

***‘Hell has many different names’*: The raids on St. Nazaire and Dieppe, 1942.**

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The fall of France in June 1940 transformed Britain’s strategic situation. It meant that amphibious operations, a form of warfare that had received very little priority to date, would become increasingly important. Such operations provided the only means of returning Allied armies to mainland Europe. As a result the British adopted two parallel and complementary approaches to amphibious warfare. In the long run the most important of these was the development of the equipment and techniques that would be required to conduct major landings against sophisticated opposition in Europe. The culmination of this remarkable process was seen on the beaches of Normandy on 6 June 1944 when over two thousand landing ships and landing craft, supported by seven battleships, 23 cruisers, 80 fleet destroyers and hundreds of smaller naval vessels, successfully landed 132,200 Allied troops by sea despite intense German opposition.¹ The other approach, most evident in the period up to and including 1942, was the conduct of a series of amphibious raids designed to exploit Allied sea control by attacking enemy troops and installations along their long seaboard. Such activity was designed to harass the enemy and to force them to divert troops to defend the coast and also to boost morale at home and abroad at a time when little seemed to be going right for the Allies. It was also hoped that experience during raids would allow the British to test equipment and techniques that were novel and, as yet, unproven in battle. The same, of course, initially applied to most of the troops that would be employed in such raids.

Most raids were designed to target the enemy away from their main positions of strength, hitting them where and when they did not expect it and then withdrawing before superior force could be brought to bear. The raids on the Lofoton Islands (March 1941), on

¹ S.W. Roskill, *The War at Sea 1939-1945. Vol. 3, Part 2. The Offensive*, (London: HMSO, 1961) p.19.

Vaagso (December 1941) and Bruneval (February 1942) provide good examples. On two occasions, in 1942, major commando raids were conducted against enemy positions that were known to be held in considerable strength. The first, Operation *Chariot*, involved an attack on the port of St. Nazaire on the French Atlantic coast. The second, Operation *Jubilee*, was the largest amphibious raid of the war and was directed against the minor port of Dieppe on the French Channel coast. *Chariot* was a success whereas *Jubilee* was a failure, notwithstanding a degree of success on the part of the No. 3 and No. 4 Commandos to the east and west of the town, respectively. Both operations provide a useful example of the dangers and difficulties of amphibious operations and also of the value of commando training and the commando 'ethos' that allowed these soldiers to prevail in the most challenging of circumstances.

In 1942 St. Nazaire housed the only dry dock on the French Atlantic coast that was large enough to accommodate the German battleship *Tirpitz*. Incapacitating this dock would make it impossible for the Germans to repair their premier battleship should this vessel suffer serious damage in any future sortie into the Atlantic sea lanes. RAF bombing failed to destroy this facility and hence it was decided to conduct an amphibious raid to destroy the dock gates, rendering the site inoperable. As a result, in the early hours of the morning on 28 March 1942 the old American built lend-lease destroyer HMS *Campbeltown*, disguised as a German vessel and accompanied by a flotilla of wooden motor launches (MLs), penetrated the harbour of St. Nazaire despite strong enemy defences. These vessels carried just over 600 sailors and commandos. Together they were to brave fierce resistance in order to achieve their objective. The primary damage was achieved by ramming the massive dock gates with *Campbeltown* which was packed with explosives on a delayed time charge. When, rather later than expected, the charge detonated, the gates were destroyed, rendering the dry dock inoperable. Further damage was created by commando demolition teams embarked in the destroyer and its accompanying MLs who had the task of destroying winding gear, pumping stations and other similar facilities. Of the 18 ships and craft that entered the harbour only 5 made it back to Britain, with the majority of the raiders either dead, wounded or captured. The novel and dramatic nature of the attack on St. Nazaire, the outstanding courage of the

raiders, and the ultimate success of the operation all combined to make Operation *Chariot* something of a classic commando raid, celebrated in numerous books and inspiring (loosely) the feature films *The Gift Horse* (1952) and *Attack on the Iron Coast* (1968). In their staff history of the war, written in 1956, Combined Operations HQ noted the value of the raid in rendering the dock unusable and also its value in providing ‘*an uplift of morale to our forces and the country as a whole*’.² The uplift was not entirely universal. Dr David Paton, a medical officer with No. 2 Commando, recalled that when the remnants of the unit mustered for a parade and marched through Ayr immediately after the operation ‘*the women in layers stood in the streets and wept. Terrible thing to see*’.³ Of the 400 men who had left Ayr for *Chariot* only 16 were available for the parade.

