

# Decoding the mystery of Dieppe

Deadly assault on Nazi-occupied beach was cover for a larger mission, documentary says

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Postmedia News

The horror of Canada's darkest day of the Second World War still remains a vivid picture in Howard Large's mind, 70 years after he crawled in terror over the still-warm bodies of comrades and across the bloodied stones of a machine gun-raked beach at Dieppe.

"This is the end ... I am dead," the 94-year-old Windsor, Ont., veteran recalls telling himself on so many occasions that hellish morning of Aug. 19, 1942.

There was the buddy from their shared hometown who threw himself on an explosive charge, sacrificing his life to save Large and others around him. The German grenade that landed on Large's chest — "it just went 'poof,' it was a dud." The sniper who hit him, but not mortally, once he and a small number reached the town. The young Nazi infantryman, who, leading the bleeding Canadian prisoner past a pile of dead German comrades, pressed the muzzle of his rifle against Large's forehead.

Covered in bullet and shrapnel wounds and burns and being led away to a German prisoner-of-war camp for the next three years, Large was one of the lucky ones.

In a disastrous raid on the German-occupied French port by an Allied force of 300 ships, 800 aircraft and more than 6,000 Allied assault troops — most of them Canadian — close to 2,000 of the attackers were taken prisoner and more than 900 lay dead within hours. Less than half the soldiers who took part, many among them wounded, made it back onto the ships for the retreat.

Of the 553 participating mem-

bers of the Essex Scottish Regiment to which Large was attached, only 51 escaped back to England that day.

"They were nuts," Large said of the Allied planners and force commanders who thought up the attack.

Now, after decades of unanswered questions and only guesses as to why the mission was launched and to what purpose the Dieppe slaughter served comes newly unearthed evidence putting the mission in a completely different light.

Could the single-biggest raid of the war simply have been a diversion for the real objective — a commando "pinch" operation to steal German naval codes and encryption machines? And playing a leading role in the top-secret mission was legendary spymaster Ian Fleming, who would later gain fame as author of the James Bond 007 series.

"What a story this is ... this is like something out of a Hollywood movie," said David O'Keefe, a Montreal-based military historian who uncovered the mystery over the course of 15 years of research. Himself a former soldier and Department of National Defence employee, O'Keefe gained privileged access to more than 100,000 pages of classified British military archival documents, many of them stamped "most secret" and part of the ULTRA files, the highly sensitive intelligence gathered during the war and only recently starting to be made available to some researchers.

O'Keefe said there was no single "eureka!" moment, but rather a series of discoveries that led to his conclusion that the plan, all along, was to slip a specially trained unit into Dieppe under the cover of a bigger operation and



Bodies, bogged-down tanks and burning personnel vehicles on the beach at Dieppe on Aug. 19, 1942. A new documentary reveals the assault had a secret purpose: recovering a German Enigma coding machine.

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recover a German-made Enigma code machine, a very complex electro-mechanical device that used a series of rotors for the encryption of secret messages. The Allies had great success in breaking into German ciphers and codes to help plan their Battle of the Atlantic strategies, but the enemy had recently advanced their Enigma technology and the possible outcome of the war itself was at stake during this pivotal period when the Third Reich was at its peak.

Housed inside Dieppe's Hotel Moderne was the German naval headquarters, the small port city hosted an important radar installation, and Allied intelligence was convinced that trawlers tied up in the harbour were pulling double-duty as spy vessels and contained valuable enemy signals equipment. Waiting offshore for the success of the initial attack were Commander Ian Fleming, who was the personal assistant to the admiral in charge of Britain's naval intelligence, as well as members of a secretive unit of naval intelligence specialists he helped create known during Operation Jubilee as No. 40 Royal Marine Commando.

The previously stated purposes of the raid, as well as lessons learned, remain valid, said O'Keefe, but it's the newly uncovered intelligence-gathering objective that was "the locomotive driving this thing."

Dieppe has always been viewed

as a "lambs-to-the-slaughter" military fiasco, said O'Keefe, especially as seen from the Canadian side. "Dieppe is still a disaster," he said, but now the operation can be viewed as something more than simply a botched testing of Germany's Fortress Europe defences.

"One of the most remarkable results is that it provides a true silver lining to this — there's a tangible, legitimate and absolutely critical purpose to this operation," said O'Keefe.

Present-day spymasters at GCHQ, Britain's intelligence agency, "reluctantly" agreed to the Canadian researcher's findings, said O'Keefe, who also spoke with the only surviving member of Fleming's assault unit. He said others in the intelligence, military and historical communities support what should now lead to a rewriting of one of the dark chapters of Second World War history.

In Dieppe Saturday, inside a theatre just steps from the assault beach, O'Keefe introduced the documentary *Dieppe: Uncovered* to an audience including Canadian veterans. The documentary premieres tonight on the History channel, the same day it's broadcast on Britain's UKTV. The fuller story will be divulged in *Dieppe Decoded*, a book O'Keefe is writing that will be published by Random House in 2013.

