

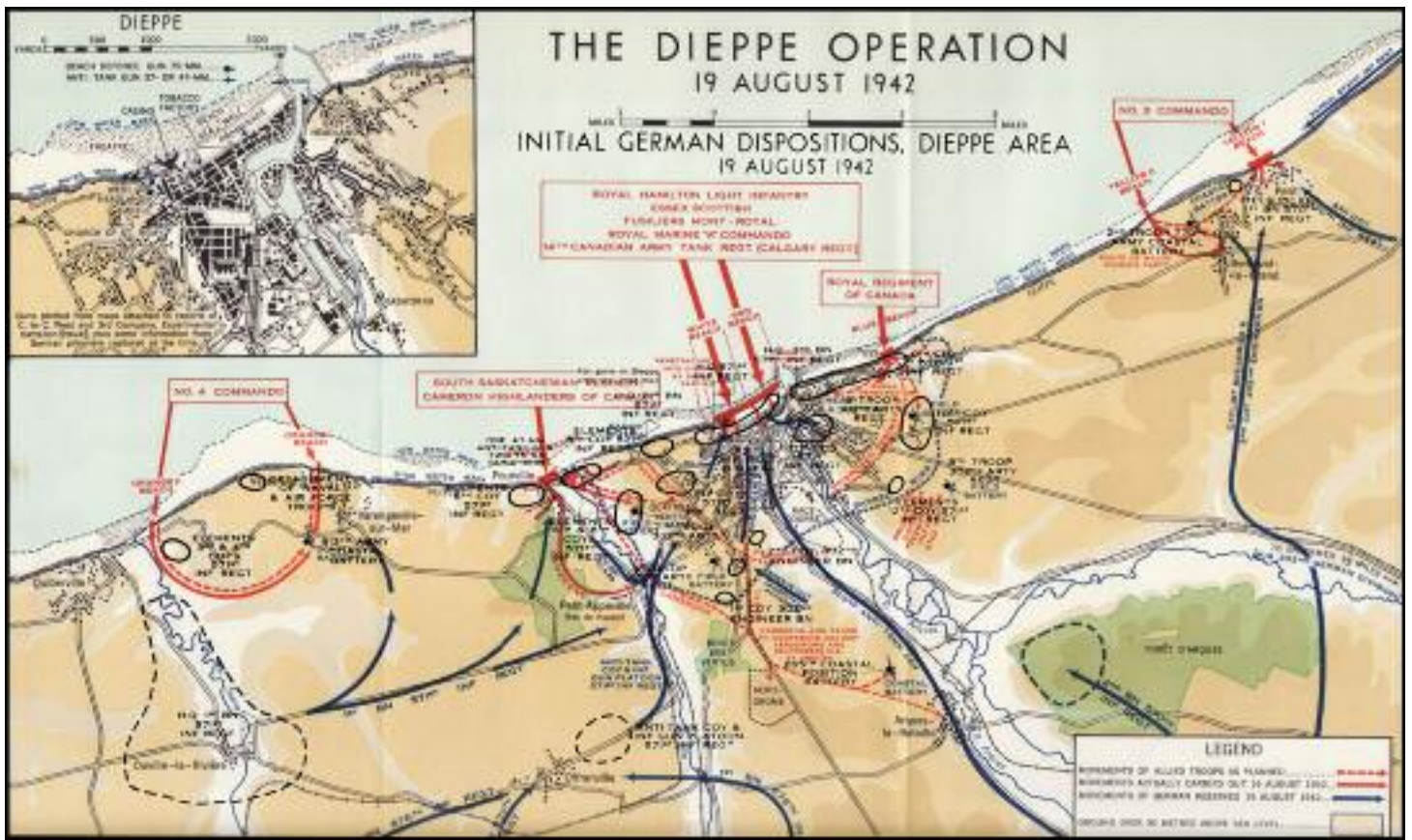


August 1942:

Winston Churchill and the Raid on Dieppe

“The People Who Planned It
Should Be Shot”

TERRY REARDON



The entry of the United States into World War II was seen by Churchill as a guarantee that the Allies would win, but in early 1942 that outcome was far from assured. On the Eastern Front the Russian Army was hard-pressed to withstand the German onslaught which threatened Moscow. Stalin appealed (or to be more correct demanded) an immediate second front in Europe arguing that this would cause substantial German forces in Russia to be moved west.

Meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov in May 1942, President Roosevelt, concerned that the Russians might make a separate peace with Germany, promised Molotov that he “expected” to launch a second front that year.¹ Churchill and his Chiefs of Staff were convinced that an invasion of Northern France was not practical at that time. Because there were insufficient troops and inadequate landing craft, such a move, they thought, would fail.

Roosevelt’s generals came to the same conclusion, and he ultimately agreed, accepting Churchill’s recommendation of an invasion of North Africa later in the year. Churchill flew to Moscow in August 1942 to give the unpleasant news to Stalin, who, not unexpectedly, was furious. However, he was somewhat placated by Churchill’s promise of a major operation in northern France very shortly.

Churchill was referring to a raid on the French Channel port of Dieppe. While one objective was to take pressure off Russia, the official reason for the raid was to prepare for D-Day, the invasion of France. There having been no amphibious assault since Gallipoli in 1915, the Western Allies needed to develop experience of modern conditions—including the capture of a major port capable of use for the transport of men, supplies and vehicles, including tanks.

The official Canadian war history covers the reason for a frontal attack on the town: “...it was feared that an attempt to ‘pinch out’ a port by landings on its flanks might produce delays which would give the enemy time to demolish the harbour, whereas if the place could be seized by a blow into the centre the problem would be solved.”²

Besides the attack on Dieppe proper, the plan included two nearby infantry movements to secure an airfield. Simultaneously, parachute troops would drop to attack the German divisional headquarters and the coastal and anti-aircraft batteries in the area. To support the mission, a heavy bomber attack was planned against the town and the airfield on the night before the early morning landings.

The choice of troops for the operation was a “no-brainer.” The Canadian army had been inactive so far in the war, and when Montgomery approached the Canadian >>

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Army Chief, General McNaughton, for a division to form the main part of the force, the response was positive.

At a meeting on 5 June 1942 the plan for heavy air bombardment was dropped for concern that it might put the Germans on the alert. Alternatively, Boulogne was to be bombed as a diversionary tactic. Also later, it was decided to substitute commandos for paratroopers.

Training for the operation was conducted on the Dorset coast, where the terrain resembled the Dieppe area. A mock exercise went badly: units landed miles off-target, and the tank landing craft arrived over an hour late. Further training was required and the next exercise, on 22-23 June, showed improvement, although certain defects occurred, particularly on the naval side. Montgomery gave a written report in which he expressed confidence that the operation would succeed. He included a P.S.: "The Canadians are 1st Class chaps; if anyone can pull it off, they will."³

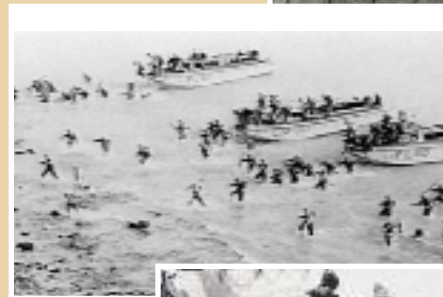
Churchill had concerns with the operation and called for a conference for 30 June. He asked the Head of Combined Operations, Lord Louis Mountbatten, whether he could "guarantee success," to which Mountbatten "naturally replied that he could not." However Mountbatten's second in command, Vice-Admiral Hughes-Hallett, who had trained in disguise with the Canadian troops, assured Churchill that they would "fight like hell."⁴

General Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, also gave the plan his support, advising Churchill that the Dieppe operation was an indispensable preliminary to a major French invasion. Based on the opinions expressed, Churchill gave his approval. The enterprise was to be launched on 3 July, but continuing bad weather put it off. A key element of the plan was secrecy, which could not be maintained with many thousands involved, so the operation was cancelled.

In August, the military command decided to re-launch the campaign, given that the troops were already trained and could be taken straight to the ships, reducing the risk of the Germans detecting a large force in advance. Planners also believed the Germans, who would undoubtedly by then have known of the July plan, would not expect another operation against the same target. Montgomery had now been transferred to North Africa; his replacement was the Commanding Officer of the Second Canadian Division, General Harry Crerar, with Major-General John Hamilton Roberts the actual army commander. Unbeknown to the Allies, the Germans remained on full alert during the summer of 1942, although there is no evidence that they knew Dieppe had been targeted.

