

## Dieppe, 60 years on: What is the truth?

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Sixty years ago today, some 5,000 Canadians, a brigade's worth of infantry and armour, landed on the beaches of Dieppe. There was great courage and unspeakable horror in a few hours, and the raid left 907 Canadians dead on the beach and 1,946 prisoners of war, many of them wounded. Only 2,200 returned to England and half of those never got ashore. The Dieppe raid was a military disaster, one of the worst in Canadian history.

Such losses understandably led soldiers then and historians since to search for explanations. The British had sacrificed Canadian troops rather than their own, some said. The Germans had known the raid was coming, many Dieppe veterans still maintain. Others looked for the lessons Dieppe might have taught, and argued that the success of Overlord, the D-Day invasion two years later, simply could not have occurred without the lessons learned on Aug. 19, 1942. What is the truth?

The first point that must be made is that the Canadian high command, not the British, had pressed strongly for the Canadian army to have the lead role in the raid. Lieutenant-General Harry Crerar, acting commander of the Canadian Corps in England in the winter of 1942, had learned of the raid and insisted that his men get the job. The Canadians were bored and needed to see action, Crerar believed. Moreover, he said, public opinion in Canada was restless, and it would be a disaster if the Americans, in the war for only a few months, saw action before the Canadians, some of whom had been in the United Kingdom since December, 1939. Crerar was right in his assessment, and he made the case strongly and well enough that he persuaded the British to select the 2nd Canadian Division. The blame, if blame there is, rests on a Canadian commander, not the British.

But did the Germans know the raid was coming? Initially planned for July, bad weather cancelled the attack. The troops dispersed to their bases and, likely enough, blabbed to their girlfriends and pubmates. Defying logic, the planners decided to use the same troops against the same target the next month; the Germans surely would not expect such a foolish violation of elementary military good sense.

And they didn't. There is no hard evidence that the Germans knew a raid on Dieppe was planned in August. But the attackers had terrible luck when their flotilla ran into a German coastal convoy in the English Channel. Firing ensued and the Nazis' coastal defences went to a heightened state of alert. This likely doomed the raid to failure, but its chances lessened even further when some landing craft put men ashore in the wrong places and when most touched down late and in daylight. The disembarking troops became easy targets for the Wehrmacht's artillery and machine guns. The Canadian dead piled up in heaps on the beaches and only a few very brave men managed to get inland.

But surely there must have been invaluable lessons from Dieppe? After August 19, the idea of seizing a defended port in a major invasion was dropped. The need for heavy air and naval support was recognized, as well as the requirement for better intelligence, better ship-to-shore communications, more specialized assault training for the attacking forces, and better tanks and landing craft. And certainly all these were essential for D-Day's success.

Let us be clear, however. Assaults from the sea were nothing new in 1942. The United States Marine Corps had a developed doctrine for such attacks, and the British themselves had staged seaborne attacks in the Great War. Who could have believed that tactical surprise was all that was necessary to get 5,000 men ashore on defended beaches? By what planning principles did the staff decide that a relative handful of aircraft could provide air support and that eight destroyers could give sufficient covering fire?

More to the point, what fool decided to attack Dieppe? No one who has stood on the stony beach in front of Dieppe -- as hundreds of thousands of British vacationers had done for a century before 1942 -- could have failed to notice the cliffs that commanded the Canadians' landing areas. Where else would the Germans have placed their weaponry? Dieppe was a failure of intelligence, a "gross lapse in command sense and leadership," historian Bill McAndrew has correctly noted. Yes, there were lessons learned from Dieppe, but most of them would have been obvious to a second lieutenant fresh out of officer cadet classes.

Mistakes happen in planning and strategy. War always leads to deaths in action and many inevitably occur as a result of blunders. But let us no longer wallow in conspiracy theses and in seeking to blame the British or this commander and that senior officer. The Canadians wanted to get into action, as Victoria Cross winner Lieutenant-Colonel C.C.I. Merritt said after the war. "We were very glad to go, we were delighted. Taken prisoner during the raid, Merritt recalled, "We were up against a very difficult situation and we didn't win; but to hell with this business of saying the generals did us dirt." Colonel Merritt died in Vancouver two years ago, but his judgment was and remains the most sensible assessment of the tragedy of Dieppe.

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