

2021

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Jennifer A. Munson

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Recommended Citation

Munson, Jennifer A. (2021). The Dieppe Raid: Avoidable Disaster or Lesson in Amphibious Assault?*. *Undergraduate Review*, 16, 155-163.

Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol16/iss2/15

The Dieppe Raid: Avoidable Disaster or Lesson in Amphibious Assault?*

JENNIFER A. MUNSON, UNIVERSITY OF MAINE, ORONO, ME, USA.

jennifer.munson@maine.edu

Abstract: During World War II, the Allied forces mounted an amphibious assault on the occupied French coastal town of Dieppe. Since its execution, the raid on Dieppe has become a very controversial topic. The operation had an abundance of flaws that caused many casualties. This article analyzes both issues and who, if any one should have been held responsible.

Keywords: World War II, Canadian military, amphibious assault, Operation Jubilee, Dieppe

On August 19, 1942, Allied forces consisting of mostly Canadian troops mounted a full-scale assault on a small port in Dieppe, France. Prior to this assault, Allied forces had been forced to withdraw from the western front at Dunkirk in June 1940, which left the eastern front in the Soviet Union's territory as the only active front against Germany. By 1941, German forces were within striking distance of Moscow.¹ This raised many concerns that the Soviet Union might fall to Hitler's forces. Joseph Stalin, the leader of the Soviet Union, urged Great Britain to reopen the western front to draw some of the German forces out of Russia and give his soldiers some relief. This desperate need for assistance led the British military to devise a plan to reclaim territory in France.

The plan was premature and had many flaws including late tanks, limited air support, misplaced landing crews and the loss of the element of surprise, which doomed the Canadian forces. In total, 907 Canadian soldiers were killed, 2,460 were wounded, and 1,946 were taken prisoner.² The losses were tremendous. There is a mountain of questions still left unanswered today. What was the original plan? How was this plan approved? Was it approved through official military channels? What issues needed to be addressed prior to a successful raid? How did the military react to this disaster? Was anyone at fault? Who should have been held accountable?

It was determined by the Combined Operations Headquarters, commanded by British

Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, that a temporary assault on a seaport would display the Allied powers' ability to mount a full-scale attack by landing craft from the English Channel.³ According to Bernie Anderson, a Canadian soldier who played a role in the Dieppe Raid, "The idea was for a short, sharp assault on the small French port of Dieppe to encourage the struggling Soviet Union, to boost morale on the home front, and to provide the bored, obstreperous Canadians a taste of action."⁴ Up until this point, the Canadian forces had been stationed in Great Britain along the English Channel to protect against a German raid that would never happen.⁵ With no action yet for the Canadians, the home front was beginning to get anxious. The initial plan was simple. Historian Bill Twatio comments that "The Allied forces would seize and hold the town until sunset, destroy the defences, take prisoners and be safely home on the evening tide."⁶ This did not work out the way they had planned it.

The plan started out as Operation Rutter. The operation was cancelled abruptly after months of planning and special training for the Canadians, when the 250 Canadian ships, ready to attack Dieppe the next day, were discovered by German bombers. This ruined all hopes of maintaining the element of surprise and contributed to the cancellation of Operation Rutter.⁷ The final decision to cancel was also due to poor weather conditions on the day of the raid.⁸ Historian Norman S. Leach notes that, "While many in the Allied headquarters wanted to permanently cancel the raid, the new Chief of Combined Operations—Louis Mountbatten—did not."⁹ The plan was practically unchanged and renamed Operation Jubilee.

During Operation Rutter, while soldiers were in their ships preparing for the assault, they were told that Dieppe was the target. When the plan was cancelled and renamed, the target was not changed. N.M. Christie notes that this was a massive security risk: "Normally when an operation is remounted its destination was changed for security reasons."¹⁰ With the risk of German spies knowing the location, it is unclear why it was not changed. If this information had been leaked to the Germans it would explain the large number of defensive obstacles placed at Dieppe, including concrete barriers along paths and multiple anti-tank guns. Were these added before Operation Rutter was planned, or after its location got out? The *Canadian Encyclopedia* makes it clear that there was a

“need for better intelligence on beach conditions and German defences.”¹¹ Dieppe was not thought to be as fortified as it was. Could old intelligence before the location was leaked have changed this?