Operation *Jubilee*, the raid on Dieppe on 18 August, was a different type of operation. Far from being a small commando type raid it involved an entire division, the 2nd Canadian Division, supported by elements of three Commando units. It was the only raid in which tanks were employed, 58 in all, although only 29 were actually landed. The whole force was transported in 253 ships and craft. The raid, eventually planned to last for the duration of one tide, was designed to seize and briefly hold Dieppe, despite the known presence there of significant German defences. The reasons for conducting the raid, and for pursuing with *Jubilee* after an earlier plan, operation *Rutter*, had been cancelled, remains an issue of major controversy.⁴ It is usually presented as a ‘reconnaissance in force’, designed to test assault techniques and equipment in addition to providing some support to the hard pressed Soviet Union, partly by forcing the Luftwaffe in France to engage the RAF, providing an opportunity for the latter to inflict significant attrition on them. The result was nothing short of a disaster. The 2nd Canadian Division was shattered. On one beach, at Pourville to the west of Dieppe, the South Saskatchewan Regiment and the Cameron Highlanders of Canada secured their beach and penetrated a limited way inland before eventually being withdrawn under fire. At the beach on the eastern flank, however, the Royal Regiment of Canada was virtually wiped

² *History of the Combined Operations organisation 1940-1945*, (London: Amphibious Warfare Headquarters, 1956) p.86.

³ Dr David Paton, Tape 1083T. Second World War Experience Centre archive.

⁴ For a particularly strident view on this see Brian Villa, *Unauthorised Action. Mountbatten and the Dieppe Raid*, (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1989)

out with only a handful of men penetrating the headland, to little effect. Famously, the main assault on the beach directly in front of Dieppe town foundered in the face of stiff German opposition, with only a handful of tanks and troops getting beyond the shingle beach, an area that rapidly became a deadly killing zone.

‘These men were ready to have a go at anything.’

One of the features of amphibious raids was that they generally called for military skills that were beyond those that could be expected of the average soldier in a conscript army. This was reflected in the nature of the Commando units raised from 1940, that consisted entirely of picked volunteers who were subjected to the most arduous training. The result was units and individuals that were truly elite. Peter Young, who was responsible for recruiting his own Troop in the newly formed No. 3 Commando, described his men as follows, *‘The great majority of our men were reservists, who had served seven years with the colours, mostly in India. Their average age was about twenty-six, and they were well-trained, keen, professional soldiers in the prime of life. They knew their weapons, had seen some fighting and wanted more’*. This conclusion that *‘these men were ready to have a go at anything’* was born out by his own experience at Dieppe.⁵

At St. Nazaire, the difficulty of landing and then re-embarking troops from MLs seriously undermined the planned action ashore. It did not stop the commandos, in small groups or even on their own, from pursuing their objectives. Captain Micky Burn of No. 2 Commando was one of only two men to get ashore from his ML. Continuing on to his objective regardless, he was eventually joined by one other individual, Major Bill Copeland, the unit second in command. Burn spent a few confused hours ashore, occasionally running into and engaging German patrols, before eventually being taken prisoner.⁶ His experience was not unusual with commandos separated from their comrades, fighting at night in the built-up area of the port. One of Burn’s compatriots in No. 2 Commando, Lt Bill ‘Tiger’ Watson, recalled that after an hour ashore *‘...I felt that*

⁵ Peter Young, *Storm from the Sea*, (London: Greenhill Books, 1958) pp.15+20.

⁶ Michael Burn 1376/1377. Second World War Experience Centre archive

nothing I had tried to do had gone right.’ Having decided to head back to his ML to re-embark he was faced with a unpromising sight ‘*When we saw the river before us, we stopped, appalled. The surface of the water was lit up brightly by sheets of flaming petrol while thick, oily, black smoke rose above the flickering glow. A few blackened hulks, some still smouldering redly along the waterline, were all that remained of the M.L.s to take us home.*’ Undeterred, he returned to the fray and engaged in what he describes as ‘*a lethal game of cowboys and indians*’ fighting the Germans at close quarters before, like so many of his comrades, being wounded and then captured.⁷

