieppe was also within the range of the RAF's

Spitfires and Hurricanes based nearby at Eastbourne, Sussex.

The raid was to unfold in two phases rapidly following one another. During the first phase, assault troops were to approach from the flanks and launch a surprise attack at daybreak, the main goal of which being to neutralize the artillery positions at Berneval and Varengeville. Half an hour later a second, frontal assault was to be conducted against Dieppe itself, to capture the harbour and the German landing barges that were moored there. Once other targets further inland had been reached, Allied troops were to withdraw to the beach and board the ships waiting for them. The operation was only a raid: the attackers were to destroy several German installations and leave immediately. The timing depended strictly on sunrise and troops had to retreat before the high tide. In order to benefit from the surprise element, there would be no air bombings the night before.

The Assault Troops

General Bernard Montgomery chose the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division for the raid. General Andrew McNaughton, who commanded the First Canadian Army and General H.D.G. Crerar, commander of I Canadian Corps eagerly accepted this opportunity for Canadian soldiers to get some combat experience as they had been stationed in Great Britain for two years without having ever engaged the enemy in a major operation. In Canada, public opinion was starting to question this inactivity: the time was ripe and Canadians soldiers were roaring to go and make a name for themselves like their predecessors of WWI did.

Major-General J.H. Roberts, commander of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, was at the helm of the land forces. But neither Roberts, nor McNaughton, nor Crerar took any part in the overall planning of the operation, codenamed *Jubilee*, having assisted only with details. The plan had already been designed by the Combined Operations HQ when the Canadians were called in.

On August 19th, 1942, the ground forces that were taking part in the raid included 4,963 men and officers from the 2nd Canadian Division, 1,005 British commandos, 50 US rangers and 15 Frenchmen. A fleet of 237 ships and landing barges, including 6 destroyers, brought them near the seashore. In the air, Royal Air Force and Royal Canadian Air Force bombers and fighters took part in the operation. Although some questioned the very concept of a full frontal assault on a fortified position, the British and Canadian strategists were in agreement with the military doctrines that prevailed at the time and success was likely.



Part of the assault fleet gathered for Operation Jubilee.

The Assault on the Right Flank: Varengville and Pourville

The raid was off to a great start on the west flank: No 4 British Commando landed in Varengville. Climbing up the steep slope, it attacked and neutralized its target, a battery of six 15-cm guns. The commando then withdrew at 0730 as planned.

At the same time, a little further left, the South Saskatchewan Regiment was headed towards Pourville, some four kilometres west of Dieppe.

The LCA reached the pebble beach at 0452, almost on time. The surprise was real and the soldiers managed to leave the landing crafts before the enemy could fire. Unfortunately the landing crafts had somewhat drifted and most soldiers of the battalion found themselves west of the Scie River rather than east of it. Because of that apparently minor mistake, the regiment, whose objective was the hills east of the village, had to enter Pourville to cross the river on the only bridge.



of Canada, who joined them soon, were unable to reach their target.

Before the Canadians had a chance to reach that bridge, the Germans were in position, blocking their progression with a wall of machine-gun and antitank artillery fire. Dead and wounded soldiers piled up on the bridge. Lieutenant-Colonel Merritt, commanding officer of the South Saskatchewan, stepped forward, bare-headed, his helmet in his hand, and shouted to his men: “Come on over – there’s nothing to it!” The assault resumed but nothing could be done. The South Saskatchewan and the Cameron Highlanders

Landing crafts of the assault troops taking part in Operation Jubilee, Dieppe, August 19th, 1942. On the left, a smoke screen produced to conceal them from enemy fire.

Department of National Defence / National Archives of Canada, PA-183770.

Close by, other troops from the Cameron, under Major A.T. Law, moved inland towards Petit Abbeville. Cut off from their battalion, they were forced to retreat and be evacuated. Merritt’s courage allowed most of the South Saskatchewan and Camerons to be evacuated but a small rear-guard detached to hold the Germans back, did not make it. Merritt was awarded the Victoria Cross.

On the Left Flank: Berneval and Puys

The situation on the left flank proved to be a disaster even before the first landing. An hour before the scheduled landing time, the ships carrying the No 3 British Commando encountered a German convoy with an armed escort. Fierce fighting followed that disorganized the manoeuvres of the landing crafts and only seven out of 23 reached the Berneval beach. The firing alerted the Germans who met the Commandos with strong opposition. Only one craft escaped the attention of the enemy and 17 men and three officers from No 3 Commando managed to land without being seen. Edging their way through a gully, an unbelievably bold movement, they got near their target, a German artillery position on the hill above Berneval. Unable to destroy it, they took shots at it with such intensity that for an hour and a half, the Germans were unable to take aim at the Allied ships.

The Royal Regiment of Canada, plus three Black Watch platoons and one artillery detachment, experienced unbelievable bad luck on the Puys beach. Their task was to neutralize machine-gun and artillery batteries protecting the Dieppe beach. Problems started during the crossing of the Channel and the barges arrived in disorganized waves, the first ones already twenty minutes behind schedule. By then, the darkness and smoke screens that should have concealed their arrival had been lifted and German defences were on high alert. As soon as they reached the shore, the men found themselves pinned against the seawall and unable to advance otherwise than in full view of the enemy. Since no ship could get close without being targeted and probably sunk, the survivors of the Royals and Black Watch were forced to surrender. Of the 556 men and officers of the Royal Regiment of Canada who sailed for Dieppe, over 200 lost their lives in action and 264 were captured, among them several wounded.

