The Dieppe Raid

By Julian Thompson

Did lessons learnt in the disastrous Dieppe Raid of 1942 secure the success of the Normandy landings? Julian Thompson questions how useful the tactical blunders and senseless slaughter were in planning D-Day.

Why Dieppe?

On 19 August 1942, a disastrous seaborne raid was launched by Allied forces on the German-occupied French port of Dieppe. Why was such a raid ever undertaken? Because, with Germany operating deep in the Soviet Union, the Russians were urging the Allies to relieve the pressure on them by opening a second front in north-west Europe.

At the same time the British Chief of Combined Operations, Rear Admiral Louis Mountbatten, was agitating for a practical trial beach landing, against real opposition, for his troops. In the face of this pressure, Churchill decided that Operation Rutter, a 'hit and run' raid on Dieppe, should go ahead.

The plan and the players

The Canadian government was keen for its troops to take part
British Lieutenant General Bernard Montgomery's South-Eastern Command provided the troops for the operation, and planned an unimaginative frontal assault, without heavy preliminary air bombardment. Montgomery was also being pressed by the Canadian government to ensure that Canadian troops saw some action, so the Canadian 2nd Division, under Major General Roberts, was selected for the main force.

These troops were to assault the town and port of Dieppe, while, as a distraction, British parachute units would attack German batteries on the headlands on either side of the Canadians.

The first rehearsal was a disaster, but a second try, ten days later, went better, and Montgomery was satisfied. On 1 July it was agreed that the raid would take place either on 4 July, or on the first day afterwards that promised favourable weather conditions.
'The first rehearsal was a disaster ...'

The attack was to be mounted from five ports between Southampton and Newhaven, with forces made up of around 5,000 Canadians, 1,000 British troops, and 50 US Rangers. There were 237 ships and landing craft, and 74 squadrons of aircraft, of which 66 were fighter squadrons.

Changes and security

The plan: frontal attack without aerial bombardment

The weather was consistently bad, however, and on 7 July the operation was postponed. Montgomery wanted it cancelled altogether, as the troops had been briefed and he was afraid that word of the operation might leak out. Unusually for him, however, he did not persist with his demand, and preparations continued. He was not involved in the matter for long, in any case, as he was summoned to Egypt to command the Eighth Army.

Meanwhile, a number of changes to the plan were made. The codename was changed to Jubilee. The planned air bombardment on Dieppe was reduced, for fear of French casualties, and because of the continuing priority of the strategic bombing offensive on Germany. Eight destroyers were allocated to bomb the shore from seaward, as it was judged that battleships could not be used, being too vulnerable when they were close to the coast.

The parachute operation on the flanks, even more dependent on the weather than the seaborne assault, was cancelled. This task was instead given to Numbers 3 and 4 Army Commandos, to the relief of the Commanding Officer of 1st Parachute Battalion, who later commented that from the outset of the raid 'security was abysmal'.

'Intelligence on the enemy was patchy,'

It was decided that the Royal Marine Commando, which had been in the force from the outset, was to land in fast gunboats and motor boats after the main force had gone in. They were then to destroy the Dieppe dock installations, and capture documents in a safe in the port office. The break-in was to be the special responsibility of a marine who had been a burglar in civilian life.

Intelligence on the enemy was patchy. There were German gun positions dug into the sides of the headland cliffs, but these were not spotted by Allied air reconnaissance photographers. Planners assessed the beach gradient and its suitability for tanks only by scanning holiday snapshots. As a consequence, enemy strength and terrain were grossly underestimated.

In addition, the Germans were on high alert having been warned by French double gents that the British were showing interest in Dieppe. They had also detected increased radio traffic and the concentration of landing craft in Britain's south coast ports.

Initial assault
The raid began at 04.50 on 19 August, with attacks on the flanking coastal batteries, from west to east. These included Varengeville (Number 4 Commando), Pourville (the South Saskatchewan Regiment and the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada), Puys (the Royal Regiment of Canada), and Berneval (Number 3 Commando).

By this time, however, the element of surprise that the planners had counted on was lost. Some of the landing craft escorts had already exchanged shots with a small German convoy off Puys and Berneval at 03.48.

'...the element of surprise that the planners had counted on was lost...'

Despite this, Number 4 Commando successfully stormed the Varengeville battery. This was the one unit that captured all of its objectives that day. Only 18 men from Number 3 Commando got ashore in the right place. Nevertheless, for a time they managed to distract the Berneval battery to such good effect that the gunners fired wildly all over the place, but the commandos were eventually forced to withdraw in the face of superior enemy forces.

At Puys, the Royal Regiment of Canada was annihilated. Just 60 men out of 543 were extracted from the beach. And only a handful of the men of the South Saskatchewan Regiment reached their objectives, with others from this regiment landing in the wrong place. The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada, despite being landed late, did manage to penetrate further inland than any other troops that day, but they were soon forced back as German reinforcements rushed to the scene.