A total of 4,963 Canadians, 1,005 British commandos, and 50 U.S Rangers participated in Operation Jubilee.¹² However, Alex Herd notes that “Allied commanders knew the raid was risky.”¹³ There was a major push by Canadian Officers to involve the restless Canadian troops who had not yet seen any action after three years at war. Canadian military historians J.L. Granatstein and Dean Oliver write that “Lieutenant-General Harry Crerar heard rumors that Mountbatten was planning a major raid, he demanded that the British Chiefs of Staff select Canadians for the task; it would be good for morale, he judged.”¹⁴ Historians also speculate that the troops were not properly prepared and lacked combat experience, which contributed to the failure of the operation. While they did lack the experience, they trained intensely in land and sea tactics for months before the raid. The Canadian government later insisted that the troops were “well trained and more prepared than ever.”¹⁵ The Combined Operation leaders who formulated the plan should be the ones labelled not properly prepared instead.

The plan was riddled with flaws from the start. Along with the massive security risk, the entire plan was based on the element of surprise. Not only was this risky, but during the raid, as they were crossing the English Channel, a group of ships were intercepted by a German convoy. The interception alerted the enemy on shore, which delayed the raid. Most of the landing craft reached the beaches late and dropped the troops off in full daylight.¹⁶ Even though the element of surprise was essentially lost the raid was not called off. Instead, command thought that additional tank and naval support would compensate for the lack of surprise.

Historian Terry Copp wrote that the Operation “seems to have been devised by men who believe that battles could be won by surprise, speed, and shock effect of landing tanks alongside the infantry.”¹⁷ This plan could have worked better if the tanks had been more successful on the beaches, but a series of failures led to the ineffective deployment of the armored support. First, the tanks were about 10 minutes late. This poor timing set the entire raid back and left hundreds of men vulnerable.

Second, according to Norman Leach, “out of the 58 tanks prepared to assist in the raid, only 29 were able to offload at the shore.”¹⁸ Third, most of the tanks used during the raid got stuck on the beach almost immediately. Major Allen Glen, a Canadian soldier who was involved in the raid, remembered, “You couldn’t pick worse terrain for a tracked vehicle, you turn the vehicle a little bit, the stones are rolled into the track, and if you get too many going through at once you break your track.”¹⁹ This was the unfortunate reality for many tank crews. Lastly, even the tanks that made it off the beach were eventually stopped by the blockades set up by the Germans. The tanks were not able to get through and soon became sitting ducks, leading Leach to sadly conclude that, “Unable to escape in time, all of the tank crews were either killed or captured.”²⁰ This error could have been avoided if the planners had done their research. With the terrain at Dieppe being so unique, they should have recommended training on similar ground to give a more realistic example of how the tanks would respond in action.

Instead, soldiers trained in England with slightly different terrain. Not only did this affect the tanks, but it also caused issues with the landing craft. Caroline D’Amours notes that “Boats were scattered all along the seafront because of smoke, the heavy fire and the currents.”²¹ While training for these situations would have been a difficult task, a systematic order with proper timing of approaching ships could have made a huge difference. Despite organization being vital for a raid of this size, it was not practiced.

During the raid, the communication was poor and unreliable. D’Amours further notes, “The faulty communication system between the beaches, the Royal Air Force, ships, and tanks during the operation had resulted in a significant number of losses.”²² Calls for more support, retreat, and other commands were hard to come by after landing. A miscommunication between the troops on shore and the British Royal Marines led to reinforcements being sent to shore. “It was believed the tanks were progressing well and the beach was in Canadian hands.”²³ The moment the reinforcements reached the beach they, however, realized that this report was inaccurate. Instead of landing craft coming to pick up those who were still alive, they dropped more off, only adding to the casualties. Sadly, many soldiers did not make it onto the beach.

After both groups' attempts to flank the enemy failed, those on the main beach were sitting ducks. The initial force was supposed to "capture the Headlands" or cliffs "overlooking the Dieppe Beach" and supply cover for the main assault.²⁴ With failure on both sides, the main assault did not stand a chance. The right flank was ill fated from the start. After being dropped off to begin their assault soldiers realized they had been dropped at the wrong side of the Scie River. Leach notes: "With no other way to cross the river, the Canadians were forced to enter the town of Pourville to use the only available bridge."²⁵ The Germans foresaw this, and set up machine guns and anti-tank artillery to defend the bridge. The South Saskatchewan Regiment's fate was sealed after they were dropped in the wrong location.

