

Transcript of Colonel Walter McGregor's Speech on
the Dieppe Raid of 1942

Address to the Algonquin Club, in Windsor, Ontario,
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I would like to explain that my personal experience at the raid on Dieppe was as the Beach Master on Red Beach, which was directly in front of the town and which was the landing area for the Essex Scottish Regiment. I had been a superior officer for the Essex Scottish since 1939, and had recently been promoted to the rank of Captain and been given command of a company of four officers and about 110 men. During the spring of 1942, I had been seconded to what was referred to as the Viking Force, consisting of one platoon from each infantry battalion in the Fourth Brigade, the force commander being Major Brian McCool, of the Royal Regiment of Canada. We carried out commando-type training on the south coast of England and on the northwest coast of Scotland, including combined operations with the Navy and assault landings on the Isle of Malta. We fully expected to be involved in raiding activities on France, or on the Channel coast, but for reasons unknown these never came to pass, and the Viking Force was disbanded and we were returned to our units as instructors. When the Dieppe Raid was being planned, our former Viking Force Commander was appointed Senior Beach Officer

and he asked that he be allowed to select from his former Viking Force a Beach Master for each of the landing areas. As a result, I was appointed Beach Master for the Essex Scottish Red Beach. I mention this to explain my part in the Dieppe Raid, which was not to lead my troops into battle, as I had been trained to do, but to organize the withdrawal and re-embarkation of troops as they returned to the beach, including the calling in of landing craft from the ship's crew offshore as required and also evacuation of those wounded. My reward for these efforts would be that I was expected to be the last man to leave the beach.

Now to get on with the raid itself, which I will try to explain before dealing with what went wrong and what, if anything, was learned from it. By August, 1942, the Essex Scottish, as well as the other two infantry regiments in the Fourth Brigade, the Earl Hamilton Light Infantry and the Royal Canadian Regiment, the Royal Regiment of Canada, not to be confused with the Royal Canadian Regiment or R.C.R. which was a permanent force. We'd been in England for two years. We were fit, well trained and more than ready to put our training into practice. Canadian troops were restless, and knowing that, the senior staff welcomed that opportunity to involve us in some type of action. The planning staff of combined operations under its charismatic leader, Admiral Louis Mountbatten, had been working for some time on

plans for a large-scale raid on the French coast. There had been, as you know, several small-scale commando raids on the coast of Norway and the Channel Islands and at Bolougne and St. Isere and elsewhere. But there was now great pressure being brought to bear to step up activities on the western front, to draw German troops from the Russian front. Stalin kept pushing Churchill to launch the fulmination of France, to force Germany to fight on two fronts. The Allies however, were not yet ready to commit themselves to such a massive undertaking, but felt obligated to these, to at least give some token response to challenge Stalin's demands. The basic plans for the Dieppe Raid, which were not made by the Canadian senior staff, but were made by Combined Operations under General Paget, were offered to and accepted by the Canadian Army with the full approval of Lieutenant General McNaughton, and Major General Harry Crerar, our senior officers overseas. Major General "Ham" Roberts, who commanded the Second Canadian Division, was selected to organize the raid, and he in turn chose the Fourth Brigade and the Sixth Brigade as the infantry components. We were moved to the Isle of Wight opposite Southampton for intensive training. What was so hard to abolish was any active resentment of what we were aware that things were warming up. In due course a conference was called by General Roberts, who had met with some 300 officers in a large room, complete with a sand table,

on which was an exact scale model of the town of Dieppe and surrounding area. A full explanation of the operation was given and we were returned to our units, sworn to secrecy. We continued our training until July 1st, when all troops involved, with their equipment, were transported to New- haven, and other parts on the south coast where we were embarked on a variety of ships. Some of those ships were converted channel steamers, which carried assault landing craft, and others on tank landing craft where we shared space with three forty-ton Churchill tanks and their crew. There all ranks were given full details of the raid and operation orders, maps, French francs, ammunition, and everything else required. From July 1st, to July 7th, you recall that the Dieppe Raid was on August 19th, but July 1st to July 7th we stayed put. As the raid was postponed for various reasons, mainly weather, and finally cancelled on July 7th, when all units returned to their bases. As a reward for our months of hard training, we were all given nine days leave with the usual warning that "loose lips lose lives", no mention was made that the raid might be lost if we did.

