Engineer Gallantry on the Beaches of Dieppe

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Background

RUTTER becomes JUBILEE

In 1942, British operational command conceived of a combined amphibious, airborne, naval and air force assault on Dieppe, a German-occupied and fortified port on the French coast. The initial plan, Operation RUTTER, planned for a division-sized force to land, cease key facilities, destroy others, gather high value intelligence, and hold the town for two tides before withdrawing back to England. It would be supported by airborne landings, fighter support and heavy air and sea bombardment.

Operation RUTTER was cancelled in June in favour of preserving forces for the invasion of North Africa later that year, using the excuse of bad weather and leaky security. However, possibly bowing to pressure from Russia to open a Western Front, and in no small part to the urging of the Canadian government to involve Canadian troops sooner rather than later, Operation JUBILEE was resurrected from RUTTER and approved for 19 August 1942.
The Assault Force

The assault force would be centred on the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Canadian Infantry Division with support from three Royal Marine Commandos and 50 US Rangers. The main assault would be in the town itself with three infantry battalions, an armoured regiment, a specially formed engineer field company and ‘A’ Commando, Royal Marines. Three more battalions would conduct flanking attacks to the east and west of the town. The other two commandos and the Rangers were assigned specialized tasks against gun batteries and radar installations.

The assault began roughly on schedule, but disaster was never too far away. Some landing craft were lost, others floundered on obstacles, others landed in the wrong places and many were hit by enemy fire. On the beaches, accurate and concentrated enemy fire cut swaths of death through the charging ranks of the Canadians. Tanks broke down on the beach and infantry and sappers were left without the close support they needed to get off the beach and into the town. The total lack of heavy preparatory bombardment and air superiority turned the beach into an arcade game shooting gallery for the defenders.

As has been documented in countless other places, the raid was a failure. The attackers made few objectives and their losses were horrendous. For reasons for failure are perhaps more political than operational. Initial Operation RUTTER plans for massive air and naval bombardments on the town were scaled back to the paltry support of a few destroyers and fighter aircraft. This may have been done to save the lives of French civilians, and the planners held to the belief that the element of surprise would allow landing troops to overcome German defenders.

While the lack of preparatory massive fire alone was enough to doom the mission, other complicating factors such as poor command and control, faulty intelligence, and serious equipment failures added to the disaster. While wartime propagandists claim the lessons learned at Dieppe paved the way for success in Normandy, the argument is weak. By any stretch, thorough and complete staff work would not have let the raid take place without the massive preparatory fire and bombardment that preceded the Normandy Landings. Conspiracy theories abound about the real reasons the raid took place, but again the truth is clouded in a fog of secrecy, possible cover-up and the hubris of the aristocratic British high command. At home in Canada, the public only saw casualty rates and wartime security ensured the cost of the operation was never publically justified. It was a sad day for the Canadian Army, and it has been noted the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Canadian Infantry Division never fully recovered from this experience.

German Reaction

Despite the fact that Operation JUBILEE was a catastrophe, in no way was the fighting quality of the force to be questioned. The 302\textsuperscript{nd} Division, who were in contact throughout the day, reported the Canadians fought with great energy and spirit despite the highly slacked odds against them.

A report from their higher HQ 15\textsuperscript{th} Army reflected a similar view:
The enemy, almost entirely Canadian soldiers, fought - so far as he was able to fight at all - well and bravely.

**RCE Role**

**Force Selection**

Planning for the Dieppe Raid started months before under the auspices of Operation RUTTER. As a primary goal of the raid included the destruction of enemy defence works in the port, aerodrome facilities at St. Aubin, radio direction finding stations, power stations, dock and rail facilities, and petrol dumps near the town, sappers would be a key component. The demolitions programme, coupled with the engineer implications of an assault-landing over open beaches, provided a sufficient attraction for any group of sappers — let alone a group more than a little bored with repetitive construction and endless maintenance in England.

The first step was to assemble a capable Engineer component for the Raid. In May, detachments totaling over 350 all ranks were drawn from 2nd Divisional Engineers – 7th Field Company provided the largest sapper element and the rest came from the 2nd Field Company (about 100), the 11th Field Company (about 65) and the 1st Field Park Company (about 25). Interestingly, soldiers from the 7th, 11th and 1st were almost all from South-Western Ontario.

In all, there were 12 officers. The RCE were divided into two main groups: the Beach Assault Party (under Major Bert Sucharov) and the Demolition Party (under Lieutenant-Colonel L. F. Barnes). The Beach Assault Party was responsible for getting men, stores, vehicles and equipment off the landing craft, over the beaches and back on the landing craft for the return to England. The larger Demolition Party was responsible for mine clearance and the many demolition tasks in the town and beyond. The parties were then subdivided into various sized detachments and squads depending on their tasks. Men, equipment and stores were then distributed throughout the Tank Landing Crafts (TLCs).

