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H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Robin Neillands. The Dieppe Raid. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. xii + 279 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-253-34781-5.

Reviewed for H-German by James V. Koch, Old Dominion University.

A Disaster Reprised

The Allied amphibious strike at Dieppe on August 19, 1942, has long been viewed as an unmitigated disaster. This conclusion is easy to support because at least 4,131 men (some sources say as many as 4,384) of an invading force of 6,086 were killed, wounded or captured. Some Canadian assault battalions lost more than 90 percent of their personnel, reflecting foggy operational goals, faulty intelligence, wretched planning, an absence of necessary naval and air support, spotty implementation and surprisingly robust German opposition. In this volume, British military historian Robin Neillands tells this story of the Dieppe Raid with considerable skill, presenting a view of the operation within the context of the overall war mixed with judiciously chosen individual experiences and anecdotes.

His emphasis falls upon the genesis of the operation, the various pressures that propelled it forward despite unmistakable danger signals and an analysis of the finger-pointing that ensued after its egregious failure. While Neillands provides details of the actual combat that resulted from the five-pronged Dieppe landing, his major focus is trained upon the dynamics of the operation. How could this have happened, he asks, and what lessons, if any, did the Allies learn from it? Neillands is hardly the first military historian to examine the Dieppe operation, which some term a raid, others a reconnaissance and some even an invasion. At least twenty-five credible histories of Dieppe have been written already. Still, Neillands's discussion of this engagement is first rate.

The Allied soldiers, the majority of whom were Canadian, generally fought well under very difficult circumstances. One is reminded of the grudging admiration of the Germans for Commonwealth soldiers who fought on the Somme in Summer 1916--"lions led by donkeys." The troops who landed at Dieppe mostly did fight like lions. Perhaps they were not led by donkeys, but it is easily demonstrated that most were used badly. Those most culpable included the British Chiefs of Staff (COS) and Winston Churchill. Even so, a variety of other individuals including Bernard Montgomery, Louis Mountbatten and the commander of Canadian

forces in Great Britain, John Hamilton Roberts, might have called a halt to this ill-fated operation well before invasion day. Yet, despite their misgivings, none felt strongly enough about the issue to bring it to a head.

Dieppe registers as a comparatively small blip on the radar screen of World War II. While the 4,131-man loss of the Allies (a handful of Americans landed, but the Canadians and British overwhelmingly dominated) was proportionately quite large, losses of this magnitude occurred on a daily basis on other fronts. Counting civilians, the Soviets suffered an average of approximately 20,000 dead every day because of war-related events between June 22, 1941, and May 8, 1945. Nor was Dieppe the only badly planned, unsuccessful military action to be mounted by the Allies. Well before Dieppe, the combinations of the European allies already had failed in Norway, France, Greece, Crete and Southeast Asia, despite weapons such as Ultra intelligence. Further, other apparent miscalculations often were of far greater magnitude, such as the British area bombing of Germany, which cost the lives of more than 55,000 British flyers, plus 9,784 taken prisoner, and the loss of an astonishing 12,727 aircraft (in addition to the German casualties). Despite this, German production rates soared from an index of 100 in January 1942 to 322 in August 1944.

Why, then, have so many authors tackled Dieppe? First, the proportionate loss of personnel at Dieppe, almost 70 percent, was quite high. Second, the loss occurred in a brief eight-hour period. Third, the operation always has been of special interest to Canadians, who bore the brunt of the losses. Fourth, it has been difficult to assign responsibility for the Dieppe failure, inspiring decades of denials and finger-pointing among the major participants. Fifth, a set of myths has arisen about the Dieppe operation, including some that suggest valuable lessons were learned from its failure that stood the Allies in good stead when they landed at Normandy. (Lessons were learned, but not necessarily those Mountbatten and others suggested.) Finally, in contrast to war activities elsewhere in Europe and the Pacific, records relating to the Dieppe operation generally have been available and many of the surviving participants are eager to speak about the event.

The raid on Dieppe was approved in May 1942 and was scheduled for the first two weeks of July 1942. The operation was assigned the code name Rutter, but was cancelled on July 7, 1942, after it appeared the Germans had discovered the invasion fleet. Nevertheless, it was soon remounted, almost without change, and renamed Operation Jubilee. Bernard Montgomery had wished the raid to be cancelled permanently, but Louis Mountbatten, Churchill's Advisor on Combined Operations, pressed ahead even though he had not received authorization from the COS. Simply put, he thought it was the thing to do and no one objected vociferously. The project moved ahead on its own momentum.

