

'What were the objectives of the Dieppe Raid and how far were they realised?'

The Dieppe Raid was an operation launched by the British Combined Operations Headquarters on 19 August 1942 with its target the French port of Dieppe as Operation JUBILEE. Envisaged as a large scale raid of limited duration it utilised air and naval assets and a landing force provided mostly by the 2nd Canadian Division but also including three British Commandos. By the end of the day total Allied casualties amounted to 3,367 out of 5000 engaged in the operation, the vast majority of whom were Canadians¹. German casualties were a little over 600.

The Dieppe Raid had two sets of objectives; tactical and strategic. The tactical objectives are those set for the actual conduct of the attack and are relatively easy to determine and assess. The strategic objectives are those wider aims for the operation in terms of grand strategy and diplomacy and are somewhat more difficult to assess not least due to the controversy that surrounds the operation.

In tactical terms the plan was for the ground force to land at five locations on the coastline around Dieppe. On the eastern flank No.3 Commando would land and destroy² a German coastal battery to protect the assault shipping. On the western flank No.4 Commando would conduct a similar operation to destroy another German coastal battery. At Puits to the east of Dieppe a reinforced Canadian battalion would land and secure the high ground which dominated the port. Similarly at Pourville to the west two Canadian battalions were to land and secure the high ground there³.

The main landings were to be conducted directly onto the town itself, with two Canadian infantry battalions supported by a tank regiment and engineers assaulting across the beach into the town. A further Canadian battalion and Royal Marines

¹ R. Atkin, *Dieppe 1942 - The Jubilee Disaster*, (London, 1980) pp.251-252

² P. Young, *Storm from the Sea*, (London, 1958) pp.60

Commando were in reserve to reinforce the assaulting troops. Once the troops were ashore armoured units from Dieppe and infantry from Pourville would move inland to attack further targets. A defensive perimeter was to be formed around Dieppe whilst engineers conducted demolitions and the Royal Marines 'cut out' shipping in the harbour⁴. The whole force would be re-embarked on the same tide and return to England.

With the exception of No.4 Commando none of the assigned objectives were achieved and the force badly mauled. On the eastern flank No.3 Commando was able to neutralise its objectives but was too weak to destroy it. At Puits the Canadians were not able to get far from the beach never mind clear the headlands. The Canadians at Pourville were able to make better progress but still fell short of their objectives. With the eastern and western headlands still in the hands of the Germans the main landing at Dieppe was doomed. Most of the force was trapped on the beach, as was the armoured support and the reserve was committed to support failure. Once again with the exception of No.4 Commando only a small proportion of the landing force was re-embarked and most were forced to surrender⁵.

In addition to the ground operations the Allies had intended that JUBILEE would provide an opportunity to inflict significant attrition on the *Luftwaffe*. Previously the RAF had conducted CIRCUS and RHUBARB sweeps across northern France to tempt the German fighters into combat. However the Germans only ever engaged on their own terms and usually came off best. Fighter Command hoped that the *Luftwaffe* would be forced into the skies above Dieppe and be forced to take on superior numbers of RAF planes⁶.

³ Atkin, *Dieppe 1942*, pp.45

⁴ C.P. Stacey, *The Canadian Army 1939-1945*, (Ottawa, 1948) pp.64-65

⁵ Stacey, *Canadian Army*, pp. 71-86

⁶ B.L. Villa, *Unauthorised Action: Mountbatten and the Dieppe Raid*, pp.143

In the event JUBILEE did in fact provoke what was perhaps the largest air battle of the war⁷. In terms of numbers the *Luftwaffe* came off better again, losing 48 planes to the RAF's 106⁸. However the Air Commander, Leigh-Mallory, was satisfied with the results in having brought the Germans out to fight despite the 2:1 loss ratio.

In terms of the overall tactical objectives laid out before the raid Dieppe was an almost absolute failure. Only one of the objectives was achieved and that was as subsidiary, enabling one. The bravery of the servicemen undertaking the operation amounted to little as they were launched into an operation that stood little chance of success with objectives that they had no real chance of meeting. The air battle provoked by the raid was a fierce one, but far from the decisive defeat of the *Luftwaffe* Fighter Command had hoped for.

