



# The Dieppe Raid



Canada's experiences in times of war have been marked by great triumphs but also by harsh setbacks. The Dieppe Raid during the Second World War was one of the darkest chapters in our country's military history but it was also marked by great courage and helped lead to important lessons being learned.

## "FORTRESS EUROPE"

By the summer of 1942, the Second World War had been raging for almost three years and things looked grim; Nazi Germany had pushed east deep into the Soviet Union, enemy forces were advancing in North Africa and u-boats were making the Atlantic a deadly place for Allied shipping. The British Isles were the only Allied holdout after the Germans had invaded and occupied much of Western Europe in 1940. The continent's west coast was studded with enemy troops, machine guns, artillery, barbed wire, concrete pillboxes and offshore obstacles. It truly was on its way to becoming "Fortress Europe."

## WHY RAID DIEPPE?

Many factors contributed to the decision to mount a large raid into occupied Europe in 1942. The Soviet Union was pressuring the Allied forces to open a second front in Western Europe. The Allies, however, needed more time to build up their military resources before undertaking such a massive effort. They felt that a large raid on the coast of France, however, could force the Germans to divert more of their military resources away from the Soviet Union and also help in the planning for the full-scale Allied assault that would eventually have to take place.

Canadian soldiers had been training since the outset of the war in 1939 and, except for the Battle of Hong Kong, had yet to see significant action. There was political pressure at home to finally get the Canadians into battle, as well as impatience within the army itself.

Dieppe is a resort town situated at a break in the cliffs along the northwest coast of France and was selected as the main target of the raid partially because it was within range of fighter planes from Britain. The Allies' plan was to launch a large-scale amphibious landing, damage enemy shipping and port facilities, and gather intelligence on German defences and radar technology. Recent research has suggested that the desire to capture a top secret Enigma code machine and accompanying codebooks was also an important factor in mounting the raid.

## OPERATION JUBILEE

The Dieppe Raid, code-named "Operation Jubilee," saw more than 6,000 men come ashore at five different points along a 16 kilometre-long stretch of heavily defended coastline. Four of the attacks were to take place just before dawn on 19 August 1942 at points east and west of Dieppe, while the main attack on the town itself would take place half an hour later. The raiding force was made up of almost 5,000 Canadians, approximately 1,000 British commandos and 50 American Army Rangers.

Fallen soldiers amid damaged tanks and landing craft on the beaches of Dieppe.  
Photo: Library and Archives Canada C-014160



Things immediately went wrong for the landing force on the eastern flank. They encountered a small German convoy and the ensuing firefight alerted the enemy. The soldiers that came ashore at Berneval and Puy consequently were met with overwhelming fire and some of the heaviest Allied losses took place there.

Some objectives on the western flank were achieved and the enemy gun batteries at Varengeville were destroyed. In Pourville, the South Saskatchewan Regiment and the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders came ashore and pushed towards their goals. The mounting German resistance, however, would force them to withdraw with heavy losses.

Running behind schedule, the main force going ashore at Dieppe landed as daylight was breaking. The German troops, now alerted to the raid, cut down many Canadians as they waded in the surf. Nevertheless, many of our soldiers fought their way across the cobblestone beach to the relative protection of the seawall. The same cobblestones and seawall made it hard for the 14th Army Tank Regiment (The Calgary Regiment (Tank)) to move their armoured vehicles off the beach and the fierce enemy fire prevented engineers from clearing the way for them to push their way into the town.

Small groups from the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry and the Essex Scottish Regiment were able to fight their way into the bullet-swept streets of Dieppe. It was clear, however, that the raid could not continue and the retreat soon began. Trying to evacuate everyone, however, would mean the probable destruction of the Allied naval force. Through great courage, many men were taken off the beaches under heavy fire, but by early afternoon the last boat had departed. Left in a hopeless situation, the remaining Canadians were forced to surrender. The raid was over.

## HEROISM

Many acts of great courage took place during the Dieppe Raid and two Canadians would earn the Victoria Cross, our country's highest award for military valour. Lieutenant-Colonel Cecil Merritt earned the medal for courageously leading his men from the South Saskatchewan Regiment across the River Scie at Pourville in the face of heavy resistance. Once the regiment could go no farther, he then led a dangerous retreat that allowed most of the men to escape back to Britain. Merritt himself was captured and spent the rest of the conflict as a prisoner of war.

Honourary Captain John W. Foote, a chaplain with the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, also earned a Victoria Cross. For eight hours, he continually braved enemy fire on the Dieppe beach to bring the wounded to first aid posts. When his own landing craft was about to leave, he intentionally stayed behind to be captured so that he could minister to the many men who were going to be taken prisoner.

## LESSONS LEARNED

1942 was one of the darkest periods of the Second World War. But the fact that the Allies had come ashore in occupied France gave the French people some hope and the Dieppe Raid let them know that they had not been forgotten.

While the losses were heavy and the raid did not meet most of its objectives, many historians feel that the lessons learned there played an important role in the success of later actions. For example, the Dieppe Raid and subsequent wartime beach assaults contributed to improvements in Allied amphibious landing techniques. While the cost of gaining this knowledge was steep, it likely saved many lives on the beaches of Normandy when the Allies returned to the shores of continental Western Europe to stay on D-Day, June 6, 1944.



## SACRIFICE

The men who participated in the Dieppe Raid paid a great price. Of the 4,963 Canadians who embarked on the mission, only approximately 2,200 returned to England and many of those had been wounded. More than 3,350 Canadians became casualties, including a total of 916 who lost their lives as a result of the raid and approximately 1,950 more who were taken prisoner. A total of 210 British and American personnel also lost their lives.

Those who were captured faced especially harsh treatment in prisoner of war camps and most would remain in captivity for more than two-and-a-half years. As the end of the war neared, many of them also had to endure forced wintertime marches as the Germans moved the prisoners away from the advancing Allied forces who otherwise could have liberated them.

The Dieppe Raid also took a considerable toll on the ships and aircraft that supported the assault. 19 August 1942 saw the Allies' worst single-day losses for aircraft of the entire Second World War, with 119 of their warplanes being shot down as they tried to protect the landing force.

## LEGACY

The Canadians who fought in the Dieppe Raid were among the more than one million men and women from our country who served in uniform during the Second World War. The efforts of all of these brave Canadians helped the Allies eventually achieve victory. The sacrifices and achievements of those who gave so much to restore peace and freedom to the world will never be forgotten.

## CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by those who have served—and continue to serve—during times of war and peace. As well, it invites Canadians to become involved in remembrance activities that will help preserve their legacy for future generations. To learn more about Canada's role in the Second World War, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada website at [veterans.gc.ca](http://veterans.gc.ca) or call **1-866-522-2122** toll free.

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