Moving forward now to August, when General Roberts called another conference of the three hundred odd officers from the various units which had been involved. There we were informed that the raid was on again, and to the surprise of all, and the dismay of many, including myself, the destination was the

same--Dieppe. Many of us were disturbed about the repeat location, knowing that 5500 men had been on leave. Actually, it was more than 5500, it would be 5500 of the Army, plus all the Navy personnel and Air Force, a total of about 7000, had been on leave, visiting families and friends from John O'Groats to Land's End, talking about recent events with their pals, and quite likely in the presence of others. Other changes had also been made since the first meeting back in July. Firstly, the heavy bombing attack on the landing area, originally scheduled to take place immediately before the attack went in was cancelled, apparently because bomber command was not receptive, also the adverse effect it would have on the attitude of the French population, also the resulting damage might clog up the streets and prevent the troops, and especially the tanks from reaching their objectives. Also, the request for battleships, a battleship, or cruisers for fire support was denied, leaving four destroyers carrying 4- inch guns for naval support. Remember, Britain had recently lost two battleships, the *Prince of Wales* and the *Republic*, and that was a major blow to their naval strength then, and particularly to their pride. Also instead of parachute drops behind Dieppe, to attack and eliminate firepower from the headlands east and west of Dieppe, commandos would land on the east headlands, in order to take on this task, which originally was supposed to be done by airborne troops.

Now to the raid itself. Please remember, it was planned as a raid, in and out in five hours, or as they called it, a "one-tide operation", with no significant strategic objectives. Destruction of a radar station was probably the most important objective. Outside of that, it was capture of staff and documents in the military headquarters, capture and search of the Air Force, or code books, secret files, capture and search of Coast Guard Headquarters and barracks and many other minor search and destroy missions. On the afternoon and evening of August 18th, 1942, we boarded our ships, some on converted channel steamers with assault landing craft, and others on tank landing craft, carrying Churchill tanks. The convoy of more than 200 ships left their respective ports--Southampton, Portsmouth, New- haven. After dark, they joined to form one large convoy, with destroyer escort. Once again, all ranks had been briefed in detail and issued masks where required, ammunition and other equipment. I, with my large staff of one runner, and a wireless operator was on the tank landing craft with the Essex Scottish Company Headquarters, one Essex Scottish platoon, and three forty-ton Churchills. The convoy headed south across the channel at about 3:15a.m. We were startled to hear the chatter of automatic weapons and to see tracer fire a short distance away. Apparently a small convoy of German ships, escorted by e-boats or frigates, had intercepted the

leading part of our convoy. The firing continued for twenty minutes or more, when it was obvious that this encounter would be reported to the Dieppe coastal defence, and our arrival would be expected. The plan was to hit the beach, the main beach, in front of the town, while it was still dark, or just as full light appeared.

What actually happened is best described in an article in the Aylmer Record, written by a friend of mine, Lieutenant Art H. Pearson, who was Platoon Commander of B Company of the Essex Scottish. Reading from that article, Art says, "Our tank landing craft in the second or third wave of that frontal assault was supposed to put its nose onto Dieppe Beach under cover of darkness, but a small error in navigation brought us to the wrong beach, a mile or so to the west of that. When the error was discovered, the tank landing craft turned east as darkness turned to dawn and we touched down in broad daylight to a furious crescendo of fire. According to plan, half the platoon stood near the boat on the left, and half on the right, to let the two scout cars, (the tank landing craft had two scout cars and three tanks)—to let the two scout cars speed out when the ramp opened. When that happened, those cars that went out were immediately enveloped in flames as we watched. They made quick U-turns and drove into the English Channel. Simultaneously, the shell or the mortar bomb fell