Prior to the raid, there are multiple examples of unrealistic expectations. Many thought that the raid would be simple and that casualties would be low. Even though the planners knew that it was risky, generals and other military leaders were not prepared for what was to come. The night before the raid Major-General J.H. Roberts told the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, which constituted the main infantry assault force, "Don't worry men, it'll be a piece of cake."²⁶ Whether this was to ease nerves or was a serious statement, it was inappropriate to lower expectations. His troops needed to be as prepared as they could be, including knowing that the plan was risky and that giving full effort was needed in order to succeed.

The final issue to address is the lack of approval. According to historians Brian Villa and Peter Henshaw, after the failure of the raid, Churchill sought answers to "when and how formal authorization for the raid was given."²⁷ This question remains unanswered and has since raised even more. During a session of the Canadian House of Commons, Tommy Douglas of Weyburn, Saskatchewan addressed confusion over the commanding roles. He stated, "We do not know whether it was carried out under General McNaughton as commander of the Canadian forces overseas, or whether it was under Lord Mountbatten who was in charge of the combined operation."²⁸ It had been months since the raid and the Canadian government still had no knowledge of formal roles, or who had command of the operation. After reviewing authorization requirements, Villa and

Henshaw found that “existing procedures required of Mountbatten were missing from the archives. Mountbatten himself admitted afterwards that he had no authority to proceed after the cancellation of Operation Rutter, except on the basis of a new request.”²⁹ Part of the process at the time was to submit a full outline of the plan for review, but as stated by Villa and Henshaw, “It was never done.” With a lack of formal approval, the raid was bound to be full of flaws. It can be speculated that combined operations “lost” formal approval paperwork to release them from blame after the raid failed.

Days after the Raid had taken place, the media began claiming it as a heroic victory. Multiple newspapers used headlines like, “Daring Raid,”³⁰ “Blazing Battle,”³¹ and “Allies Smash Nazi Defences.”³² All of these were misleading and prompted a false hope in the war effort at home. In reality, most of the German defenses remained intact and questions had already arisen about the endless list of flaws. While the raid did slightly weaken the German air force and led them to move more forces and aircraft away from the Soviet Union, it still did not make up for the avoidable casualties and issues.

After the Dieppe Raid failed, research began immediately to determine why and who was responsible. To this day, theories and speculations consume many historians who have dug into the vast documentation of first-person accounts, newspapers, government documents, and other research papers. Thousands have been affected by this disaster, and many are still emotional about the outcome. Alan Saunders, a veteran who fought in the Dieppe raid, stated that, “I think it was one of the biggest cock-ups of the Second World War and it never should have happened.” Historian Gerald Gilbert summarizes that Saunders and others viewed it as “a costly lesson, and crass stupidity to think that by frontal assault you could take an enemy-held port.”³³ While many were upset and even angry at those who put Operation Jubilee into action, there were some who did not share those feelings.

Shortly after the war, some researchers began to refer to the Dieppe Raid as the dress rehearsal for the invasion of Normandy beach. Although there was a 67 percent casualty rate at Dieppe, many claimed that multiple valuable lessons were learned.³⁴ Granatstein and Oliver, for example, note that, “Dieppe was a lesson on how not to mount an amphibious assault.”³⁵ The Allied

forces learned that in order to attack a coastal port, tanks and the element of surprise were not enough. The Germans had heavily fortified the coast of occupied Europe during WWII and expected an invasion on the Western front. The tall cliffs along the coast of France made the German defenses even stronger. Yet, despite these impressive defenses, it was clear that if the Allies had any hopes of reopening the Western front, an attack by sea would eventually be necessary. The Allies had to acquire better intelligence of terrain and military defenses, along with improving proper communication and general planning. How to make use of tanks also came into question. With such difficult terrain, specialized landing craft and tanks would be needed.³⁶

After all, Dieppe was only a raid. The entire goal of it was to display power and gain intelligence on performing a synchronized sea/land assault. While the casualties were tremendous, it did allow for vital gains in intelligence and brought the enemy's focus towards the Western front to help relieve the Russians as much as possible. Both sides of the Dieppe raid debate make good points, but the flaws that surround the raid could have been avoided. With proper planning, approval, and intelligence, the casualty rate could have been drastically lower. Yet, instead of calling for early retirement resignations or imposing demotions of those in charge of the raid, the Canadian and British militaries gave out promotions and medals. Was the Dieppe Raid a failure or a success? That is still a hard question to answer.