On the evening of 18 August, the ships set sail, only to be spotted en route by a German convoy making its way from Boulogne to Dieppe. A battle ensued, the firing alerting German troops on shore. Surprise, a key element of

Valiant troops of the Canadian 2nd Division, who bore the brunt of the attack, before, during and after the raid. Eight months earlier Churchill in Ottawa had said they might soon engage in "one of the most frightful battles the world has ever seen." He and they didn't realize how near at hand it was.



the operation, had been lost. Problems next arose when the Navy disembarked some troops at incorrect locations, from which they were unable to carry out their objectives.

The forces defending the port were much heavier than had been expected. Tanks had trouble proceeding on the pebbled shore. General Roberts, commanding the operation, lost wireless connection with his forces. Based on fragmentary information that the first wave was successful, he ordered a second wave ashore. While some of the first wave did reach the town, the bulk of forces were tied down on the beach or killed or wounded. It was soon apparent that the key mission, to take Dieppe and destroy the port facilities, was not achievable. The troops withdrew under terrific German fire from the cliffs around the port, which caused more deaths and woundings.



Above: “Green Beach,” scene of terrific fighting on August 19th, after the battle and as it appears today. Allied planners did not fully consider the tall cliffs bristling with machine gun emplacements. Left: A photograph posted by S. Pallad of his father (cross-legged), with the 49th Panzer Battalion, 10th Panzer Division, clearing the shell-torn beach. (Panoramio.com, <http://bit.ly/y6kpnJ>)

It was a disaster. Of the 4963 Canadian troops engaged, only 2104 returned to England, many of whom were wounded; 913 were killed and 1946 captured. Heavy losses were also recorded by the other forces involved.

On September 8th, Churchill in his official statement to the House Commons made the best of it: “The raid must be considered as a reconnaissance in force....We had to get all the information necessary before launching operations on a much larger scale....I, personally, regarded the Dieppe assault, to which I gave my sanction, as an indispensable preliminary to full-scale operations.”⁵

Privately, however, Churchill was concerned over the operation. In a minute to Chief of Staff Major General Ismay on 21 December 1942 he wrote: “At first sight it would appear to a layman very much out of accord with the accepted principles of war to attack the strongly fortified town front without first securing the cliffs on either side, and to use our tanks in a frontal assault off the beaches.”

“ATTACKERS GROSSLY UNDER-ESTIMATED THE STRENGTH OF THE GERMAN GARRISON....IT WAS A DISASTER. OF THE 4963 CANADIAN TROOPS ENGAGED, ONLY 2104 RETURNED TO ENGLAND, MANY OF WHOM WERE WOUNDED; 913 WERE KILLED AND 1946 CAPTURED.”



Churchill wanted Ismay to ascertain the facts, after which he would decide whether to hold a more formal inquiry.⁶

Ismay’s reply included a report from Mountbatten, laying responsibility on Montgomery, Monty was in North Africa at the time of the raid. Churchill did not pursue the matter at that time, but after the war, preparing his memoirs, he asked Ismay for a full explanation, including those responsible for reauthorizing the raid in August.

Ismay was unable to find the evidence and surmised that for secrecy reasons nothing had been put in writing. He did report: “I can now recall the fury of General Nye, then V.C.I.G.S. [in the absence of General Brooke, accompanying Churchill in Cairo], who had no idea that the operation was on until reports started to flow in from the scene of the action.”⁷ Ismay also noted that Churchill must have approved the plan in principle, because he cabled from Cairo two days before the raid using its codeword.

Ismay went on to contact Mountbatten and Hughes-Hallett, about the authorization of the August plan, but they could not help. So Churchill provided his own account of the operation, including the statement that it was Mountbatten who had revived the operation, without approval of the Chiefs of Staff, or the War Cabinet Defence Committee. Understandably Mountbatten was alarmed at Churchill’s re-draft and he provided a voluminous response, which Ismay supported, on the basis that he had no recollection of the specifics.