Half a century after the war, Howard Large's body was still shedding pieces of shrapnel from that day of horror.

"I think it's all out now," he said

in an interview Thursday.

Large recalls the deafening noise, the mortar rounds landing and turning beach gravel into deadly missiles, tanks bogged down and aflame.

In the hour-long *Dieppe: Uncovered*, Large describes how "body parts were starting to fly" during the tortuous Essex Scottish Regiment's advance up Red Beach. The documentary, citing previously "ultra secret" documents, describes the pivotal role ascribed to the members of the Essex Scottish. O'Keefe said they were the ones ordered to push through to the inner harbour and provide the signal to Fleming's commandos, with a green flare as the sign that the targeted trawlers in the harbour had been knocked out.

"A red flare meant they were coming in hot — either way, those commandos were coming in," said O'Keefe.

It would be another six months, a period that saw U-boat sinkings of Allied vessels in the Atlantic "rise dramatically," before British codebreakers at Bletchley Park were able to crack the latest version of Germany's Enigma machine.

In an interview before departing for France this week, O'Keefe said during the making of the documentary one of the veterans interviewed, Ron Beal of the Royal Regiment of Canada, came up to him off-camera: "Dave, now I know why my friends died and I can die in peace."

## Veteran MP warns of the pernicious perils of Parliament



MAJOR'S CORNER  
Maj. (retired)  
Nigel Smythe-Brown

I am well aware that most of my readers assume the subjects roiling about the senior reading room at my club (the home of homes) consist of such topics as recalcitrant roses, dreary church sermons or the next week's lunch menus. Oh, I can hear you sniggering behind your newspapers, but assumption

has lost more than one war, I can tell you.

Take, for example, last week, when a retired member of Parliament, Arthur (Landslide) Gerrymander, sat down beside me in a welcoming green wingback and gave a deep sigh in response to my cocked eyebrow. Arthur is a man of short stature, but when he stands on his golden parliamentary pension, he soars to a great height.

He spent an uneventful 25 years hiding in the back benches, only popping up for the most sought-after trips to the South Seas in the dead of winter on behalf of his shivering constituents. Inevitably it would be under a guise such as "World Democracy Day" in Costa Rica or someplace like it.

Afterward, there would

appear in our mail a picture of Arthur amongst a colony of monkeys, waving our flag. Below the simians would be a paragraph or two on the trip, during which apparently not one of the conventioners could mention Canada without locals bursting into tears of gratitude for all we have done for good government around the world. We came to notice the appalled Mrs. Gerrymander in said picture proving once again why no one should wear a dress around a curious monkey.

When he retired as the longest sitting Member of Parliament, it dawned upon the populace of his riding what they had voted for in the last quarter of a century, and they have voted Marxist ever since as some sort of punishing cleanse.

Nevertheless, I always look forward to a chat with the far-from-dull ex-MP, and he did not disappoint me. As we ordered our normal pre-lunch martini, he opined that the greatest threat to a sitting MP has always been the two-headed serpent of alcohol and adultery. A catlike smile played about his lips as if he were in a golden reverie of his early years in the House of Commons. Then he shook his head sharply, as if to rid himself of bittersweet memories and return to the topic at hand.

He pointed out that the people of Canada (outside of Quebec, with its more urbane style) generally elected strange-looking white men with retreating chins and startled looks. They come from places like

Where-Am-I, B.C., or Sandblast, Sask., and are therefore unused to a sophisticated city where they are suddenly someone, in a sandbox containing nine women for every male, that is to say our capital, Ottawa.

Each arrives bug-eyed in their one suit with the gravy stain, bursting with ideas concerning their voters and Canada itself, only to be told by their pretty new assistant Claudette that they are on their way to a four-month sojourn of intense French/Wine lessons privately taught by voluptuous Québécois women.

The rest is a blur, with only a few scribbled postcards sent to their fretting families in an unfamiliar patois and signed, instead of Peter, "Pierre."

They return to the capital

with a new swagger and suit, both of which fit the new men who have emerged from the chrysalis of their former selves. They are still unattractive by any measure, but now have a small, neat beard to hide the pointy chin, a new diet, bad French and a hovering, delectable PA.

It is a Hollywood for all those bullied chaps from school who finally get a date with a starlet and, stranger still, are taken seriously.

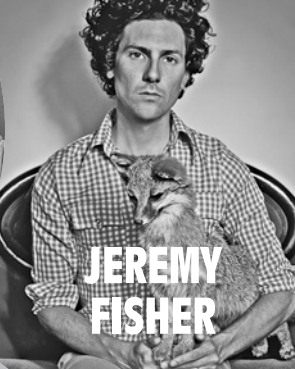
This, of course, brings up the serpent's tail, said my friend the retired MP, the thing to be most afraid of in Ottawa, for after alcohol and adultery comes their loathsome friend alimony. Tread thoughtfully. majornigelsb@gmail.com @TheYYJMajor on Twitter

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