The Front Attack on Dieppe



Corpses on the beach next to two Churchill tanks of the 14th Armoured Regiment (Calgary) stuck in pebbles. Behind them, thick smoke coming from LCT 5.

Department of National Defence / National Archives of Canada C-014160.

Meanwhile, before Dieppe, four destroyers were pounding the coast as landing crafts approached. At 0515, five RAF Hurricane squadrons started bombing the coastal defences and set a smoke screen to protect the assault troops. Between 0520 and 0523, assault troops from the Essex Scottish Regiment and the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry landed on the beach, dashing through barbed wire and other obstacles littering the ground beneath the seawall.

Poor timing proved fateful: the tanks of the 14th Armoured Regiment scheduled to arrive at the same time were late and, as a result, the two infantry regiments had to attack without artillery support. Landing crafts were hit or destroyed before or after the landing, making the retreat even more problematic. Whole platoons were annihilated as soon as they set foot on the beach. Hiding behind the partly demolished casino, groups from the RHLI and the Essex Scottish succeeded in

sneaking into town and fought gallantly. They were, however, unable to neutralize the enemy and to reach their assigned targets.

The Calgary Regiment tanks arrived soon after the infantry: 29 got off the LCA but two fell into deep water. Of the remaining 27, 15 made it across the seawall between the beach and the boardwalk, as it was not very high in places. Without engineers, they were unable to eliminate obstacles that blocked their way into the city and were forced to return to the beach where one after the other they got hit or bellied in the beach shingle. Still able to fire, the 14th Regiment's tanks protected the infantry's retreat to the very end. The tank crews paid a heavy toll for their gallant behaviour as they were all made prisoners.



Officer and soldiers examining a Churchill tank stuck on the beach in front of the boardwalk after the battle, its left track broken. Wounded men lying on the ground are about to be evacuated. Dieppe, August 19th, 1942. *Department of National Defence / National Archives of Canada C-017293.*

On HMS *Calpe*, Major-General Roberts and Captain John Hugues-Hallet, commanding officers of the ground and naval forces respectively, had only a vague notion of the actual situation. Following an ambiguous message that could be understood to mean the Essex Scottish had indeed entered the city, Roberts ordered the reserve troops, the Fusiliers Mont-Royal, to land in order to exploit that gain. Under Lieutenant-Colonel Dollard Ménard, the FMRs boarded their 26 landing barges at 0700. They sailed towards the beach at full speed but the Germans hit them with heavy machine-gun, mortar and grenade fire. Bullets bounced off the sides of the crafts and many fusiliers were hit even before landing. Unable to resist such a powerful enemy, the FMRs were decimated, only a few men managed to edge their way between houses.

The second the boat scraped the beach, I jumped out and started to follow the sappers through the barbed wire. My immediate objective was a concrete pillbox on top of a 12-foot parapet about 100 yards up the beach. I think I had taken three steps when the first one hit me. You say a bullet or a piece of shrapnel hits you but the word isn't right. They slam you the way a sledgehammer slams you. There's no sharp pain at first. It jars you so much you're not sure exactly where you've been hit-or what with.

– Lt-Col Dollard Ménard, Fusiliers Mont-Royal

At 0900, Hughes-Hallett and Roberts had to face the evidence: the Germans were still in control of the hills and were firing without mercy at the beaches. Orders were given to evacuate at 1100. The landing crafts sailed back towards the beaches under a smoke screen cover and partially protected by RAF fighters. Evacuation took place in utter confusion as fighting was still going on nearby. At 1220, the beaches could no longer be reached even if men were still there. HMS *Calpe* made a last attempt at 1248 and headed for the shore with two boats. The fleet then

sailed back to England. The Dieppe raid was over. Some 3,367 men, including 2,752 Canadians remained on the beach, dead or soon to be made prisoners.



Canadian prisoners escorted by German guards marching through Dieppe, August 19th, 1942. *Department of National Defence / National Archives of Canada PA-200058.*

The Dieppe story made instant headlines worldwide. Unfortunately, the British Army's press services did not mention the part played by the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division. It was several weeks before Canadian public opinion realized what a failure Operation *Jubilee* had

been, and how many of its own had died in action.

Lessons Learned from Dieppe

Dieppe was a pathetic failure. Sixty years later, it seems obvious that Jubilee was a bizarre operation with no chance of success whatsoever and likely to result in a huge number of casualties. In August 1942, British and Allied officers did not have yet the knowledge and combat experience to make a proper assessment of the risks of such an operation. This catastrophe was useful precisely in providing that knowledge which was later to make victory possible.



Exhausted but alive, these men are happy to be back in England after nine hours in the Dieppe inferno. *Department of National Defence / National Archives of Canada PA-183775.*

The Dieppe fiasco demonstrated that it was imperative to improve communications at all levels: on the battlefield, between the HQs of each unit, between air, naval and ground forces. The idea of capturing a well-defended seaport to use as a bridgehead was dropped after August 19th, 1942. In addition, the raid on Dieppe showed how important it was to use prior air bombings to destroy enemy defences as much as possible, to support assault troops with artillery fire

from ships and landing crafts, to improve techniques and equipment to remove obstacles to men and tanks.

The true meaning of the sacrifices made at Dieppe was made obvious two years after this ill-fated date, when on D-Day the Allies gained a foothold in Europe to free the continent from Nazi aggression.