

Operation Jubilee – Dieppe 1942

Stemming from the British determination to harry the enemy wherever possible, early in 1942 the idea arose of a reconnaissance raid in force on the coast of Europe. Eventually the French holiday resort of Dieppe was chosen as a suitable target for the seaborne invasion, as it was easily within fighter cover range of British airfields.

The operation, code-named Jubilee, was the responsibility of Combined Operations and strict security was maintained throughout. The date selected was August 18th, the last date in 1942 to offer the conditions of time and tide suitable for the operation's requirements.

The total assault force comprised 6,080 officers and men, with 24 tank landing ships and 60 squadrons of aircraft providing air cover. Despite bad weather which delayed the operation for 24 hours, the total force of 252 ships sailed from four south coast ports on the night of the 18th, and arrived off Dieppe in almost total darkness shortly before 0300 hours on the morning of the 19th. Six destroyers fanned out to the east and west to act as the eyes and ears of the expedition and to give all possible support to the attackers.

On the left flank, to the east of Dieppe, No 3 Commando and the Royal Regiment of Canada was to land and destroy the heavy coastal battery. In the centre the Essex Regiment, the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry and the Cameron Highlanders of Canada were assigned the task of capturing the St Aubin airfield. On the right flank No 4 Commando was to land and destroy the Hess battery. In support on the Dieppe beaches the 14th Canadian Army Tank Battalions were to assist with the capture of the headlands.

By 0330 hours 5000 men were in their assault landing craft and taking up station behind the gunboats that were to lead them in to the beaches. Meanwhile Vice-Admiral Lord Mountbatten and Lieutenant General Crerar joined Air Marshall Leigh-Mallory at Fighter Command Headquarters to oversee the operation, via radio contact with the force commanders on board the destroyers. Up to 0335 hours the whole pattern worked out as in a training exercise, but then gunfire erupted at sea on the left flank. Disaster had overtaken the gun-boat leading the commandos, for without warning it

had run into a group of five enemy armed trawlers. Within five minutes the gunboat was a shambles, and the twenty landing craft it had been protecting were dispersed and unlikely to be able to silence the battery as planned.

On the extreme right flank the commandos landed as planned and destroyed the Hess battery. Sadly this was almost the only success of operation Jubilee. An hour after all the assaults had gone in intense fire from the headland batteries and accurate shelling of the assault area from inland batteries told a sorry story. Attacks from fighter bombers and the offshore destroyers and their smoke screens failed to make any impression on the Germans. Some of the troops landed well and pushed on to their objectives, but were unable to sustain their attacks without help from armour and aid from the Dieppe beaches; and of such aid there was no sign. Notwithstanding, all the troops followed their leaders promptly; an assault regiment of the Canadian Artillery and the Black Watch was reduced to just two companies in minutes. Naval crews from the support craft died on the shore and in the shallows, or were marched off to prison camps.

None of this disaster was known on the HQ ship offshore. The almost continuous smoke screens, and smoke and flame from the battle on the beaches, masked the coast and the seaways. Fragmentary messages reaching the force commanders were not only confusing but meaningless. The attempt to seize Dieppe itself foundered in the shallows and died on the beaches. Troops coming ashore met a continuous deluge of crossfire and high explosives over the shallows and shingle. Within five minutes of the landings all hope was gone; it was impossible to reach the town or even the safety of the seawall. German light and heavy machine guns, firing flat over open sights, wreaked havoc on the beaches, while medium and heavy batteries turned their fire on the British ships offshore.

It had been planned to put four troops of the new Churchill tanks ashore in the first wave and despite the weight of fire 17 tanks did manage to land, and six of them reached the sea wall. One even climbed the steps of the Casino, but the results were minimal; all fought to the last but none of the crews survived. At 0830, the force commander, still unaware of the true situation, decided to reinforce the landings with Royal Marine Commandos under the cover of a smoke screen. However as they moved in they were met by a murderous

concentration of fire. The Marines' commander, perceiving the nature of the tragedy, without hesitation signalled his men to turn back. In doing so he saved many lives but sadly not his own.

Finally at 0900 hours the decision to attempt a withdrawal was made. Elaborate planning for this had been made, but in the event it was proved optimistic to the point of irresponsibility. Attempts were made to grab as many survivors as possible and the last hours saw deeds of heroism in the finest tradition of British military history. Nevertheless, by early afternoon the surviving men and ships were homeward bound.

It was six days before the casualties could be assessed and in the final count 494 officers and 3,890 men were killed, wounded or listed as missing. In addition, all the vehicles and equipment on shore were lost.

Losses at sea were also severe; the Royal Navy lost 81 officers and 469 men and 34 ships.

In the final analysis, the enemy defences had been tested and not found wanting. However, from that day onwards German anxiety increased and work began in earnest to further strengthen the western coastline.