Selection required men with a range of sapper skills and high levels of strength and fitness. They all had to complete a forced march carrying 60-load loads and then complete their required sapper tasks, along with those of the other men in the party. In addition, they had to be as skilled as any infantryman in battle drills and weaponry. Every engineer party would be small and would have to operate almost independently, so every man had to learn every job in

‘Blitz Buggy’ jeep loaded with high explosives for the sappers to breach the Dieppe wall. Most of the engineers were killed or wounded before they got to that point. Note the chespaling under the wheels. (Dieppe: Tragedy to Triumph, BGen Denis Whitaker)
his assigned party. As there would be little or no duplication-or reinforcement after the assault was launched, even a single casualty could easily put a particular group out of action if the men were not versatile and the organisation agile.

**Demolition and Mobility**

Training and preparation started immediately and it was intense. This was the first operation of this type for the Canadians and many of the tactics and procedures had to be worked out from scratch. Using intelligence summaries, lists of targets and obstacles were prepared. Trials and experiments determined the best way to complete tasks. Demolition targets would be attacked with explosives, fire and simple sledge-hammers.

For one of the first times in the war, hollow shaped charges to concentrate the punch of the explosion and give deep penetration would be used. Trials showed that three well-placed 60-pound conical charges could blow a gap in the seawall more than wide enough for a Churchill tank. A similar technique used lighter, thirty-three pound charges. Each sapper could carry two such devices that were hooked together in a chain and hung from the top of the wall. Once the charge was blown, a tank could get through the breach in about a minute. In all cases, it was assumed that the sappers placing the charges would be protected by covering fire from infantry and tanks – this did not happen as planned.

The unit trained on beaches similar to Dieppe’s shore. Full-scale target mock-ups were built. The largest was a mock-up of the Colbert Swing Bridge that crossed the entrance to Dieppe’s inner harbour. This job had to be completed in less than three hours with a minimum of stores. A crew of 25 men was selected to place 300 pounds of explosive totalling 82 individual charges, run a 600-foot firing circuit, all the time providing their own covering party, in one hour. Remember, almost all tools and stores had to be transported on the men’s backs.

The loose gravel on Dieppe’s beaches would slow tanks and wheeled vehicles. Similar to snow fencing in construction, but more robust and wider, chespaling could be used to build trackways over the unstable beach gravel for tracked and wheeled vehicles. It could be laid in single or double layers as necessary. As originally designed, four sappers would land with each tank and manually pull the chespaling out in front of the tank’s tracks.

Maj Sucharov and his team developed a way to attach chespaling rolls to the tanks that could be rolled out by the crew without using sappers. The chespaling rig could be jettisoned from the tank after use with an explosive circuit. When needed, a full roll of chespaling could be dropped against the seawall allowing the tank to drive up and over the 28-inch barrier. For higher parts of the seawall, sappers were trained and prepared to build timber cribs and ramps. Each ramp needed up to five tons of timber and thirty men to assemble it. The task would be complete in under five minutes.

**The Landings**

Engineer parties, stores and equipment were cross-loaded on the landing craft according to assigned roles. The landings varied from meeting the planning objectives to completely missing the mark. Only one-half of the embarked sappers landed on the beach. The remainder were stopped by enemy fire or underwater obstacles. Many were wounded on the boats. Some sappers manned anti-aircraft guns when the Navy crews were killed.
On the beach, the sappers acquitted themselves far beyond expectation. When leaders were taken out of action, subordinates stepped up. In one case, a sapper sergeant took control of an infantry platoon and while no able to complete his task, was able to complete others including destroying enemy strong points and weapons. Other sapper parties found themselves unable to move from the beach and spent their time defending themselves and finding protection for the wounded. The sappers suffered 85% casualties that day – the worst of any unit. Of the 71 assault sappers who landed, only ten returned to England and only eight of 98 sappers from the demolition teams returned. In all, 27 died on the beaches, in the boats, later in hospital or in captivity.

**Gallantry**

As one would expect, after all the training and preparation, all RCE fought bravely at Dieppe. The following were singled out for specific recognition and were awarded decorations for their actions that day. Similar actions of others have more than likely gone unrecognised in the fog of war as will be seen when reading these stories:

- Lance Sergeant George Alfred Hickson, DCM
- Lance Corporal W.W. Sinasac, DCM
- Lieutenant William Alexander Ewener, MC
- Lieutenant John Edward Rogers Wood, MC
- Lance Sergeant Trower, MM
- Acting Sergeant Skippon, MM
- Lance Corporal John Molyneax Fisher, MM
- Lieutenant William Alexander Millar, MiD