Main assault

At 11.00, the order to withdraw was given.

Half an hour later the main frontal assault by the Essex Scottish Regiment and Royal Hamilton Light Infantry started, supported by 27 Churchill tanks of the 14th Canadian Army Tank Regiment.

The tracks of most of the tanks were stripped as they were driven on to the shingle beach, and the bogged down vehicles became sitting ducks for German anti-tank guns. Those tanks that did cross the sea wall were stopped by concrete roadblocks. The infantry were slaughtered on the beach by vicious cross-fire from machine-guns hidden in the cliffs. Supporting fire by naval destroyers was far too light to have much
effect.

To make things worse, Canadian Major General Roberts could not see the objective, because of a smoke screen laid by ships in support of the landings. As a result, acting on incorrect information and unaware of the mayhem on the beaches, he now made the mistake of reinforcing failure and sent in his two reserve units.

'... the bogged-down vehicles became sitting ducks for the anti-tank guns.'

Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal, launched straight at the centre of the town, were pinned down under the cliffs, and Roberts ordered the Royal Marine Commando to land in order to support them. This was a completely new task, involving passing through the town and attacking batteries on the east headland. The last minute change of plan caused utter chaos. The commanding officer had to transfer all his men from gunboats and motor boats into landing craft used in the earlier waves, and brief them on the new mission in very short order.

Many of the RMC craft were hit and disabled on the run-in. Those men that did reach the shore were either killed or captured. The commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel 'Tigger' Phillipps, seeing that the mission was suicidal, stood up on the stern of his craft and signalled to those following him that they should turn back. He was killed a few moments later.

At 11.00, under heavy fire, the withdrawal from the beaches began. It was completed by 14.00. Casualties from the raid included 3,367 Canadians killed, wounded or taken prisoner, and 275 British commandos. The Royal Navy lost one destroyer and 33 landing craft, suffering 550 dead and wounded. The RAF lost 106 aircraft to the Luftwaffe's 48. The German army casualties were 591.

Who to blame?

Claims that Mountbatten did not have authority have been discounted. Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff - the heads of the Navy, Army and Air Force, who met daily to discuss strategy and advise Churchill - were responsible for this disastrous misjudgement. But, because no written record exists of the Chiefs of Staff approving the raid in its final form, it has sometimes been suggested that it was really Mountbatten who remounted it without authorisation. This is almost certainly nonsense.

The Chiefs of Staff disliked Mountbatten, regarding him as an upstart foisted on them by Churchill, so any unauthorised action on his part would have given them the ammunition to recommend his removal. Since Mountbatten was not removed, and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir Alan Brooke, in his frank and detailed diary, makes no mention of his having exceeded his authority, it seems unlikely that Mountbatten can be accused of mounting the raid without authority.
General Brooke was in the Middle East from 1 August 1942, returning on the 24th, after the event. This was unfortunate, for, as the most forceful and intelligent of the Chiefs of Staff, had he been in Britain in the days preceding the raid, he might have persuaded Churchill to call it off.

'The disaster did point up the need for much heavier firepower in future raids.'

Much has been said since about the fact that the Dieppe raid was a necessary precursor to the great amphibious operations that were to follow, in terms of the lessons learned and experience gained. Mountbatten pursued that line all his life. But as Chief of Combined Operations, he did bear some of the responsibility for mounting the operation, so one can only comment, 'he would say that, wouldn't he?'

The disaster did point up the need for much heavier firepower in future raids. It was recognised that this should include aerial bombardment, special arrangements to be made for land armour, and intimate fire support right up to the moment when troops crossed the waterline (the most dangerous place on the beach) and closed with their objectives.

However, it did not need a debacle like Dieppe to learn these lessons. As judged by General Sir Leslie Hollis - secretary to the Chiefs of Staff Committee and deputy head of the Military Wing of the War Cabinet with direct access to Churchill - the operation was a complete failure, and the many lives that were sacrificed in attempting it were lost with no tangible result.

Find out more

Books


*Canada at Dieppe* by T Murray Hunter (Canadian War Museum, Ottawa, 1982)

*Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War: Vol 1, Six Years of War* by CP Stacey (Ottawa, 1966)

*The Commandos 1940-1946* by Charles Messenger (William Kimber, 1985)

*March Past* by Lovat, the Lord (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1978)

*The Green Beret: The Story of the Commandos 1940-1945* by Hilary St George Saunders (Michael Joseph, 1949)

*Commando* by Peter Young (Macdonald, 1970)

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Historic Figures

• Winston Churchill - http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/churchill_winston.shtml
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• World War Two Timeline -
  http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/ww2_summary_01.shtml

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• On This Day: WW2 -
  http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/themes/conflict_and_war/world_war_ii/default.stm

External Web Links

• Imperial War Museum -http://www.iwmcollections.org.uk
• Bletchley Park - http://www.bletchleypark.org.uk/

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