

Veterans salute 60th anniversary of Dieppe

Royal Hamilton Light Infantry lost 197 men in iron-coast raid

BY MARK NEWMAN
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Stan Darch will have much to think about on Sunday.

The west mountain resident is scheduled to take the official salute when Royal Hamilton Light Infantry veterans gather outside their Barton Street club at 1 p.m. on Aug. 18 to commemorate the 60th anniversary of Dieppe, a Second World War raid that would claim the lives of about 900 Canadians, including 197 members of the RHLI.

"I still get flash-backs," said Mr. Darch, who was a 22-year-old private with the RHLI when they stormed the beach on the French coast just after sunrise on Aug. 19, 1942.

He recalls the horror of seeing dozens of young Canadian soldiers cut to pieces by German fire as they stepped from their landing crafts.

"When I first came home from overseas I used to wake up screaming in the middle of the night," said Mr. Darch, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. "It scared the living daylight out of my mother."

Mr. Darch will be attending one of many 60th anniversary services that are being held across the country this week.

In Dieppe, Frank Volterman, a medical sergeant with the RHLI during the raid, and his three children will join a group of RHLI veterans and others at official ceremonies hosted by the French city.

Nearly 5,000 of the approximately 6,100 troops that participated in the raid were Canadian. About 2,000 Canadians were taken prisoner.

Other Canadian troops at Dieppe included: the Essex Scottish (Windsor), Royal Canadian Regiment (Toronto), Cameron Highlanders (Winnipeg), South Saskatchewan Regiment, Les Fusiliers Mont Royal, Calgary Tank Regiment, Black Watch (Montreal), Regiment de Masionneuve (Montreal), Calgary Highlanders and Toronto Scottish.

Dieppe has been described as the bloodiest nine hours in Canadian military history. It has been referred to as either a total disaster or a tragic failure that taught the allies valuable lessons that were later applied to the Normandy invasion in June 1944 (ie. more troops, larger guns, co-ordinated air cover, better communications and the element of

surprise).

"A lot of lessons were learned," said Mr. Darch, who believes lives were spared at Normandy thanks to the sacrifice at Dieppe. "But it should not have happened the way it did."

Canadian Lt. General Harry Crerar, who had lobbied for Canadian participation at Dieppe, suggested that had the raid been a success, the allies would have tried an invasion much sooner than June 1944, and that he felt, would have been a disaster.

Mr. Volterman points his finger at British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

"Churchill accomplished what he wanted to do," said Mr. Volterman, who believes the British PM felt it was too soon to mount an invasion and that the Dieppe raid was staged to support his argument.

"It had to fail to prove his point," Mr. Volterman said.

In the spring of 1942, the war was not going well for the allies.

Hitler's forces had conquered most of Europe and were moving deep into Russia.

The United States and Russia were pressuring the British to stage a full-scale invasion of the continent as soon as possible. Russia in particular was feeling the wrath of the Nazis at this point and its leader, Joseph Stalin, desperately wanted the allies to open a second front in the west. Stalin felt an invasion would force the Germans to shift some of their troops from the east to meet the invasion thus taking some of the heat off his battered troops.

In the face of this pressure the British reluctantly agreed not to have a full-scale invasion, but rather conduct a raid along the coast of France. A raid they felt would placate the Americans and the Russians.

A successful raid would also boost morale amongst the public, where there had been growing support for an attack from the west.

Meanwhile, members of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, including the RHLI, were growing bored and tired. Many had been in Britain since 1940 and were getting weary of the countless hours of training they were being put through. They wanted to get into the fight.

"We were on maneuvers all the time," Mr. Darch noted. "We were getting bored and morale was getting low. We were over here, what the hell are we doing here, let's get some action."

The allied command had agreed to stage a raid on the coastal town of Dieppe during the first week of July 1942. In May the Canadians were sent to the Isle of Wight off the south coast of Britain to prepare for what was code-named Operation Rutter.