The tactical objectives of the raid can be seen to be only a relatively minor consideration in the decision to mount the raid. The push to mount JUBILEE came from a variety of sources and its objectives were much more important than the limited gains that might have been achieved on the ground.

For the British 1942 was the nadir of their fortunes across the world. The Eighth Army in North Africa was on the back foot, U-boats were at large in the Atlantic and Japan had inflicted a range of humiliations on the Empire in the Far East. The United States had joined the war and was looking to take the war to Germany whilst the Soviet Union was under severe pressure from the *Ostheer*. So far the British were able to strike back with only the nascent Bomber Command and a number of morale boosting pin-prick raids on the coast of Europe.

Already in 1942 a number of raids had been conducted. Operation CHARIOT against the dry-dock in St. Nazaire had been a spectacular, if costly, success. A further

⁷ Villa, *Unauthorised Action*, pp.160

⁸ Villa, *Unauthorised Action*, pp.24

raid by paratroopers against a German coastal radar station had also gone well at lower cost. Combined Operations was the organisation tasked by Prime Minister Winston Churchill in planning and conducting these raids, although the vast majority of them were cancelled and never launched. The raids had the benefit of boosting British civilian morale and bolstered foreign, especially American, opinion of Britain's fighting spirit. JUBILEE, originally planned as RUTTER, although much larger than the usual raid must also have had similar objectives. In addition to boosting morale JUBILEE was to be an example of Britain's willingness to act at a time when her allies were becoming increasingly sceptical of her resolve.

The USA entered the war at the end of 1941 with great military potential but limited existing combat power. The then little-known head of the War Plans Department of the US Army General Staff, Dwight Eisenhower, settled on a plan to deploy the developing army in the British Isles for a direct assault on German power in Europe in 1943 known as Operations BOLERO and ROUNDUP. Should the Soviet Union be on the verge of collapse then an operation known as SLEDGEHAMMER would be launched in an almost certainly doomed attempt to force Germany to move troops away from the Eastern Front⁹.

The British had agreed to these plans early in 1942 but soon began to backslide from them. Objections were raised as to the practicality of these missions. Vital resources such as landing craft were in short supply, as was trained manpower; any troops employed on SLEDGEHAMMER would be primarily British. Similarly the time scale for ROUNDUP began to slip with the British pushing for landings not before 1944. By the end of July 1942 SLEDGEHAMMER had been cancelled and American troops committed to the TORCH landings in North Africa instead.

⁹ J. Keegan, *Six Armies In Normandy* (London, 1982) pp.37

This was a major disappointment for the US Joint Chiefs of Staff who felt resources were being diverted away from the main effort of defeating Germany into bolstering Britain's position in the Mediterranean. As they had throughout 1942 the Americans openly pondered switching their main effort to the Pacific into the war against Japan something the British were desperate to avoid.

Whilst the US was seeking to get into the fight against Germany the Soviet Union was already fighting for its life. Since the opening of BARBAROSSA there had been a constant clamour from the Soviet Union for the opening of a 'Second Front' in Western Europe to draw German units away from the Eastern Front¹⁰. There is some suggestion that this clamour was done partly to extract the maximum materiel support from the Allies¹¹ but the case for supporting the Soviets remained a valid one.

For the Allies to defeat Germany they needed the massive military resources of the Soviet Union to absorb those of Germany while the power of the US began to grow. Stalin had already shown his willingness to cut pragmatic deals across ideological lines with Hitler in 1939 with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The western Allies could not afford for something similar, however unlikely, to happen again and so had to be attentive to Stalin's demands regardless of their impracticality.

In Britain there was also strong political and popular backing to give maximum support to the Soviets. Politicians such as Beaverbrook and Cripps were putting increasing pressure on the Prime Minister whilst popular rallies demanding the 'Second Front Now' crowded the streets of London. Churchill was above all a politician and being seen to support the Soviets would increase his chances of retaining domestic power.

