

RMMGS077; DIEPPE 1942

At Combined Operations HQ during the winter of 1941–2 plans were made to test the theories for capturing a defended port. The Combined Operations' planners chose Dieppe, a French Channel port set in a wall of cliffs easily defended. This Combined Operations' plan was to divide the RM Division into two forces, one to land and swing south–west, capturing the airfield 3½ miles south of Dieppe before linking up with the second force, which was to swing north–east; neither force would make a frontal assault. At this time, in May 1942, Lord Mountbatten made clear to the Chiefs of Staff that bombarding a town was an essential preliminary to its capture by an amphibious assault, for such towns were likely to be in the 'front line'.

There were, however, doubts as to whether bridges on the routes encircling the town were strong enough to take the new Churchill tanks, and the Army, therefore, favoured a frontal assault for this and other reasons.

For political reasons 2 Canadian Division replaced the Marines, while General Montgomery rejected the concept of flank attacks. Neither were heavy warships to be risked in the raid, so that only a relatively light bombardment was possible. But 40 RM Commando's role was retained: it would assault the docks and cut out German landing barges, and its Commanding Officer, Lt-Col J.P. Phillipps, was to 'take charge of all fighting required on the dockside and the capture of all craft ... He will also be in charge of final demolition work'. Some of the Marines were to be landed from HMS *Locust*, a river gunboat carrying part of the Commando and the RN Dockmaster's party, who were to force lock gates to inner basins. Seven French *Chasseurs* (submarine chasers) carried the remainder of the Commando, No. 2 RM Demolition Party, the Assistant Dockmaster's Party, No. 3 Royal Navy Demolition Party and an RN Engine Room party to start up captured craft.

The troops' movements were concealed on the night of 18 August in the guise of another exercise, an earlier raid on Dieppe having been cancelled. As the ships crossed to France, however, those craft carrying 3 (Army) Commando were scattered by fire from a German coastal convoy. Nevertheless Maj Peter Young, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment, got ashore with 19 commandos and successfully harassed the easterly heavy battery with small arms fire in a cool piece of determined courage. To the west Lord Lovat's 4 (Army) Commando took out another heavy battery in a classical flank operation.

On the main beaches, however, the assault engineers came ashore without covering fire from the tanks running in late. Over two-thirds of these engineers became casualties and could not therefore breach the seawall, with its anti-tank defences; so — caught on the shingle beach — the tanks were

immobilised by German 37–mm anti–tank guns, which could knock off the tanks' tracks though not penetrate their armour. Infantry landings were also delayed by heavier gauge German barbed wire than was expected. The final horror for the attackers was anti–tank guns and machine guns wheeled out of caves in the cliff face. Concealed from air reconnaissance, these unexpected defences effectively put paid to any chance of success.

The RM commandos aboard *Locust* — Commando HQ, 'A' Company and No. 1 Demolition Party — in all 172 all ranks, arrived off Dieppe about 0530 hours, 10 minutes after H-hour on the main beaches (0520). Thick smoke had greatly reduced visibility, although it was a fine day. As *Locust* tried to pass the mole into the harbour, she was hit twice, two men being killed and six wounded. With the guns on the east side of the entrance still effectively covering the channel, *Locust* came out to join destroyers bombarding the shore batteries. Meanwhile all but one of the *Chasseurs* — 'B' and 'X' Companies, No. 2 (Rear) Commando HQ (the second of the HQ parties afloat), Nos 2 and 3 Demolition Parties, in all over 190 Marines — had arrived off Dieppe. *Chasseur* 43 broke down and arrived late.

On the landing beaches the Canadians had failed to make a lodgement, although this was not known on HMS *Calpe*, the Hunt–class destroyer fitted with 32 additional radios and navigational aids as the HQ ship; for these communications had broken down, since the Beach Signals Sections had been landed with the first flights of assault troops and soon became casualties, their wireless sets damaged beyond repair. A Royal Marine provost party under Lt-Col R.G. Parks–Smith, a pioneer of parachute landing, was landed on White beach 'to maintain discipline and order over all personnel'. It came ashore in the first flights but the Colonel was mortally wounded not long after it landed. He was with the Beach Party, mainly responsible in this raid for preparing 'the beaches for a smooth and expeditious withdrawal', but in the event this was organised from the HQ ships with a mixture of craft. (There was, incidentally, a second destroyer as a duplicate headquarters.)

At a conference about 0630 hours aboard *Calpe* the cutting–out plan was abandoned and the RM Commando placed at the disposal of the Canadian GOC, Major General Roberts. After passing through White beach, they were to join the Essex Scottish, believed to be in the town.