"They sent us over to the Isle of Wight for seven weeks of intensive commando training," Mr. Darch recalled. "Around the fourth of July they put us on board ships and said we're going to Dieppe. Everybody cheered, we were going to see action."

But poor weather conditions prevented the raiding force from making the 113 kilometre (70-mile) channel crossing. Then on July 7, flying low to avoid detection by radar, a group of German aircraft came out of the clouds and strafed the decks of the allied ships holding the Canadians at the Isle of Wight. The raid was cancelled.

If the commanders wanted to keep the July raid a secret, they failed.

Mr. Volterman found that out when he returned to Britain to visit some friends right after the raid was cancelled.

"When I walked in the door (they said) you were going to Dieppe, weren't you?" he recalled. "Everybody knew."

It was not reassuring for what was to come.

The Americans and the Russians continued to press the British for an attack with the U.S. threatening to pull out of the war with Germany unless some action was taken.

With no time to train new troops or pick a new target, plans for the Dieppe raid were revived for mid August. This time the raid was code-named Jubilee.

The Canadians resumed exercises in Britain, then on Aug. 18 they were put on trucks and taken down to the coast and put on ships.

Mr. Darch recalled the worried looks on some of the faces when the soldiers were told they were going back to Dieppe.

"I thought to myself, oh oh, we're in trouble," Mr. Darch said. "When British commandos abort a raid they never go back to the same place. We went back. (I thought) we were going to get the living daylight kicked out of us."

At the time Lt. General Bernard Montgomery, who was involved with the planning for Rutter, suggested the Dieppe raid be shelved permanently. Montgomery was not part of the Jubilee planning and was about to be shipped off to north Africa where he would gain notoriety during the Second World War.

In addition, the topography on the Isle of Wight, where the Canadians had trained in May, was supposed to be similar to what existed at Dieppe, which according to some intelligence reports was not heavily guarded. In reality, the situation was the opposite.

Dieppe was in fact a heavily-fortified, camouflaged battle station with 50 field and coastal guns (including 150 millimetre guns), dozens of concrete pillboxes, several kilometres of barbed wire and high cliffs.

The Germans had also noticed the activity around the Isle of Wight in May and suspecting an attack was imminent, moved additional troops into France, Holland and Belgium.

In the book *Dieppe, Tragedy to Triumph* (McGraw-Hill Ryerson) Denis Whitaker, who was a captain with the RHLI at Dieppe, suggests Prime Minister Churchill and the British high command must have known about the beefed-up forces at Dieppe prior to the raid.

"They must have known that the Dieppe assault forces would be outnumbered and, in terms of experience, out-classed by the German defenders. They would encounter beaches that were heavily fortified and strongly defended by an enemy force whose ability to counter-attack was terrifying."

Further, he noted: "No wonder the commander of the German 81 Corps was baffled that the British so underestimated his defences. Such chaos at intelligence-sharing and evaluating could not have occurred in the disciplined Wehrmacht rank."

During the early morning hours of Aug. 19, 237 ships carrying 4,961 members of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division along with 1,057 British commandos and 50 U.S. rangers set off from Southampton, Portsmouth, Shoreham and Newhaven.

British commandos were slated to land several kilometres to the east and west of Dieppe near Varengeville and Berneval. The Black Watch was to land outside Dieppe near Puits to the west and the South Saskatchewan Regiment and the Cameron Highlanders were to hit the beach on the east side near Pourville.

The flank attack troops were scheduled to land first, scale the heights and take out the big guns sitting above the beach before the main assault force arrived.

Heading into the teeth of the Dieppe fortress were the RHLL, Essex Scottish, Les Fusiliers Mont Royal and the Calgary Tank Regiment.

The goal of the raid was to surprise the Germans by landing under the cover of darkness, move several kilometres inland, occupy the town, destroy German defenses and radar installations, blow up power stations, fuel dumps and dock and raid stations, seize documents and take prisoners.