The historian David Reynolds, who limned all these postwar ruminations in his account of the writing of the War Memoirs, concludes that Churchill had by now lost interest and accepted Mountbatten’s account: “*The Hinge of Fate* >>

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therefore prints Mountbatten's self-serving answers, not Churchill's soul-searching questions."⁸ They went like this:

Our postwar knowledge of German records shows that they did not have any special warning about Dieppe through leakage. However, their general estimate of the threat to the Dieppe sector led to the intensification of defence measures along the whole front....Looking back, the casualties of this memorable action may seem out of proportion to the results. It would be wrong to judge the episode solely by such a standard. Dieppe occupies a place of its own in the story of the war.⁹

It is ironic that one of the most imaginative ideas of World War II, the floating Mulberry Harbour, assured that there was no need to take Dieppe on D-Day. One such floating harbour, at Omaha beach, was destroyed in a storm, but the other at Arromanches, named Port Winston, saw heavy use, landing over 2.5 million men, 500,000 vehicles and four million tons of supplies.

While mistakes were made in the execution of the plan itself, the failure was partly owed to flawed intelligence reports. The attackers grossly underestimated the strength of the German garrison, and did not consider that the towering cliffs in the headlands made perfect gun nests, which gave the enemy easy pickings among invasion forces. True, Mountbatten was a sailor, with a swashbuckling attitude; but experienced soldiers such as Brooke and Montgomery also bought into the plan, which led to Churchill's sanction—which he questioned soon afterwards.

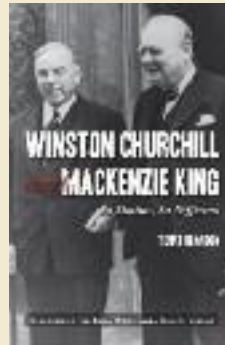
Few historians believe that the raid on Dieppe was anything other than an illogical, flawed plan with disastrous results. Canadian historian Pierre Berton wrote: "How ironic it is that for Canadians the defining battle of the Great War was a glorious victory [Vimy Ridge], while its counterpart, twenty-five years later, was a bitter defeat."¹⁰

Three soldiers involved in the raid were awarded the Victoria Cross. The last word is left to one of them, Captain Patrick Porteous, quoted in his obituary in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* of 16 October 2000: "The people who planned it should be shot." ☞



Canadian Cemetery, Dieppe

Winston Churchill & Mackenzie King: So Similar, So Different, by Terry Reardon. Published in the autumn by Dundurn Press.



Born just two weeks apart in 1874, Churchill and King took different paths to their parliamentary careers, Churchill through military exploits, King through academia. When he became Prime Minister, King realized that Canada had to progress from a subservient position to an independent one. Thus when the Second World War broke out, Canada's

Parliament made its own decision to declare war on Germany. King had been highly critical of Churchill's vehement anti-Appeasement stance in the 1930s, but when Churchill became Prime Minister, King and Canada gave him wholehearted support. King changed his opinion of Churchill, and this developed almost into hero worship as the war progressed. This book is more than a chronicle of the relationship between two men during the fifty years they knew each other; it also explores their influence on the progress of their countries during that period. To pre-order, see <http://bit.ly/A4k3jP>

Endnotes

1. Contention exists over what Roosevelt promised. The official transcript (<http://bit.ly/yzn79W>) reads: "The President then put to General Marshall the query whether the U.S. was preparing a second front. 'Yes,' replied the General. The President then authorized Mr. Molotov to inform Mr. Stalin that we expect the formation of a second front this year." (Italics ours.) "Preparing" or "expect" are not definite. Nor was Stalin so told: Molotov's summary to Stalin quoted FDR as saying, "This is our hope. This is our wish." See Oleg Rzheshesky, *War and Diplomacy: The Making of the Grand Alliance* (Abingdon, Oxon.: Taylor & Breach, 1996), 179-80, 185-87, 204-06, 219.

2. C.P. Stacey, *Six Years of War: Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War*, 3 vols., (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1966), I 326-27.

3. *Ibid.*, 335.

4. *Ibid.*, 337.

5. Winston S. Churchill, *The End of the Beginning* (London: Cassell 1943), 205.

6. David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), 356.

7. *Ibid.*, 356.

8. *Ibid.*, 348.

9. Winston S. Churchill, *The Hinge of Fate* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950), 510-11.

10. Pierre Berton, *Marching as to War* (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2002), 371.