under the right front of the boat, killing or wounding at least six men, and chopping the hand off the naval officer who opened the door. The lead 40-ton Churchill tank, the biggest in the British armoury, went out, and turned right and dropped a track, so it became immobilized a few feet in front of the ramp. It blocked the exits of the second and third tanks, that couldn't drive out and our platoon couldn't get out either. Eventually the third and second tanks backed away from the door. Then the second moved out the door, turned left and immediately drove aground, and so too was immobilized. But by this time the tank landing craft which was reversing away from shore with its bridge and much of its stern on fire, our Bangalore torpedoes, long water pipes stuffed with dynamite, and meant for wire-cutting by a million splinters were under the tank. The door was now clear, so I ordered the platoon to follow me in, wade to shore as we had been trained to do. The trouble was, that the water was over our heads, so several men were drowned. Moreover, the tide had turned and was moving out, making swimming against it difficult. That, for all practical purposes, was the end of 12th Platoon."

This is very similar to my own experience, our tank landing craft was not as far off course, but some adjustment had to be made due to navigational errors. When we touched down, the ramp, which

formed the bow of the boat, was dropped, and instantly the lead tank, suffered a direct hit from an 88mm. gun, followed by a second. The hot metal sprayed from these hits killed or wounded many of the infantry, standing on both sides of the lead tank. Now I say that that was 88mm., but in Brigadier Whitaker's book, which is an excellent source of information on the Dieppe Raid, he refers to them as 75mm., but as far as I know, it was the 88mm., which became a very fearsome weapon throughout the rest of the war. The lead tank was immobilized, and the other two could not land. The troops, or those still mobile, took off to the beach. Eventually, the second tank pushed the lead tank off the ramp, hit the beach where it threw a track, and again that must have happened. I don't know what happened to the third tank. The tank landing craft was under very heavy fire, and had probably backed off the beach without unloading, so that in those two tank landing craft, carrying six tanks, only two having reached the beach. I can't exaggerate the volume and variety of fire, which greeted us on landing. From the headlands on both sides of town, 88mm., high velocity artillery, not firing as long range artillery, but at short range over open sites, crippled landing craft and tanks. Of the 29 tanks that crossed the Channel, three eventually managed to cross the beach and reach the Esplanade. That's to my knowledge. Apparently more landed. I'm told that eight or nine actually landed and reached the

beach. The others, I don't know where they were. They must have been on White Beach in front of the R.H.L.I.'s. The rest were disabled by artillery fire or because of broken tracks, the consequence of the pebble beach. It might have occurred to us about the pebble beach, pebbles are normally about this size, but when I say pebbles in this report, the Dieppe Beach is made up of stones of about this size, [approximatively 6-8 inches]. Those are what I call pebbles. There is no sand on the beach at all. It is very difficult to walk on it, very difficult to run on it, and these rocks or pebbles got in between the tank tracks and the sprockets and broke the tracks. And it's difficult to explain why that wasn't known beforehand, but I'd say that many more than half of the tanks that landed were disabled. From the same headlands came very heavy mortar fire and machine gun fire, enfilading the entire beach and Esplanade areas. In addition, weapon pits had been positioned in the Esplanade, from where machine gun fire raked the top of the sea wall. Had the tanks been able to reach the Esplanade early in the operation, at least the Esplanade could have been cleared, but it was not until later in the morning that two or three tanks got past the wall onto the Esplanade in front of our beach. To add to the excitement, the beach was periodically dive-bombed by German Stukas, who signalled their arrival by activating siren blasts as they commenced their dives. These Stukas also kept up regular attacks on our ship's pool and other ships and