On board one of the mother ships that was ferrying troops to the middle of the channel where they would board smaller assault crafts, Sgt. Volterman was putting together first-aid packages when one of his lance corporals had a frightening premonition.

"Suddenly he starts sort of half crying and I said what's the matter and he said 'sergeant, I'm going to be the first one to get it, I can feel it in my bones,'" said Mr. Volterman, who added the corporal's fears were realized shortly after he stepped on the beach. "I was only about two feet behind him and he got a direct hit by a mortar three minutes after we landed."

Mr. Volterman, who was knocked into the air by the blast, also suffered shrapnel wounds to his neck and the left shoulder of his tunic was torn to pieces.

Around 3:47 a.m., an hour prior to the start of the assault, the allied flotilla ran into a convoy of German ships and a battle ensues. The element of surprise has vanished and coastal defences have

been alerted, but the assault troops are not called back, the raid continues.

Things now go from bad to worse on the 16 kilometre-wide front.

Due to a mix up during the channel crossing, many of the troops are late in landing, the darkness is gone. In broad daylight they finally arrive at their target. Dozens are cut down as soon as they hit the beach. Others never make it to shore.

A key part of the raid plan called for the coastal installations to be pounded by sea and air to soften them up prior to the landing. But other than a brief bombardment, there was little cover for the RHLL and Essex Scottish when they reached the Dieppe shore.

In Dieppe, Tragedy to Triumph (McGraw-Hill Ryerson) Denis Whitaker recalled the terror his troops felt as their assault craft approached the beach.

"We looked at one another. Something was terribly wrong. Everything was intact! We expected a town shattered by the RAF's saturation bombing the previous night. We thought we would see a lot of damage to the sea-front from the shelling. There was no sign of bombing. The window panes were glittering, unbroken in the reflection of the sun's first rays."

The book also notes that 58 tanks were supposed to land at Dieppe but only 29 did. Of those, 12 tanks were smashed by enemy fire or lost their treads on the piles of loose stones strewn along the shore.

Problems were compounded by poor communication between the command ship HMS Calpe and the troops on shore.

Minor successes such as the capture of a casino by RHLL troops were interpreted as huge victories and more troops were sent in to be killed, captured or if they were very lucky, escape with their lives.

"We were pinned-down on the main beach," Mr. Darch noted. "I couldn't move."

Mr. Darch describes the scene at Dieppe as "nine hours of hell."

Like Mr. Darch, Mr. Volterman tried to shut out the carnage that was taking place around him and concentrate on doing his job, helping the wounded.

Mr. Volterman said a disabled landing craft was turned into a first-aid station. He recalls walking up and down the beach looking for wounded, patching them up and injecting them with morphine to ease the pain.

Others were helped to the rear holding area of a nearby ship where a British medical officer was treating the wounded. It was a gruesome sight.

"There must have been 150 or more wounded lying on benches on the floor, on tables, moaning and groaning," Mr. Volterman said.

He couldn't help but notice the lines of large dots on many of the overcoats worn by British soldiers. When the ship was hit by enemy dive-bombers the soldiers where thrown to the sides of the craft

with such force that the rivets along the walls of the ship left permanent impressions in the coats.

Once the medical officer was finished in the rear of the ship, Mr. Volterman said he brought the officer to the front hold to treat wounded Canadians.

"This is where I learned I was hit because some of my lads that were wounded said sergeant has been hit too."

Mr. Volterman recalls leaning over a badly wounded soldier and covering the soldier's head with his body during dive-bomber attacks to protect the soldier from falling debris.

While on board the ship, the order to return to Britain was given and Mr. Volterman headed back to safety.

Following Dieppe Mr. Volterman received a commission and finished the war as a lieutenant with the RHLL. He suffered a fractured jaw and shoulder wounds during the Rhineland campaign in March 1945 and was sent home three months later.

At 8:30 a.m. the Black Watch surrendered. About 70 minutes later the signal to withdraw was given. The troops were told to return to shore for evacuation at 11 a.m.