The only real bright spots in the entire operation at Dieppe were the actions by No. 4 and No. 3 Commandos on the western and eastern flanks, respectively. These units were both tasked with silencing German artillery batteries that otherwise might be able to fire on the ships and craft offshore. No. 4 Commando, under Lord Lovat, was entirely successful, destroying their battery of six 150-mm guns in dashing style, including a bayonet charge, at a cost of 45 casualties from a party of 252.⁸ On the eastern flank No.3 Commando was less fortunate. On their run-in to Dieppe their flotilla ran into an armed German coastal convoy and in the ensuing engagement, for which their accompanying destroyer was self-indulgently absent, it suffered numerous casualties and was badly scattered. Only seven landing craft made it in, six at ‘Yellow 1’ where the troops were pinned down a short distance from the beach and one at ‘Yellow 2’ where 19 commandos under Major Peter Young were landed by Lt H.T. Buckee RNVR. Despite their paucity of numbers, and a lack of heavy weapons, Young and his commandos proceeded to attack the German battery, sniping the artillery positions and effectively suppressing their fire until they ran short of ammunition and withdrew back to the beach where Buckee was able to collect them.⁹

⁷ W.H. Watson, Tape 2851. Second World War Experience Centre archive

⁸ See Stephen Prince, ‘The raids on St. Nazaire and Dieppe’ in Tristan Lovering (ed.), *Amphibious Assault. Manoeuvre from the Sea*, (Rendlesham: Seafarer Books, 2007) pp.1123-144 and Peter Young., *Commando*, (London: Pan Books, 1969) pp.128-153 and John Durnford-Slater, *Commando*, (London: Greenhill Books, 1991) chapter 7.

⁹ Young, *Strom from the Sea*, chapter 4.

In both operations the commandos displayed courage, initiative and a determination to succeed whatever the odds, demonstrated outstandingly by the actions of Major Young and his men who engaged a position designed to be taken by an entire unit. This was a result of selection, training and prior experience. Sergeant Major Dunning, of No. 4 Command, recalled training *'very, very hard'* in the weeks prior to the operation. Lord Lovat had decided that he would take to Dieppe only the very best of what was already an elite unit, taking four Troops instead of the entire Commando. In Dunning's words *'no lame ducks, no passengers. Anybody who wasn't up to scratch or had say small injury of any sort was replaced from the other two troops. So there we were. Four troops. Very well trained.'* As Lovat's party in the raid would need to advance a mile inland before reaching his objective he had his troops run a mile in full kit every morning before breakfast.¹⁰ In his 1969 history of the Commandos Peter Young acknowledged the success of No.4 Commando's action, ascribing the secret of this success to *'...meticulous planning, training and briefing, relentless yet imaginative leadership, and first-class weapon training, the foundation of that self-confidence which is the backbone of courage.'*¹¹ Some historians have contrasted the commando's ruthless determination to succeed with the performance of the inexperienced Canadian troops at Dieppe who, it is argued, went to ground rather quickly and were disinclined to get up again.¹² Such comparisons are probably unfair. On most of their beaches the Canadians faced difficulties that may have been insurmountable even by experienced elite troops. It is worthwhile to recall that at 'Yellow 1' beach on the easternmost flank the assaulting commandos were pinned down and could not replicate Peter Young's success at 'Yellow 2'. One veteran of Yellow 1, George Peel, put it succinctly, *'quite frankly it was the biggest cock up you have ever seen in your life. It should never have happened, but there it was'*. He recalled *'a couple of hours'* ashore that were *'just a massacre. Absolute massacre'*. It is a little difficult to dispute his overall conclusion that *'it was a most unfortunate enterprise and best forgotten'*.¹³ Not even commandos are bullet proof.

¹⁰ Major James Dunning, Tape 1624/1627. Second World War Experience Centre archive

¹¹ Young, *Commando*, p.145.

¹² For example, see M.R.D. Foot, 'Dieppe. Triumph out of disaster' in *History Today*, Vol.42, Issue 8, 1992. and Brereton Greenhaus, *Dieppe, Dieppe*, (Montreal: Art Global, 1992).

¹³ George Peel, Tape 1372. Second World War Experience Centre archive.

‘So that’s where we’ve been’

Raiders returning to tranquil Britain immediately after intense combat could often find the experience a little disconcerting. Dr David Paton was embarked on one of the few MLs to make it home from St. Nazaire. He had an eventful return trip, being attacked twice by German aircraft. On arrival at Falmouth the survivors in his craft booed the RAF ambulance crews that attended them as *‘They all felt like me that the RAF had completely let us down’*. To complete what had been a rather difficult day, as he was dealing with the ambulance crews and transferring wounded personnel Paton encountered a *‘beautifully starched’* VAD nurse who, after informing him that he could not speak to the surgeons because they were having breakfast, admonished him for not having shaved!¹⁴ After *Jubilee* Marine Jack Brewin returned to the UK in a rather battered and bullet ridden landing craft with many wounded onboard, only to be forced to wait outside Newhaven overnight because the harbour boom defence had been drawn across. When asked by a newspaper reporter what he thought of Dieppe. He replied simply, *‘ “So that’s where we’ve been.” How ridiculous that most have sounded to him. But the name meant nothing to me. Hell has many different names.’*¹⁵

‘A naval version of the charge of the light brigade’

Britain had started the war with almost no specialist amphibious ships and craft. By 1942 a variety of new designs had been developed and an ever increasing number of vessels were entering service. However, throughout the war amphibious ships and craft remained in short supply and, in any case, by their very nature they involved design compromises between protection, landing characteristics, speed and sea keeping. At both St. Nazaire and Dieppe the nature of some of the craft employed had a deleterious impact on the life expectancy of their crew and the troops that they carried.