According to Neillands, Lord Mountbatten was "brave, ambitious, charming and extremely devious" (p. 34); he had a ship sunk from underneath him at Crete. Even so, he was inexperienced with amphibious operations. Neither Mountbatten's portfolio of responsibilities nor his authority was clear, yet it is apparent that Churchill wished him to carry the fight to the Germans, often by means of commando-type raids. This the British did with success prior to Dieppe by means of the Vaagso Raid in Norway on December 27, 1941, and the raid on the French port of St. Nazaire on March 28, 1942. Whether or not merited, the prevailing notion was that Britain was undertaking increasingly complex operations that would generate experience and ultimately lead to the invasion of Europe in a Normandy-like circumstance.

Dieppe was defended by fewer than 1,600 German infantry who were responsible for almost ten miles of coast. Their major advantage was topographical; they usually defended rocky beaches from surrounding bluffs, or from buildings and a few emplacements on the beach front. After Rutter was cancelled, however, very little new intelligence was generated by the British on the Dieppe defenses and in fact "at no point had the proposed operation been subjected to a detailed analysis of its aims and the likelihood of achieving them" (p. 91). It was, then, a vaguely conceived operation whose guiding rationale largely was produced after the debacle when the blame game rose to the fore.

Perhaps Dieppe was designed to inflict actual damage on German installations in and around Dieppe. If so, the importance of the targets was rather small. Perhaps Dieppe was conceived as a rehearsal under fire for a Normandy-type operation, yet no such invasion could ever have occurred at a cramped, rocky site like Dieppe. Perhaps Dieppe was designed to mollify the Americans and the Soviets, both of whom were strongly advocating an immediate and permanent cross-Channel invasion.

The Allies did take a few valuable lessons from Dieppe. Foremost among them was the need to undertake thorough evaluation and planning of any amphibious operation and ensure that objectives were clearly understood with necessary resources available. The necessity of establishing a clear chain of command was driven home as well, as was the need to ensure that all arms of the military were working in cooperation. The Royal Navy declined to risk any major assets in the Dieppe operation. These lessons, however, might have been learned at staff school. One might tolerate degrees of ambiguity in the planning of a weekend social event, but not in an invasion of German-held Europe.

The Allies did learn from Dieppe that they needed a wider variety of amphibious vehicles to support an invasion, particularly some that would deal with beach obstacles. The DD tank, an amphibious adaptation of the American Sherman tank, was one such product that subsequently would serve well at Normandy and in the Pacific. Dieppe also pressed home to the Allies that unsupported infantry without strong air and naval support were unlikely to succeed on most defended beaches and this

insight, too, influenced succeeding amphibious operations.

Careers were demolished by Dieppe. Canadian General John Roberts was assigned the largest responsibility, was removed from command and sent to a recruiting station. Mountbatten, however, largely escaped the sting of the failure, as did Churchill. Mountbatten emerged as Supreme Allied Commander of the South-East Asia Theater and after the war served as Viceroy of India during its move to independence.

What if these events occurred today? It seems doubtful that the probing, twenty-four-hour nature of the today's media and the relish with which they pounce on alleged cover-ups would generate the same results in Canada or Great Britain. One is inclined to doubt that today's Canada would so readily accept such grievous losses without painful public discussion and questioning of British leadership. But 1942 was a very different time.

Among the most notable previous efforts made to tell the story of Dieppe are those by R.W. Thompson, Eric Maguire, Terrence Robertson, John Mellor, Ronald Atkin, Brian L. Villa, W. Denis Whitaker and Shelagh Whitaker and John P. Campbell. A brief, but usable recent version with three-dimensional supporting color maps is that of Ken Ford.[1] If a reader's primary need is an account of the military movements and fighting that took place at Dieppe, then there is no reason to purchase Neillands' book, as many other equally good accounts already exist. If, however, the reader's focus is upon the decision-making, dynamics and extensive post mortem connected to Dieppe, then this book does break some new ground and would constitute a worthy purchase.

Notes

[1]. Ronald Atkin, *Dieppe 1942* (London: MacMillan, 1980); John P. Campbell, *Dieppe Revisited: A Documentary Investigation* (London: Frank Cass, 1994); Ken Ford, *Dieppe 1942: Prelude to D-Day* (Westport: Praeger, 2004); Eric Maguire, *Dieppe* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963); John Mellor, *Forgotten Heroes: The Canadians at Dieppe* (London: Methuen, 1975); Terrence Robertson, *The Shame and the Glory: Dieppe* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1967); R.W. Thompson, *Dieppe at Dawn* (London: Hutchinson, 1956); Brian L. Villa, *Unauthorized Action: Mountbatten and the Dieppe Raid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); W. Denis Whitaker and Shelagh Whitaker, *Dieppe: Tragedy to Triumph* (London: L. Cooper, 1992).

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