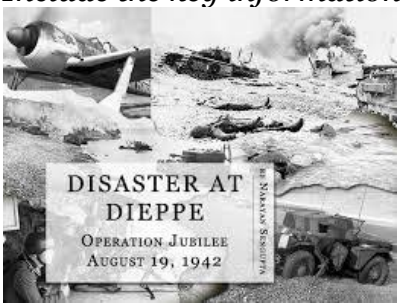
Canada's Key Battle Contributions to WWII

Entering World War Two: September 10, 1939

Include the key information and significance for Canada.

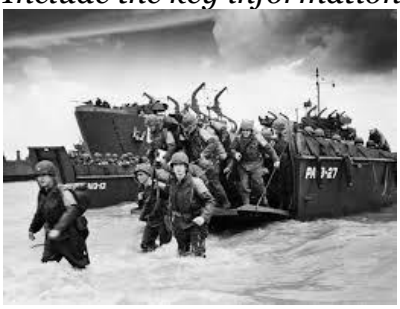
Dieppe: August 19, 1942

Include the key information and significance for Canada.



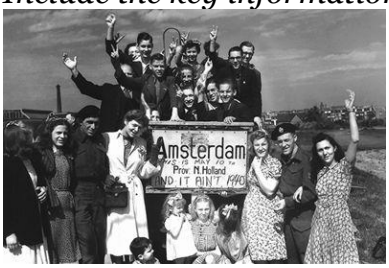
D-Day: June 6, 1944

Include the key information and significance for Canada.



Liberation of the Netherlands: September 1944 – April 1945

Include the key information and significance for Canada.



Entering World War Two

The Second World War was a defining event in Canadian history, transforming a quiet country on the fringes of global affairs into a critical player in the 20th century's most important struggle. Canada carried out a vital role in the Battle of the Atlantic and the air war over Germany, and contributed forces to the campaigns of western Europe beyond what might be expected of a small nation of then only 11 million people.

The Path to War

Memories of the First World War—the tragic loss of life, the heavy burden of debt and the strain on the country's unity imposed by conscription—made Canadians, including politicians of all parties, loath to contemplate another such experience. Initially, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King warmly supported British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasing German leader Adolf Hitler. When Chamberlain postponed war by sacrificing Czechoslovakia in the Munich crisis of September 1938, King thanked him publicly, and Canadians in general certainly agreed. Nevertheless, the shock of this crisis likely turned opinion towards accepting war to check the advance of Nazism. Only gradually did ongoing Nazi aggression alter this mood to the point where Canada was prepared to take part in another great war. King himself had no doubt that in a great war involving Britain, Canada could not stand aside.

Declaration and Mobilization

When the German attack on Poland on 1 September 1939 finally led Britain and France to declare war on Germany, King summoned Parliament to "decide," as he had pledged. Declaration of war was postponed for a week, during which Canada was formally neutral. The government announced that approval of the "Address in reply to the Speech from the Throne," which stated the government's decision to support Britain and France, would constitute approval of a declaration of war.

On September 9 the address was approved without a recorded vote, and war was declared the following day. The basis for parliamentary unity had in fact been laid in March, when both major parties accepted a program rejecting conscription for overseas service. King clearly envisaged a limited effort and was lukewarm towards an expeditionary force. Nevertheless, there was enough pressure to lead the Cabinet to dispatch one army division to Europe. The Allies' defeat in France and Belgium in the early summer of 1940 and the collapse of France frightened Canadians. The idea of limited and economical war went by the board, at which point the only limitation was the pledge against overseas conscription. The armed forces were rapidly enlarged, conscription was introduced June 1940 for home defence and expenditure grew enormously.

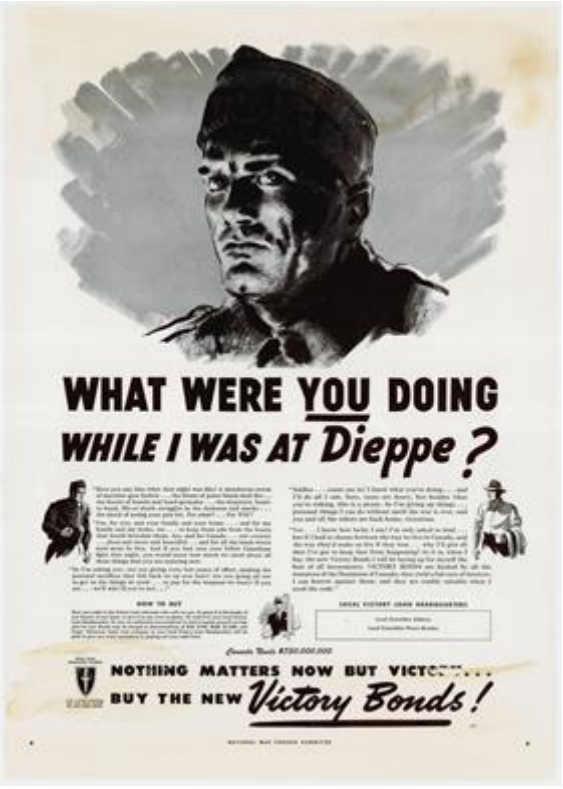
Dieppe Raid

During the Second World War, on 19 August 1942, the Allies launched a major raid on the small French coast port of Dieppe.

Dieppe Beaches
Bodies of Canadian soldiers of the Calgary Regiment following Operation Jubilee, 19 August 1942 (courtesy Library and Archives Canada/C-14160).