landing craft located a few miles offshore. Many casualties were caused by mortar bombs fired from the headlands on both the east and west sides of the town. Because of the high trajectory of mortar fire, the bombs could be dropped in sheltered areas along the seawall. And when a bomb exploded, not only the shrapnel caused the casualties, but equally lethal, were the stones, or the particles of stones, dislodged by the explosion. All told, the combination of machine gun fire from the Esplanade, bombs and artillery from the east and west headlands, Stuka bombing from the air and the absence of cover from the seawall was more than we could handle. Three attempts were made to get over the seawall, first by Major Tom Hayhurst, who was an orthodontist from Windsor. First by Tom Hayhurst, who tried to set up the Bren gun on top of the seawall, but was instantly killed by machine gun fire from the Esplanade. The next, by Lieutenant "Perc" Lee. "Perc" had been a Divinity student at the University of Western Ontario. The next, by Lieutenant "Perc" Lee and what was left of his platoon. "Perc", and others were killed or wounded. The one successful effort was made by Company Sergeant Major Con Stapleton and ten men, who made a zigzagging sprint across the west part of the Esplanade, and reached the edge of town, shot up a truck full of German troops, and withdrew when they ran out of ammunition. Stapleton was awarded the Military Cross for this fine effort. That was the only penetration

into the town from Red Beach, and the Essex Scottish. On White Beach, that was the adjoining beach to the west, where the R.H.L.I. had landed, where some protection was given by a former casino, a small group led by Captain Tony Hill, of the R.H.L.I., and another led by Whitaker, used the casino as a base for a sprint in to the town, retreating to the casino after clearing out the German weapons out in the Esplanade, and taking a few prisoners, one of whom told Brigadier Whitaker that they had been waiting for us for a week. If a few tanks had been able to climb over the sea wall on to the esplanade, to provide fire support at this stage of the game, some success might have been achieved. According to Brigadier Whitaker's book, eight Churchill tanks, accompanied by 38 troops had landed, reached the Esplanade. I saw two on Red Beach. Where the others were, I have no idea. The two who did appear, turned up late in the game as far as needed fire support was concerned. The other may well have reached the Esplanade, the other six may have reached the Esplanade by using a ramp in the vicinity of the casino, and they must have stayed on White Beach and supported the R.H.L.I. In any event no further advances were made across the Esplanade and into the town. We remained pinned down on Red Beach with ammunition running short. We were firing at an invisible enemy on the headlands, or in the buildings overlooking the Esplanade. Finally, General Roberts ordered the evacuation about 11:30 a.m.

I have not dealt with the attack on the east headlands by the Royal Regiment, or the attack on the west headlands by the commandos under Lord Lovat, followed by the south Saskatchewan Regiment and the Camerons of Winnipeg. The Royal Regiment was given the impossible task of landing on the beach at the foot of a steep cliff. They were expected to fight their way up to the top of the cliff, or west headland, and this isn't a cliff like you see on Lake Erie, this was a cliff 2-300ft. high. They were then to destroy the machine gun artillery and mortar emplacements, which were placed to cover the main Red and White Beaches. The landing was a disaster, as only twenty or thirty men, led by Colonel Dow, managed to reach the top of the headlands. They had some success, but the gun emplacements overlooking the beach were not eliminated. In this exercise, more than 200 of the Royal Regiment were hit and the rest captured, with many wounded. On the west side of town, the commandoes had landed under darkness, and successfully wiped the coastal battery position, which permitted the South Saskatchewan Regiment to follow inland. In spite of their fine efforts and the courageous conduct of their commanding officer, Colonel "Cec" Merritt, who was awarded the Victoria Cross, they were unable to eliminate the weapon emplacements on the west headlands, which dominated the main beach.