Commando HQ and 'A' Company transferred to two LCMs, the open craft intended to land trucks or a single tank, and 'B' and 'X' Companies transhipped from their *Chasseurs* to LCAs from a pool of boats that had already made at least one landing. The LCA were formed up by about 0830 hours for the 4,000yds run to the beach, with the *Chasseurs* giving them fire support on each flank, and the Marine gun–crews of two major support craft and HMS *Locust* adding to the counter battery fire. The submarine chasers then laid smoke but the landing craft came under 37–mm and heavier fire. Col Phillipps, in order to get a clearer view, had perched himself on the wheelhouse roof at the stern of his LCM. From there, breaking out of the smoke just before the craft beached, he saw his Marines 'landing with a

courage terrible to see'. Intense machine gun and mortar fire was coming down accurately on the leading craft as they hit the shore.

Royal Marine Bren-gunners, standing exposed for a clearer shot, fired back, despite the bursts of enemy bullets which repeatedly hit their craft. Then a hurricane of fire from rifles and machine guns added to that of heavier guns. Nevertheless Major Houghton got ashore from the Rear HQ's LCA, and No. 8 Platoon landed in an LCA, two Marines being hit as the doors opened for the Marines to charge across the beach to the cover of a tank. This Churchill was immobile but still firing. Only one LCM and LCAs had beached, but by now the Colonel could see that the Germans still held the beach in strength, and putting on his white string gloves, he waved back the boats coming in, so saving 200 of his commandos. Shortly afterwards he was killed but 'his personal courage led and inspired his subordinates'.

Lt Smale and the survivors of his platoon, No. 8, did what they could to bring out their wounded at 1130, and then the Lieutenant went back to the tank; he was last seen firing from the shelter of a beached LCT and his small party were all probably killed or taken prisoner in the next hour. One small group on the beach was last reported 'digging a Channel Tunnel', as they kept their sense of humour in desperate attempts to find some cover in shallow trenches.

Those who came out through the smoke were by no means out of the hail of fire, for German bombs falling nearby sent shock waves through the water and more than one Marine 'felt that his stomach had gone'. Marine gunners on the *Chasseurs'* Hotchkiss guns engaged targets as their boats came inshore, the RM Demolition Parties patching up the shell damage to keep them afloat, and rigging jury steering as they picked up survivors. The OC of 'A' Company then reported the conditions on White beach, to dash an unfounded optimism aboard the HQ ship.

The major support craft, in action for the first time in daylight at Dieppe, had RM gun crews and were developments of LCF No. 1, at first designated a Beach Patrol Craft (BPC), with twin 4-in dual-purpose guns. This craft carried almost as much fire-power as cruisers of the 1930s, and off Dieppe she successfully engaged the German coast convoy which had scattered 3 Commando's craft. Other major support craft — the LC Flak (LCFs), each with four Oerlikons and eight 2-pdr Pom-Poms, and the LC Gun (Large) (LCG[L]s), each with two 4.7-in guns in open gun houses — had come into service during 1942. At Dieppe LCF No. 2 closed White beach 'with great gallantry ... to point-blank range ...' and gave close support until she was disabled, her Captain killed, her guns put out of action one by one until she finally sank'.

Another LCF (No. 5) came close to 'shooting down an RAF Mustang, the first we have seen of this type', as she neared White beach, while providing anti-aircraft cover for LCTs heading inshore with their Churchill tanks. The LCF cruised some 400yds off the beach, getting its first Heinkel 111 soon after the tanks had been landed, although the craft was already under fire — 'great holes ... torn in the bulkheads and terrible screams ... from the poor lads who

were mangled. I felt terribly sick', one gunner writes 'but God was with me, and I held out'. The arrival of Spitfire squadrons about this time cheered everyone up, and the LCFs withdrew into the smoke about an hour after the landing. They lay a mile offshore for a short while, before going back in to spend the next three hours near the beach. Shelled, machine-gunned and taking casualties, they nevertheless were still inshore when the RM Commando was being withdrawn, 'scores of unfortunates ... struggling in the water 200 yards from the beach ... most commandos and a few Canadians'.

The Marines' gunnery officer of one LCF called for two volunteers when she was nearing the end of 'what seemed like years, picking up survivors', for he had seen wounded survivors, one with a leg blown off, clinging to a raft. Their rescuers took a dinghy through the heavy fire, reached the raft and rowed back with the survivors.

A major air battle over the landing area resulted in greater RAF losses than German, but by this date the Germans were trying to conserve their aircraft. Several were shot down by the minor support craft's Naval crews after they had gone close inshore supporting the LCAs. (These small and medium LC support would later be manned by Marines.) The German reaction ashore had been swift enough, although the German 302 Infantry Division did not order action stations until 0501 hours, 19 minutes before H-hour and after the Army commandos were ashore. Nevertheless the Canadians had 3,369 casualties, mostly prisoners, and the commandos lost 247 men including 75 from 40 RM. RM casualties among the support craft were probably over 50, including a number hit by German aircraft's cannon fire.

(extract from The Royal Marines 1919-1980 by J D Ladd)