¹⁴ Dr David Paton, Tape 1083T. Second World War Experience Centre archive.

¹⁵ Paul Lund and Harry Ludnam, *The War of the Landing Craft*, (London: Foulsham, 1976) p.59

For Operations *Chariot* the embarked military force was divided between HMS *Campbeltown* and 16 Motor Launches (MLs). Unlike conventional landing craft, the latter had the speed and range for a return trip to St. Nazaire, when fitted with extra-fuel tanks. Unfortunately they were singularly unsuited to surviving the hostile environment of an enemy port bristling with guns of all calibres. Wooden, unarmoured and equipped with spare fuel (petrol) tanks on deck their fate was perhaps inevitable. Describing the MLs as ‘*death traps*’ in retrospect Mickey Burns considered the decision to use these boats as ‘*disgraceful*’. However, in a classic illustration of the commando soldier’s attitude to danger, he noted that ‘*at the time we didn’t think much, we just thought “oh well, that’s it...its all they’ve got. We’ve got to do it and that’s it”*’.¹⁶ Eric de la Tour, a member of one of the demolition teams from No.3 Commando, survived the sinking of his ML and, while clinging to a life raft with his comrades, listened to a sailor singing the hymn ‘Oh God our help in ages past’ as men died around him and as they tried to steer the raft between lakes of ignited fuel on the surface of the water. De la Tour, like Burns, ‘Tiger’ Watson and many others were picked up by the Germans and, despite numerous escape attempts, spent the remainder of the war in a prisoner of war camp.¹⁷

In common with Operation *Chariot*, the choice of some of the landing craft employed for *Jubilee* has been criticised. In addition to the steel and (partially) armoured Landing Craft, Assault (LCA) and Landing Craft, Tank (LCT) a number of unarmoured ply-wood Landing Craft, Personnel, Large (LCP(L)), derived from the famous American ‘Higgins boats’, were employed. The British built LCAs were more suited to a head-on assault against a defended position, but, unlike the LCPs, lacked the range to conduct a cross-channel assault. They required a mother ship to carry them to the assault area. Unfortunately, there were not enough of these craft available for the Dieppe raid, a situation compounded when two such carrier ships were damaged in the Solent by

¹⁶ Michael Burn 1376/1377. Second World War Experience Centre archive

¹⁷ Eric de la Tour, Tape 1665/1666. Second World War Experience Centre archive

German aircraft prior to the raid. Thus, five LCP flotillas were detailed to take part in the operation.¹⁸

Colin Kitching was serving as a Sub-Lieutenant RNVR in a flotilla of these craft at the time of the raid. He was with the 4th Flotilla which, along with the 5th, had the Canadian Fusiliers Mont-Royal embarked. This unit was held in reserve and thus he spent the early part of the day cruising off Dieppe, peering into the smoke and gunfire that shrouded the town. His account of their run-in to the beach, to reinforce a landing that was already going awry, provides an insight into the dangers facing landing craft crew and soldiers alike:

We sailors felt particularly sorry for our excellent Fusiliers Mont Royal . They – about 25 to a boat – had been cooped up in a narrow foetid compartment, with no room to move, since 8 o'clock the previous evening: their only bonus was that the crossing had been smooth. So it was a relief to them and to us when at 7.00am we were ordered to land....

Under heavy shellfire the 26 boats of the two Flotillas performed an elaborate manoeuvre which got us into the perfect line abreast...We were soon engulfed in the enormous cloud of smoke. Suddenly we emerged to find ourselves close to – of all places – Dieppe's central promenade beach. The gunfire intensified: apart from shells from the headlands we now had mortar bombs, together with machine gunning from the hotels at the back of the promenade. The sheer din was unbelievable, added to by my coxswain who was enjoying himself with the Lewis gun right above my head. Our line abreast formation held magnificently: by now the soldiers were crouching on the decks of the LCPs, ready for the touchdown but beginning to suffer casualties...