¹⁰ J.M.A Gwyer, *Grand Strategy Vol.III Part 1*, (London, 1964) pp. 96

¹¹ Villa, *Unauthorised Action*, pp. 69-70

At the end of May 1942 Stalin's Foreign Minister Molotov arrived in Washington after a visit to London. The Soviet Union had already suffered millions of casualties and was in the process of losing the Crimea. Molotov managed to extract a promise from President Roosevelt that the Allies would regard as: '*an urgent task the creation of a Second Front in 1942*'¹². This promise came only weeks before the final cancellation of SLEDGEHAMMER. Eventually the compromise of JUBILEE combined with the TORCH landings were pushed to appease Stalin by Churchill at their August meeting in Moscow. As Stalin himself put it '*Dieppe will be explained by Torch*'¹³

Operation JUBILEE would be a powerful symbol of British willingness to strike across the Channel at the Germans. Given the limited resources available in terms of troops and landing craft it was probably the biggest such operation that could be practically mounted in the summer of 1942. It was to show both the Americans and Soviets that the British could act, and that objections to SLEDGEHAMMER and other similar operations were founded on practical reasons rather than lack of spine.

JUBILEE is, like Gallipoli before it, controversial largely due to the savaging of a contingent of Commonwealth troops participating in the operation. Canadian troops had been present in Britain in increasingly large numbers since the start of the war, but had only seen defensive duties in the south of England. A political decision had been taken to deploy the Canadians as a single group only and this had limited the opportunities for their use in operations.

However by 1942 questions were beginning to be raised in Canada about just what all those troops were up to in Britain. Consequently the Canadian leadership in Britain of Generals McNaughton and Crerar was willing to allow their soldiers to make

¹² Keegan, *Six Armies in Normandy*, pp.41

¹³ J. Kennedy, *The Business of War* (London 1957), pp.264

up the main body of the landing force¹⁴. The Canadian leaders were keen to get into action, perhaps over-keen as they ultimately allowed to operation to go ahead with a seriously flawed plan. However for the Canadians it was important to be seen to be making a contribution to the defeat of Germany.

The planning and execution of JUBILEE was the responsibility of the Combined Operations HQ which was then under the command of the recently and rapidly promoted Vice-Admiral Louis Mountbatten. Mountbatten had been charged by Churchill with two main tasks; to continue the already existent raiding program and to 'prepare for the invasion of Europe'¹⁵. However in consideration of the last task there had been no significant British amphibious assault since Gallipoli in 1915.

It was clear from the adoption of SLEDGEHAMMER that some form of rehearsal for this operation would have to be undertaken. Operation RUTTER, the precursor to JUBILEE was planned on this basis. On the 10 March 1943 the British Chiefs of Staff agreed to mount SLEDGEHAMMER if the conditions were right and that in the meantime a large raid should be undertaken to bring *Luftwaffe* assets to the west. Mountbatten suggested that such a raid could provide the Joint Planning Staff with vital data for the mounting of subsequent operations¹⁶.

As such an operation would only be mounted under fighter cover from the UK the choice of targets was limited to those in the Pas-de-Calais rather than on the Cotentin Peninsular as first suggested by Mountbatten. The Joint Planning Staff drew up a list of seven potential targets in the region and Combined Operations HQ chose Dieppe from the list¹⁷.

¹⁴ D. Bercuson, *The Maple Leaf Against The Axis* (Toronto 1995), pp.65-67

¹⁵ Villa, *Unauthorised Action*, pp.166

¹⁶ T. Robertson, *Dieppe: The Shame And The Glory* (Boston, 1962), pp.34

¹⁷ Robertson, *Dieppe*, pp.35

At the same time a group called the Combined Commanders, including Eisenhower, Paget and Mountbatten, were conducting preliminary planning for ROUNDUP. They believed that the obvious invasion route was through the Pas-de-Calais and would involve seizing the ports and pouring troops through them. Just a few weeks after the request from the Joint Planning Staff for an attack on port in the region the Combined Commanders also drew up a list of possible targets and asked Combined Operations to raid one¹⁸.

This double impetus provided the momentum for RUTTER to move from planning theory to reality. RUTTER was to provide a rehearsal not only for SLEDGEHAMMER but also for ROUNDUP. Indeed General Sir Alan Brooke, then Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff was reported to have said on 30 June 1942 that: *'No responsible General will be associated with any planning for invasion until we have an operation at least the size of the Dieppe raid behind us to study and base our plans on.'*¹⁹ Although RUTTER was cancelled due to bad weather it was remounted at short notice as JUBILEE which would also have proving the practicality of invasion and amphibious methodology as one of its aims. Although by this stage the very risky SLEDGEHAMMER had also been cancelled.