What went wrong? As real estate agents say, the most important thing is location, location, location. Dieppe still is a defender's dream—a one mile pebble, or stone beach, over a hundred yards deep at low tide, and a 1 in 4 slope from the water to the seawall, dominated by headlands 2-300 feet high on either side, giving the defenders a clear view of its full length, with no shelter except an abandoned casino building and the seawall which varied from 7 to 8 feet in height to 3 to 4 feet of stones that were built up. The seawall separated the beach from an Esplanade, or park area, of about 200 yards wide extending from the harbour entrance to the west headlands. The Esplanade was perfectly flat, with no buildings or shelter of any kind, and it was fully exposed to the headlands on its east and west. On the south side of the Esplanade, for its entire length, was a road, bordered by 5 and 6 storey buildings, mostly hotels and restaurants, and a tobacco factory. These buildings overlooked the Esplanade and the entire beach area. The key to success for the Dieppe Raid was elimination of the firepower which enfiladed the landing beaches for the east and west headlands. A sustained Air Force bomber attack, as called for, in the original operation plan, plus Naval bombardment by guns larger than the 4-inchers of the destroyers, might have done the job, but the revision of the operation plan had deleted these and the substituted ten minute bombing attack by a squadron of Hurricanes did not fill the bill.

The town of Dieppe was a textbook defensive gem, and why it was chosen for a frontal assault is the \$64,000.00 question. Now, in the area of security, I have explained the cancellation of the July 4th attempt, after all the ranks had been fully briefed, followed by a week's leave for all concerned, as well as a skirmish with the German convoylanding. I suggest we'd be naïve to think that the target of the raid would be protected in these circumstances. The reception we received clearly indicated full preparedness by the German garrison, and this is supported by the remarks made to Brigadier Whitaker by the German prisoner, who said, "We've been waiting for you for a week". In the area of intelligence, the information given to us was of a poor quality. We were not told that gun emplacements had been dug into the face of the cliffs or headlands on the east or west, and that weapon pits had been dug into the esplanade. The infantry unit was reported to be below strength, with about five hundred troops and support. The final estimate from Intelligence was about 1 700 defenders. In actual fact, reinforcements made on July 10th, and later in the first part of August, increased the defenders to three battalions, totalling 3500 men, with substantial reserves on hand in the general area, and with support and arms. This lack of updated intelligence surely jeopardized the entire operation plan, which, if the facts had been known, might have been altered, to increase the naval and

air support, or even result in cancellation or relocation. Finally, in communications, for some reason, communications between units and the attacking force and with the command destroyer were sporadic. Shortly after landing, I made my way to the Essex Scottish Battalion Headquarters, and their attempts to get status reports from the four companies on the beach had not been successful. And this I understand was a continuing problem. My signaller and his set had disappeared when we were trying to cross the beach, and to this day, I don't know what happened to him. Fortunately I located Major McCool, the senior beach officer, who had a set which was in touch with division headquarters on the command destroyer. Command headquarters was not able to contact the Calgary Tank Regiment, but we were able to, and for a good part of the morning, we relayed messages between command headquarters and the armoured unit. When the order to us to evacuate and reembark was given, the signaller operating our set took off into the Channel and McCool and I did our best to maintain contact with command and the tank unit, at the same time calling in ships to our beach to lift off the troops. All our requests were acknowledged, and no ships arrived on the beach. One landing craft had come in earlier, and removed some wounded, and that's how 51 got back from the Essex Scottish. We could see landing craft leaving the ship's pool about two miles out in the Channel, but between the 88mm.

fire, and the Stuka dive bombers, none arrived on shore. Finally I saw Brigade Headquarters on the west end of White Beach, crossing the beach with a white flag raised. When I was on the set with Colonel Churchill Mann, General Roberts, Senior Staff Officer at that time, urging him to send in more ships. When I saw what had happened, when I reported this, the brigade's, the brigade headquarters' surrender, to him, the reply was "Okay, off". I did not have an opportunity after the war to continue that conversation. Poor communications also resulted in an unfortunate decision to send in the F.M.R.'s, the Fusiliers de Montreal, a regiment being held in reserve to reinforce Red and White Beach. General Roberts received a garbled message from the Essex Scottish which was interpreted to report that the Essex Scottish had succeeded in entering the town, whereas, it was implying, merely reporting that Con Stapleton and his group of men, ten men, had crossed the Esplanade. The F.M.R. received the same reception as the Essex Scottish, of R.H.M.I., when they landed, with many casualties while unable to advance beyond the seawall. The consensus was that poor communication resulted in General Roberts losing control of the operation not long after the initial landing, and he was left to make decisions based on misinformation and speculation.