* An earlier version of this essay was published in the University of Maine's *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History* in 2018.



Jennifer Munson is a first-year Master's student studying history at the University of Maine. Her Master's thesis research focuses on the memorialization of the Holocaust on U.S and Canadian soil and the involvement of immigrants in erecting those memorials.

Notes

- ¹ Norman S. Leach, *Canadian Battles: Canada's Role in Major World Conflicts* (Edmonton: Folklore Pub., 2009), 142; N. M. Christie, *The Suicide Raid: The Canadians at Dieppe, August 19th, 1942* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2001), 6.
- ² Alex Herd, "Dieppe Raid," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 5. Accessed April 20, 2018, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/dieppe-raid/>.
- ³ J. L. Granatstein and Dean F. Oliver, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Military History* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2011), 148.
- ⁴ Bernie Anderson, as quoted in Jack Granatstein, "Nightmare of Death: Everything went wrong in the 1942 raid on Dieppe," *Maclean's* August 19, 2002: 48.
- ⁵ N. M. Christie, *The Suicide Raid: The Canadians at Dieppe, August 19th, 1942* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2001), 5.
- ⁶ Bill Twatio, "The fatal shores of Dieppe: on the 65th anniversary of the landing at Dieppe, one man who took part in that fateful landing tells his story," *Esprit de Corps* (2017): 34.
- ⁷ Leach, *Canadian Battles*, 144.
- ⁸ Christie, *The Suicide Raid: The Canadians at Dieppe*, 7.
- ⁹ Leach, *Canadian Battles*, 144.
- ¹⁰ Christie, *The Suicide Raid: The Canadians at Dieppe*, 7.
- ¹¹ Herd, "Dieppe Raid," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 6.
- ¹² Christie, *The Suicide Raid: The Canadians at Dieppe*, 8.
- ¹³ Herd, "Dieppe Raid," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 6.
- ¹⁴ Granatstein and Oliver, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Military History*, 148.
- ¹⁵ *Dominion of Canada, Official Report of Debates, House of Commons* (Ottawa: Edmond Cloutier, 1943), 2940.
- ¹⁶ Bernie Anderson, as quoted in Granatstein, 48.
- ¹⁷ "The Dieppe Raid," in Terry Copp, *A Nation at War: 1939-1945 Essays from Legion Magazine* (Stratford, ON: LCMSDS), 35.
- ¹⁸ Leach, *Canadian Battles*, 150.
- ¹⁹ Allan Glenn as quoted in Christie, *The Suicide Raid*, 22.
- ²⁰ Leach, *Canadian Battles*, 150.
- ²¹ Caroline D'Amours, "Training for Operation Jubilee," *Canadian Military History* 22, no. 4 (Autumn 2013):19.
- ²² D'Amours, "Training for Operation Jubilee," 19.
- ²³ Christie, *The Suicide Raid: The Canadians at Dieppe*, 24.
- ²⁴ Christie, *The Suicide Raid: The Canadians at Dieppe*, 17.
- ²⁵ Leach, *Canadian Battles*, 148.
- ²⁶ Gerard Gilbert, "The Dieppe Raid: The Forgotten D-Day," *The Telegraph*, August 17, 2012. See also Herd, "Dieppe Raid," 1.
- ²⁷ Brian Villa and Peter Henshaw, "The Dieppe Raid," *The Canadian Historical Review* 79, no. 2 (June 1998): 306.
- ²⁸ *Dominion of Canada, Official Report of Debates, House of Commons*. 2790.
- ²⁹ Villa and Henshaw, "The Dieppe Raid," 307.

- ³⁰ “Details of Daring Raid,” *The Halifax Herald*, August 21, 1942, 67th ed., sec. 200. 1.
- ³¹ “Details of Daring Raid,” *The Halifax Herald*, 7.
- ³² “Allies Smash German Defenses,” *The Halifax Herald*, August 20, 1942, 1.
- ³³ Alan Saunders. As quoted in Gilbert.
- ³⁴ *Dominion of Canada, Official Report of Debates, House of Commons*. 2940.
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