While there had been no co-ordinated air support prior to the landing, a massive fight in the sky over Dieppe did take place between 10 a.m. and 11 a.m. The allies lost 106 aircraft while the Germans lost 48 in what has been described as the largest one-day aerial confrontation of the Second World War.

At 1 p.m. the entire naval force was ordered back to Britain, stranding more than 2,000 men, including 1,874 Canadians. By 2 p.m. the raid was over.

Among those captured was private Stan Darch, who had tried to leave the beach when the boat he had climbed aboard was hit by a German shell and sunk.

"The officer said 'every man for himself,'" said Mr. Darch, who tore off his uniform and boots and swam back to shore where he was taken prisoner.

"The only thing I had for identification was my dog tags," he said.

As he was being marched through town barefoot along with other prisoners, Mr. Darch said they eventually came upon a wedding party. The best man in the group noticed the shoeless Canadian, removed his own shoes and gave them to Mr. Darch.

"They felt swell," Mr. Darch said. "All I could think of was merci, merci, merci."

Mr. Darch spent the remainder of the war moving from one German prison camp to another until one day in May 1945 the prisoners awoke to find all the guards had left. Later in the day a Russian tank rolled up to the gate.

"The crew commander got out of the tank. It was a woman," Mr. Darch said.

"She had an automatic weapon strapped across her back; she had a revolver on each hip; a knife stuck in each boot top and a bottle of vodka stuck in her tunic and she was huge."

Ed Newman, administrator of the RHLI museum (located in the basement of the James Street Armoury), was a private with the RHLI medical section back in Britain when word began to filter back about the raid.

"At the end of the day we didn't realize the situation was as grim as it was," he said. "It was a complete shock."

Mr. Newman noted many of the people he had trained with and had eaten breakfast and dinner with each day were suddenly gone.

"As far as I'm concerned, it was a disaster," Mr. Newman said. "Here were guys that were (well) trained and thrown into a place where they didn't have a hope in hell of being able to demonstrate (their abilities)."

The RHLI's Dieppe exhibit is on loan to the Hamilton Military Museum on York Boulevard next to Dundurn Castle, where it remains on display until Oct 14.

Victoria Cross winners

The Dieppe raid produced two Victoria Cross winners, RHLI chaplain John Weir Foote and Lt Colonel Cecil Merritt of the South Saskatchewan Regiment.

The efforts of Reverend Foote, an honorary captain, is credited with saving the lives of as many as 30 men on the beach of Dieppe as he assisted the wounded, carrying many of them on his back to the first aid post.

Here is part of the statement that appeared in the Feb. 14, 1946 edition of the Canada Gazette:

"One these occasions, with utter disregard for his personal safety, Honorary Captain Foote exposed himself to an inferno of fire and saved many lives by his gallant efforts.

"During the action, as the tide went out, the regimental aid post was moved to the shelter of a stranded landing craft. Honorary Captain Foote continued tirelessly and courageously to carry wounded men from the exposed beach to the cover of the landing craft.

"When landing craft appeared, he carried wounded from the regimental aid post to the landing craft through heavy fire with no consideration for his own safety.

"On several occasions this officer had the opportunity to embark but returned to the beach as his chief concern was the care and evacuation of the wounded. He refused a final opportunity to leave the shore, choosing to suffer the fate of the men he had ministered to for over three years."

Rev. Foote, who was held prisoner until May 1945, figured the Canadians being captured on shore could use his

services more inside a POW camp than would the troops who made it back to Britain.

Lt. Colonel Merritt was awarded the VC for valor following his efforts at Green Beach near Pourville.

His troops were pinned down by enemy fire as they tried to cross a bridge over the Scie River, west of Dieppe. As his men looked on in disbelief, Lt. Colonel Merritt walked up to the bridge, took off his helmet, wiped the sweat from his brow and with the helmet still in his hand, walked upright and calmly across the bridge while calling on his troops to follow.