So what lessons, if any, were learned from this defeat? It has been said by some, that without Dieppe, the D-day invasion would not have been successful. I think that, in many ways, that is an exaggeration. The most important contribution by far was to change the thinking about where an invasion should take place on D-day. I believe the accepted theory had been that a sizeable port would have to be secured in the first wave of an invasion, to prevent the early landing of supplies, artillery, armour and heavy equipment. This theory was also accepted by Hitler, who was so convinced that the D-day invasion would centre on Calais, that even well after the D-day landing, refused to commit all his armoured reserves to the Normandy beaches, surmising that this was a feint, to be followed up by a main landing at Calais. The failure of a frontal assault on Dieppe, probably eliminated Calais, Boulogne, Le Havre, and Cherbourg, as possible targets for the first wave of the D-day invasion, and may have spawned the brilliant and successful idea of bringing your own port, which was what happened when Mowbray Harbour was developed. The Dieppe Raid may have resulted in planners paying more attention to security, such as the establishment of the fake army, under General Patton, in the south-east corner of England to encourage speculation that Calais would be the target on D-day. I believe it proved that a final assault on any portion of French coast must begin with a heavy aerial bombardment and naval

bombardment of the landing area and supply roles by heavy bombers and cruisers or battleships protected by air cover. Canadians paid a price for the drastic reduction in supportive fire-power in the final plans for the Dieppe Raid. Also more detailed and more up to date intelligence about topographical features and enemy strength would have to be provided to the invading force. Some say that Dieppe proved that you can't land tanks on a pebble beach. I suggest that there were easier ways of finding that out, than losing hundreds of lives. There are quite a few pebble beaches in England and Scotland available for testing grounds. Another thing that was learned, I think, was the use of airborne troops, which was originally planned for the Dieppe Raid but which was cancelled for the night when we went in. I think that if we had had airborne troops coming in from the rear, or from the flank, it would have made it much easier to capture the headlands and to destroy the enfilading fire. I have great admiration for the naval officers who, unarmed, brought their landing craft onto the beaches under intense fire. But it is clear that navigational errors occurred, particularly on the Royal Regiment's beach, where, instead of landing before the landing on the main beach, they came in almost one hour afterwards. That was a contributing factor to the failure to clear the east headlands. Also on some of the landing craft, the ramp was lowered too soon and the troops on some vehicles took off to land in

deep water with the receding tide, and never reached shore. Future training, no doubt, addressed and corrected these problems, at least to some extent. As an example, Colonel Andrews, who was the Commanding Officer of the Calgary tank, as soon as the ramp went down, he took off in the lead tank, not knowing that the beach was some distance off, and his tank of course went to the bottom. He was able to scramble out, but while swimming in the water, he was shot and killed, along with his commanding officers. I've said that it was the failure to clear the east and west headlands by attack from the sea. They had revived the D- day invasion, the original plan, to have this attack made by airborne troops, dropped behind the main objectives. Also, the motto, "Keep It Simple", may have been revived when plans for D-day were being made. The operating orders for the Dieppe Raid consisted of 120 pages, with a mass of detail, and no flexibility. A copy of this plan was obtained by the Germans, and included its advice that any prisoners taken, should be immobilized by tying their hands behind their back, with a loop around their neck, not an unreasonable procedure, but putting it in writing as an operations order, resulted in Canadian prisoners being put in shackles for more than a year. The Dieppe Raid may have given the D-day planners food for thought in other areas, and hopefully, their thoughts, turned into action, saved lives, and justified the sacrifices made on August 19, 1942. Having said

that, I will end by repeating the last operations message I received from Colonel Churchill Mann, "Okay. Off."