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## The Dieppe Raid: A Product of Misplaced Canadian Nationalism?

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### Abstract

It has been commonly supposed that the raid on Dieppe of 19 August 1942 was conceived, planned, and launched at the initiative of the British government and armed services; that the part played by Canadian Army commanders in the raid did not extend beyond being foolish enough to place their faith in a British-approved operation. This view has little foundation. A Canadian division would not have undertaken the raid if the commanders of the Canadian Army in Britain had not insisted that it should do so. No Canadian seems to have had a hand in formulating the outline plan, but the detailed military planning and certain crucial decisions affecting the timing of the landings, the length of time troops would spend ashore, and the provision of air support were effectively in Canadian hands. Above all, Canadian commanders seem to have been instrumental in reviving the raid in July 1942, having taken the lead in overcoming the British Army's advice that the operation should be cancelled for all time. Far from being unwittingly manoeuvred into the

raid by British authorities, the Canadian Army was a leading source of pressure for the raid — so much so that the raid would probably not have taken place if the Canadian Army had not backed it so aggressively.

## Abstract

C'est, suppose-t-on communément, à l'initiative du gouvernement et des forces armées britanniques qu'aurait été lancé le raid sur Dieppe le 19 août 1942. N'en ayant ni conçu l'idée, ni élaboré le plan, l'état-major canadien n'aurait commis d'autre ineptie que d'engager aveuglément ses troupes dans une opération orchestrée par la Grande-Bretagne. Cette conception de l'histoire demeure, pour l'essentiel, sans fondement. Sans l'insistance pressante de l'état-major des forces armées canadiennes postées en Grande-Bretagne, une division canadienne n'aurait jamais accepté d'entreprendre une telle opération. Certes, dans ses grandes lignes, la stratégie adoptée ne semble pas porter la marque de l'état-major canadien. Il n'en demeure pas moins que le détail des opérations et certaines décisions cruciales quant à l'heure précise des débarquements, la durée de la mission et l'appui aérien relevaient de sa seule autorité. Fait encore plus décisif, le commandement canadien semble avoir pris une part active aux délibérations qui, en juillet 1942, devaient remettre le raid à l'ordre du jour, contre l'avis de l'état-major britannique qui conseillait pour sa part d'annuler définitivement les opérations. Loin de se voir manipulée contre son gré par les autorités militaires britanniques, l'Armée canadienne était l'un des principaux artisans du raid, à tel point que faute d'un appui aussi tenace, celui-ci n'aurait probablement jamais été entrepris.

## Notes and Comments



### The Dieppe Raid: A Product of Misplaced Canadian Nationalism?

As almost any Canadian with a passing knowledge of the Second World War will tell you, Canadian troops were used as cannon-fodder at Dieppe, sacrificed by British military leaders for their own political and strategic reasons, another example of the cynical British abuse of 'colonial' manpower. Abused that manpower certainly was. Of the roughly 4000 Canadian troops who actually landed on the French coast on 19 August 1942, 3367 were killed, wounded, or taken prisoner. There is no denying that the operation was conceived, planned, and launched under the direction of British officers as part of a wider strategy that Canadians had played practically no part in formulating. Was a plan that should never have seen the light of day implemented because British commanders had at their disposal expendable colonial formations? This view would certainly fit in with the prevailing Canadian mythology about the Second World War: that the worst calamities to befall Canada – whether early in the war itself, adherence to questionable tactical doctrine or strategic policy, or the casualties suffered by the Canadian armed services – can almost invariably be traced to the mistakes and shortcomings of Canada's more powerful allies, particularly Canada's erstwhile imperial master.<sup>1</sup>

1. Denis and Stelagh Whelan in their book *Dieppe: Tragedy or Triumph* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson 1982) state clearly at no doubt that Canadian troops were sacrificed by the British at Dieppe, even though the authors shy away from stating this point so bluntly. This view is also supported by Brian Villa in *Unsettling the Active: Canadians and the Dieppe Raid* (Toronto: Oxford University Press 1985) and by Brewster Greenhaus in *Dieppe: Dumb Men with Bad Guns* (1995), quite frankly, it is not the approach taken by of the more Robertson in *Dieppe: The Slaves and the Glory* (London: Hutchinson 1953) David Robertson in *Dieppe: Last Against the Axis: Canada's Second World War* (Toronto: Stoddart 1995) argues that the total responsibility for the massacre belonged to Molnarbarer, McNaughton, and Giesler. A glance at the Canadian reviews of *Tragedy or Triumph* is sufficient to show how readily Canadians accepted the view that the British were to blame. See, for example, the reviews in *The Toronto Star* and the *Montreal Star*, 5 Aug. 1982, *The Globe and Mail*, 2nd and *Ottawa Citizen*, 22 Aug. 1982.



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