The Allied raid on the French port of Dieppe on August 19, 1942 only lasted nine hours, but they were nine of the worst hours that Canadian soldiers endured during World War II. The raiding party consisted of 4963 soldiers from the Canadian Second Division, 1075 British Commandos, and 50 U. S. Rangers. Of the Canadians, 907 were killed and 1946 taken prisoner.

**Why Dieppe?**

In the summer of 1942, there were many reasons for the Allies to mount a raid that would test the coastal defences of Hitler’s **Festung Europa**, Fortress Europe. The Soviet Union, which Germany had invaded in June 1941, was pressing its Western allies to open a second front. Churchill was hungry for a morale-boosting victory. Canadian troops, some of whom had been training in Britain since September 1939, were clamouring to take part in some real fighting.

Dieppe was chosen as a target because a large fleet could reach it under cover of darkness. It was within easy range of RAF fighter planes, and it would give the Allies experience in carrying out a major **amphibious assault**. The aim was to destroy as many German defences in and around Dieppe as possible: airfields, rail and harbour facilities, and fuel dumps. Then the troops would return to England, taking German prisoners back with them for interrogation.

On August 18, the troops were assembled aboard a fleet of 237 ships. The raiders were scheduled to attack just after dawn, hitting eight beaches across a 16-kilometre front and catching the German defenders napping. The element of surprise was crucial. Dieppe was well-fortified and protected by high bluffs. The actual attack when it came was not well coordinated. Many of the Canadian troops arrived late. After the first wave ran into fierce resistance, the reserve troops were ordered onto the beaches, where they found the Germans waiting for them.

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**Figure 20-1** As you can see from the map, the British Commandos were assigned the task of knocking out gun batteries on either side of Dieppe, while the main Canadian force bore the responsibility for a direct assault on the fortifications in front of Dieppe. Why is timing such an important factor in an assault of this kind?
The attack at Dieppe resulted in two-thirds of the Allied forces being killed, wounded, or captured.

**The Attack**

**Orange Beach**
Landing under cover of darkness at 4:45 a.m., British Commandos overcame the defenders of a six-gun battery in a furious 15-minute knife and bayonet battle, blew up the guns, and headed back to the beaches with four prisoners.

**Yellow Beach**
At 3:45 a.m. the British Commandos headed for Yellow Beach ran into a small German convoy, which scattered their forces. Only a third of the troops were able to land one hour later; they failed to knock out the battery; and most were quickly killed, wounded, or captured.

**Blue Beach**
In a hopeless three-hour fight, the Royal Regiment of Canada suffered 96% casualties. Out of 554 officers and enlisted men, only 65 got back safely to England.

**Green Beach**
The Canadians quickly overran the town of Pourville. German resistance soon stiffened, however, and the regiments were forced to abandon their objectives.

**Main Beaches**
The main beaches quickly turned into a terrible killing ground. The Essex Scottish Regiment suffered almost 80% casualties within an hour of landing. The 27 Churchill tanks from the Calgary Tank Regiment made little headway. Some climbed over the sea wall but then ground to a halt before the concrete antitank barriers at the entrance to Dieppe. One by one, they were picked off by German anti-tank guns.

Garbled radio messages from shore persuaded Major-General J. H. Roberts to commit his reserves to an already hopeless battle. Believing that an entire regiment had fought their way into Dieppe, not just a handful of survivors, he sent the Fusiliers Mont-Royal to support them. With no cover to shelter them from German guns, this regiment was massacred on the beach.

Meanwhile, in the skies above Dieppe, 67 squadrons of the Royal Air Force (including eight of the Royal Canadian Air Force) fought the Luftwaffe in the single biggest air battle of the war. The Germans decisively beat the Allies here as well, losing 48 aircraft to 106 Allied planes downed.

The Dieppe Raid was a costly disaster for the Allies. Inadequate planning, poor preparation, and the lack of heavy air and naval bombardment all taught a painful lesson in how not to attack Hitler’s Fortress Europe.

**CONNECTIONS**

**DIEPPE AND D-DAY**

Although the raid on Dieppe was a costly disaster, the Allies learned a valuable lesson: trying to seize a heavily defended port by attacking from the sea was unwise. This lesson influenced the Allies' choice of a landing area for the D-Day attack in 1944. The Normandy beaches, although well fortified, did not contain the kind of concentrated defences that surrounded Dieppe. The Allies also learned lessons about timing, air and sea support, and diversionary tactics that had a direct impact on the successful D-Day attack.

The next time Canadian forces attacked Dieppe was in September 1944. They entered the town from the landward side and took it quite easily.

**RECONNECT**

1. Why did the Allies attack Dieppe?
2. Why were Canadian casualties so high?