¹⁸ Colin Kitching, Tape 1537/1538. Second World War Experience Centre archive

At our end of the line the touch-down went well, though the 5th Flotilla ran out of beach under the cliff and could not land everyone dry-shod. My soldiers hit the shingle beach quickly, led by their Lieutenant who, I was sad to see, crumpled up no more than a dozen strides away. The general scene on the beach was appalling.¹⁹

The main assault had gone in at 0520 and the Fusiliers Mont-Royal were sent in at 0700. By 0900 the Force Commanders offshore had realised the hopelessness of the situation ashore and planned a withdrawal for 1100. Lt. Kitching and his comrades, waiting in their vulnerable LCPs, contemplated the risks associated with returning to the fire swept beaches to try and pick up survivors. The two flotillas had already lost five boats and, out of 104 officers and ratings who had set out, 21 were dead and nine wounded. He ascribes the high proportion of killed to wounded as being because ‘...*a direct shell hit on a flimsy LCP loaded with high octane petrol resulted in the boat being blown apart*’. Kitching was unimpressed both with the raid and with the decision to employ LCPs, describing the whole thing as ‘*a naval version of the charge of the light brigade*’.²⁰ Fortunately, just as the LCPs prepared for an operation they considered to be suicidal, the order came to stand down. The dangers of employing these craft had been appreciated and armoured LCAs employed instead. Only around 368 men were recovered from the main beach, although 600 were saved from Pourville to the west.

‘The blackest day in Canadian military history’

Commando operations did not necessarily involve high casualties. The successful raid on the radar station at Bruneval, for example, resulted in only one man killed and seven missing.²¹ However, hitting an enemy strong-point head-on, even when in disguise and seeking to exploit the element of surprise as at St. Nazaire, is always likely to result in high losses. The historian Stephen Prince has pointed out that at St. Nazaire out of an

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bernhard Fergusson, *The Watery Maze. The Story of Combined Operations*, (London: Collins, 1961) pp.131-132.

assault force of 630, 144 were killed, a far higher proportion than the 195 killed out of 1,780 men who assaulted Zeebrugge in 1918. When one also considers wounded, missing and captured then the casualty figures for the raid are 55% for the Royal Navy component and 80% for the commandos, the majority being captured. This was a very heavy price indeed. However, as Prince notes, ‘...*the success in the main objective, coupled with the daring nature and limited scale of the operation, meant this loss was not seen as controversial or disproportionate.*’²² The operation was costly, but not to an unprecedented or an unacceptable degree. It is worth remembering that during the *Bismarck*’s brief sortie into the Atlantic in May 1941 it had sunk HMS *Hood*, leaving only three survivors from a company of 1419 men, ten times the fatal casualties suffered by the British during *Chariot*. Discouraging the *Tirpitz* from undertaking a similar break-out may indeed have been worthwhile.

Operation *Jubilee* was even more costly. The Allies suffered 4,260 casualties overall. Of the 4,963 Canadian troops who embarked, 907 died during or as a result of the operation, 2460 were taken prisoner and 2210 returned home, many of whom were wounded.²³ Eric Maguire describes 18 August 1942 as the ‘*blackest day in Canadian military history*’.²⁴ Total German casualties were only 591. It was hard to justify such heavy losses in terms of the operational return. It was difficult for the Allies to portray the operation as anything other than a defeat, despite hugely over-inflated claims of German aircraft losses. In truth even the air battle went badly, with 106 Allied aircraft lost compared to only 48 German. It is frequently claimed that it was a success insofar as the lessons learned played an important role in preparations for Operations Overlord two years later. Alternately, one might argue that nothing was learnt that was not already known, or could not have been discovered through training and exercises. In terms of raising Allied morale and diverting German resources the raid was clearly a failure.

Conclusion

²² Prince, ‘St.Nazaire and Dieppe’ p.130

²³ See Greenhous, *Dieppe, Dieppe*,

²⁴ Eric Maguire, *Dieppe: August 19* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963) p.11.

After Dieppe there were no more big raids. Minor raids continued to be conducted, including Operation Frankton, the famous 'Cockleshell Heroes' raid on Bordeaux by canoeists in December 1942. However, after *Jubilee* the emphasis shifted towards preparations for major assaults, in which commandos would continue to play a part, alongside the conventional army. In a paper of this length it is possible only to touch on some aspects of the commando experience. At St. Nazaire and at Dieppe they faced some of their toughest tests, and came out with credit. When called upon to meet challenges and dangers far beyond the norm they proved their worth. Anyone with an interest in such matters should consider consulting the excellent archives at the Second World War Experience Centre to get a real feel for what these men endured and what they achieved.