

# THE DIEPPE RAID (WORLD WAR II)

---

ASHWANI GUPTA

## Background

The raid on the German occupied port of Dieppe was a cross channel seaborne raid undertaken by the allied forces on 19 Aug 1942. The force levels were highest ever used for a raid with approximately 6000 soldiers, 237 ships and landing craft and 66 fighter squadrons taking part in the assault. The raid was a major failure with 60 per cent of assaulting troops killed/ wounded or captured during the six hour battle. According to the planners at British Combined Operations Headquarters, the raid provided valuable lessons in Amphibious warfare which led to development of new techniques and equipment ultimately leading to fewer casualties during Operation Overload.

1942 was a very unsuccessful year for the allied forces. The British forces had recently suffered a humiliating retreat at Dunkirk, the North African Campaign was stalled due to Rommel's counter offensive. The Americans were regrouping after the Pearl Harbour attack and were fighting a losing war in Philippines. The Russian Red Army was fighting a fight to death against the Nazi Army. It was felt that a Russian military collapse may have an adverse effect on the allied war effort. Stalin was demanding for an offensive on the west to relieve the pressure on his armies. Mass rallies held in London and New York in Apr 1942 called for an opening of a second front. These events created immense pressure on the British Chiefs of Staff to plan and execute an offensive operation on the western front with an aim to either draw the German divisions from the Russian front or

tie down the existing German troops in France to prevent reinforcement of the eastern front. Though a number of raids were planned, only the raid on Dieppe was executed with Canadian troops forming the bulk of the assaulting force.

## **Objective**

Dieppe is a fishing port situated on the northern coast of France. The town and port lie behind a one mile stretch of steep shingle beach on the mouth of River Arques. The town is overlooked east and west by headlands dominating the beach, river mouth and the harbour. The Germans had defended the town by having weapon emplacements on the highlands to provide fire support to oppose any beach landing. The beach was covered by a maze of anti-tank traps and obstacles with nests built on the slopes of the highlands.

## **Planning and Preparation**

The preparation for the raid commenced in April 1942. Codenamed Operation Rutter, the plan was to conduct a Division size raid on Dieppe and included dropping paratroopers to capture or destroy the gun positions at Verengeville and Berneval. The idea was to swiftly capture the port, destroy its facilities and defensive emplacements and then evacuate before the German troops could counter attack. Another objective was to shock the Germans and test the vulnerability of their coastal defences. As a first, tanks were to be grouped with infantry for the latter's support during the landing stage. The planners envisaged a frontal attack without aerial bombardment to achieve surprise. The attack was to be mounted from five ports between Southampton and Newhaven. Dieppe was a suitable target as it was within the range of RAF bombers. As the operation was dependent on favourable weather conditions for its success, the paratroopers were later replaced by commandoes landing from the sea and the codename changed from Rutter to Jubilee.

The Canadian troops started rehearsing for the raid in May 1942 and the target date was 04 July. As the target date approached, the weather conditions deteriorated and the raid was postponed by three days. Later, 19 August was selected as a suitable date for the raid.

## **Force Levels**

The Canadian government was keen that its troops take part in allied operations as they had been in England since 1939 and had seen little or no action. Their participation was essential for political and morale reasons. This key factor led to

the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Division forming the bulk of the assaulting force under Major General John Hamilton Roberts. The troop composition on either side was as follows:-

- Allies
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Division
  - 14 Army Tank Regiment
  - No 3 and 4 Commando
  - Detachment of 1<sup>st</sup> US Ranger Bn
  - Components of Air Defence, Artillery and Engineers
- German Troops guarding Dieppe were part of 302 Infantry Division under the command of General Konrad Haase.

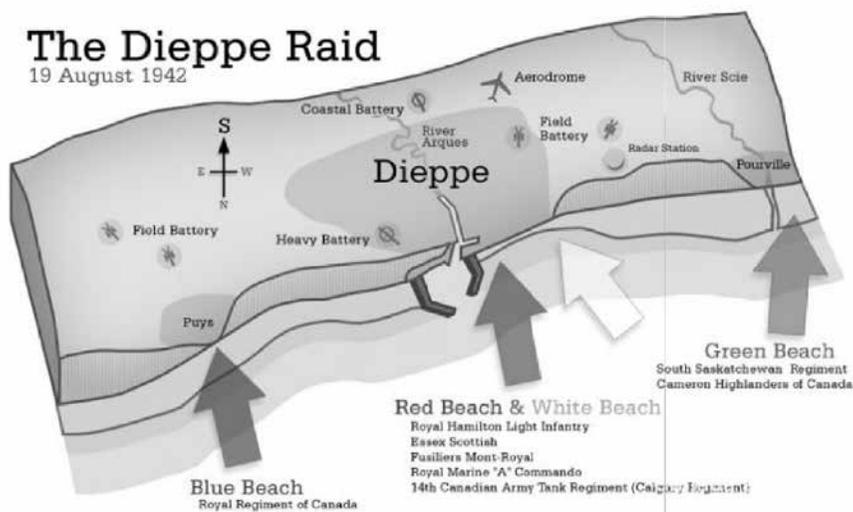
## **The Plan**

The final plan approved in May 1942 was to carry out assault landings at eight locations in the vicinity of Dieppe. The objectives assigned to allied troops were:-

- No 3 Commando was to neutralise the coastal battery at Berneval, located thirteen kms east of Dieppe.
- No 4 Commando along with a component of US Rangers was tasked to neutralise the coastal battery at Verengeville, 10 kms to the west of Dieppe.
- The units of Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> Division were the main assaulting force landing at four separate locations. Three Inf Bns were to land on east and west of the town at Puy and Pourville half an hour before the main assault to neutralise and capture the high-grounds overlooking the harbour. Simultaneously, two infantry battalions supported by armour were to land at the main beach at Dieppe to assault and destroy the port facilities and German defences. Later they were to proceed inside the town and carry out maximum destruction before withdrawing and evacuating to England.