JUBILEE can then consequently be seen as having four main strategic objectives; the maintenance of British morale, to 'blood' the Canadian forces, to provide important data for the conduct of subsequent amphibious operations and as a sop to the US and Soviet Union in lieu of more ambitious operations against the French coast.

In terms of maintaining British morale and improving the impression of Britain's military power in the wider world JUBILEE certainly had poor results. The initial reportage of the operation was very favourable, but almost wholly inaccurate.

¹⁸ Robertson, *Dieppe*, pp.49

¹⁹ D & S Whitaker, *Dieppe: Tragedy to Triumph* (Whitby, Ontario, 1992) pp.303

The raid was a godsend for German propaganda efforts and they made the most of the opportunity, having newsreels showing smashed bodies and equipment on the beaches ready in a matter of days. Churchill would attempt to 'spin' Dieppe as a 'reconnaissance in force'²⁰, however it was not possible to hide a serious military defeat.

The Canadians certainly received their baptism of fire albeit one with an exceptionally heavy 'butcher's bill'. The 2nd Canadian Division was virtually destroyed as an effective force for a year and in action after OVERLORD would go on to suffer higher casualty rates than equivalent Canadian formations²¹ which perhaps can be blamed on the after effects near annihilation of the Division on the beaches of Dieppe. Canada's participation in the operation is still a controversial matter.

Dieppe certainly provided a learning experience which contributed to the success of OVERLORD, even if some of the lessons were obvious with hindsight. A direct assault against a fortified locality was one of the most notable, as was the provision of maximum firepower to cover landings. Equally important lessons on amphibious technique were learnt especially in the poor performance of the ad-hoc landing craft flotillas. In response the permanent J-Force was established and stringent rehearsals were to be a part of the build up to every amphibious assault.

In addition in response to the failure of the supporting Churchill tanks to get across the Dieppe beach specialist armoured forces were developed under the aegis of the 79th Armoured Division. Command, control, communications and especially intelligence procedures were subject to major revision across the board²².

JUBILEE delivered a timely warning about launching any premature large scale attacks on *Festung Europa* and it is difficult to deny that if launched SLEDGEHAMMER would have been anything less than an even larger fiasco.

²⁰ Atkin, *Dieppe 1942*, pp.260

²¹ Bercuson, *The Maple Leaf Against The Axis*, pp.74

However some, including Beaverbrook, believed that the raid was staged to discredit calls for the Second Front²³. Nevertheless the operation gave the Americans, including the 50 Rangers accompanying the Commandos on the raid, a lesson on what an opposed landing would really mean. Supporting what Brooke and others had already been telling their American counterparts in their efforts to do away with SLEDGEHAMMER and delay ROUNDUP until 1944.

It also gave Churchill ammunition against the Soviets and their supporters that Britain was doing more than just dropping bombs on German cities. More practically the Germans reinforced the West with ten divisions from the East as well as increased the investment of manpower and resources in fixed defences²⁴. As the Soviets defined the Second Front as an operation drawing away 40 German divisions then JUBILEE could perhaps be described as having 25% of this effect.

The Dieppe Raid was a clear tactical defeat for the Allies, both in the air and on the ground. Objectives were not met at a very high price including the virtual destruction of a promising infantry division. Strategically however the return was much more profitable. Although a jolt to morale, the operation led to the development of much more practical amphibious techniques and doctrine that would pave the way for the success of subsequent operations including OVERLORD. Perhaps most importantly it gave the British a way a meeting US and Soviet demands for action in the west in 1942 at a price much lower than the proposed SLEDGEHAMMER whilst also providing practical evidence for the delay of ROUNDUP until 1944.

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²² D & S Whitaker, *Dieppe: Tragedy to Triumph*, pp.293-303

²³ Atkin, *Dieppe 1942*, pp.268

²⁴ D & S Whitaker, *Dieppe: Tragedy to Triumph*, pp.309

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