## **The Raid**

The raid commenced on the night of 18 Aug 1942 with 237 ships with almost 6000 soldiers leaving the British coast and sailing towards Dieppe. In the early hours of 19 Aug 1942, the ships carrying No 3 Commando ran into a German convoy moving from Boulogne to Dieppe. The exchange of fire alerted the coastal defences at Berneval, and Verengeville and thus surprise was lost. No 3 Commando could land only a handful of men at Berneval which was not sufficient to neutralise the German battery. They resorted to sniping and managed to prevent effective engagement of British ships.



The soldiers of No 4 Commando were able to successfully destroy the German battery at Verengeville and withdraw suffering few casualties. The infantry battalions at Pourville, South Saskatchewan Regiment and Cameron Highlanders of Canada were able to fight their way through the light opposition but as they tried to move towards the town, they encountered heavy opposition and any further move was stalled. They failed to capture the western high ground thus increasing difficulties for the main assaulting force. The Royal Regiment of Canada also could not capture the eastern highland at Puits and the assaulting force was now subject to enfilade fire from both the highlands overlooking the main beach.

The main assault took place at 0530 hrs, half an hour later than the flanking assaults. The main assault was led by Royal Hamilton Light Infantry Battalion and Essex Scottish regiment followed by tanks of 14 Tank Regiment. The troops were subjected to heavy coordinated enfilade fire and were pinned down at the beach. Both the units lost more than half the soldiers within few minutes of the landing. The tanks could not proceed ahead due to anti tank obstacles and suffered heavy losses. At 0700 hours, the disaster was compounded when the reserve unit, Fusiliers Mont-Royal Regiment was committed due to a mistaken signal and out of 600 men 350 were killed or wounded while attempting landing on the beach. At 1050 hours, retreat signal was sounded and out of 5100 troops which landed

at Dieppe, 3648 soldiers did not return. Within hours the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian infantry Division had ceased to exist.

## **Lessons Learnt**

Though the raid was a tactical failure with great losses of men and equipment despite determined conduct on part of allies, the raid provided a number of lessons to both sides which would greatly shape the outcome of the war. The allied planners started developing new techniques and equipment based on the Dieppe experience. The major lessons of the raid were:-

- The first lesson learnt was that proper selection of target was essential for success. Dieppe had 100 to 200 feet high cliffs overlooking the main landing sites which were ideally suited for enfilade fire. Failure to capture them would impede the movement of the main assaulting force. This was aptly demonstrated at Dieppe. Also, real time intelligence was essential for any successful operation. The knowledge about the defences at Dieppe was scanty. The allies did not have information about the defences on the coast and weapon emplacements on the highlands. The tanks of 14 Tank Regiment had been practicing on sandy beaches in England, where as the main beach at Dieppe was a shingle beach and the tanks were unable to negotiate the beach as the tank tracks kept slipping on the shingles. The tanks were thus not able to assault or provide any effective covering fire and were trapped on the beach.
- The Dieppe raid demonstrated that it was near impossible to capture a port intact. Heavy ships required facilities for offloading their cargo for quick reinforcement an exploitation of battle. This led to the development of Mulberry Harbours, floating docks and PLUTO (pipeline under the ocean) both were successfully used in Normandy for offloading cargo at sea and for transportation of fuel.
- Heavy aerial and naval bombardment followed by close support fire was essential prior to any beach landing. During the Dieppe raid, only the naval guns provided covering fire for five minutes which left the troops stranded in open during the landing stage.
- The raid experience showed that it was essential to have a close cooperation between the three services for successful execution of large scale amphibious operation. The allies also carried out improvements in communication at all levels and upgraded the vital communication link for close air support.
- Development of larger and better equipped landing craft was essential for

any successful beach landing. During the Dieppe raid, many of the landing craft were made of wood offering little protection to the assaulting troops. Also, as tanks had to be ferried and landed on the beach, the Dieppe raid led to development of duplex drive tanks which had the ability to swim ashore. Another equipment developed was the Landing craft Rocket which could fire during the final run into the beach and continue firing till the landing groups had set up own artillery.

The Germans on the other hand drew dangerous conclusions from the Dieppe raid and were of the opinion that any allied offensive could be stalled by a fortified port coupled with anti-aircraft batteries and concrete defensive emplacements. This led to development of all ports in Northern France into fortified positions called the Atlantic Wall. Though the port locations were fortified, it provide little depth to the German defences and were overwhelmed during the Normandy landings by a rapid buildup of forces by the allies.

## **Conclusion**

The raid on port of Dieppe was meant to be a powerful symbol of British willingness to strike across the channel at German positions. Given the reverses suffered by allied troops in 1940 and 1941, one of the important strategic objectives was to lift the morale of British population and convey to the allies that the British could take bold decisions. The raid was a massive failure and led to heavy losses, but the allied planners were able to effectively employ the lessons learnt in the Normandy landings two years later and achieve success in liberating occupied territories and ending German resistance.

---

Col **Ashwani Gupta** is a Senior Fellow at CLAWS.