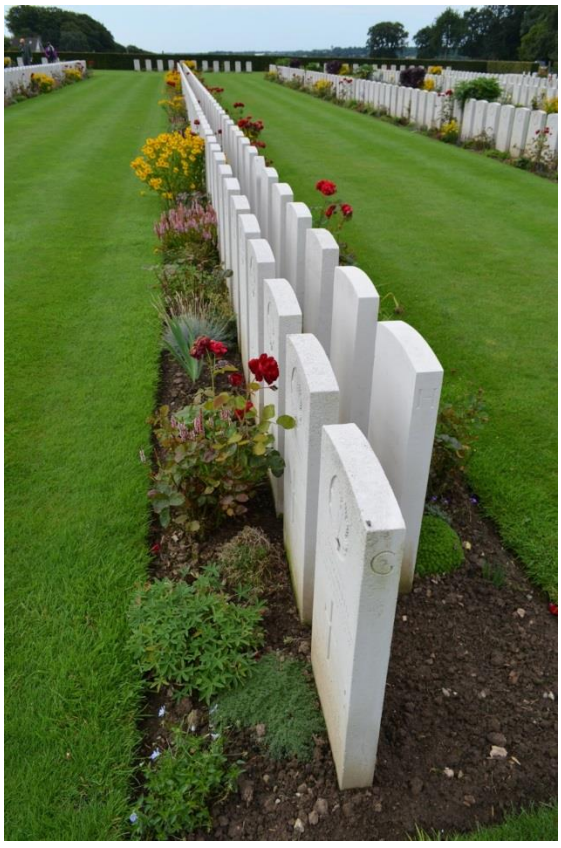
Canadian soldier with German prisoner.
A Canadian soldier with a German prisoner who was captured during the Dieppe Raid. (courtesy of Library and Archives Canada-a210156-v6)

The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada.
Infantrymen of The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada going ashore during the raid on Dieppe.(Image courtesy of Library and Archives Canada-PA-113245.)



Victory Bond poster.

Victory Bond poster, 1942 (Image courtesy of Library and Archives Canada-00989



Dieppe, July 2012.

The Canadian war cemetery at Dieppe. Image courtesy of Richard Foot.

Dieppe, July 2012.

The pebble beach in Dieppe. Image courtesy of Richard Foot.

During the Second World War, on 19 August 1942, the Allies launched a major raid on the small French coast port of Dieppe. Operation Jubilee was the first Canadian Army engagement in the European war, designed to test the Allies' ability to launch amphibious assaults against Adolf Hitler's "Fortress Europe." The raid was a disaster: More than 900 Canadian soldiers were killed, and thousands more were wounded and taken prisoner. Despite the bloodshed, the raid provided valuable lessons for subsequent Allied amphibious assaults on Africa, Italy and Normandy.

Testing Fortress Europe

The raid was mainly intended to evaluate the Allies' ability to conduct amphibious assaults against occupied Europe, and establish a foothold there. American and British leaders wanted to eventually liberate the continent and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin had asked them to open a "second front" in Western Europe to relieve the enemy pressure on the Russian front in the east. The Dieppe Raid was designed for an Allied force to take a defended port, establish and hold a perimeter around the town, destroy the harbour facilities, and then withdraw by sea. Lieutenant-General Harry Crerar pushed for Canadian troops to form the bulk of the assault force because of domestic public opinion—which was pressing for Canadian Army involvement in the war—and the morale of Canadian personnel overseas, who had been stationed in the United Kingdom for two years without combat action to date.

Launched across the English Channel from England, Operation Jubilee involved 4,963 Canadian soldiers, plus Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) aircraft, as well as other Allied forces.

Tragedy on the Beaches

In the early morning hours, Major-General J.H. Roberts' 2nd Canadian Infantry Division assaulted the Dieppe beach at four designated sections. At Blue Beach, at the village of Puys (1.6 km east of Dieppe), troops of The Royal Regiment of Canada and The Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) of Canada arrived late in their bid to take out enemy artillery and machine guns guarding the Dieppe beaches. From the start the enemy pinned down and shot them up until the raid was over.

At Green Beach, by the village of Pourville (4 km west of Dieppe), the South Saskatchewan Regiment arrived on time and in the dark. Unfortunately, the part of the unit tasked with reaching a radar station and anti-aircraft guns to the east of Pourville landed on the west side of the River Scie, which ran through town. These troops had to cross the river on the village's only bridge, which the Germans ferociously defended. Ultimately, both the South Saskatchewans and Cameron Highlanders of Canada were pushed back.

At Red and White Beaches directly in front of the port, the Essex Scottish and Royal Hamilton Light Infantry (RHLI) regiments landed without their armoured support, the 14th Canadian Army Tank Regiment (the Calgary Tanks), which was late. The enemy, from higher ground and in the town's Casino, hit these units hard. Some infantry entered Dieppe, but the Canadians also failed to achieve their objectives here.

On a ship offshore, Roberts, believing that more troops were in Dieppe than in reality, sent the reserve Fusiliers Mont-Royal to take advantage. This regiment was also destroyed. Finally, the Calgary Tanks that did land onshore were limited in movement by the shingle beach (consisting of large pebbles, known as chert), and concrete barriers. The surviving tanks provided covering fire for the force's evacuation.

High Costs and Critical Lessons

The raid was over by mid-day. In nine hours, 907 Canadian soldiers were killed, 2,460 were wounded, and 1,946 Canadians were taken prisoner— including more prisoners than the army lost later in 11 months during the Northwest Europe campaign of 1944-1945. In the air battle overhead, the RCAF lost 13 planes and 10 pilots, out of 106 Allied aircraft and 81 airmen lost overall.

Only British commandos, assigned to subdue coast artillery batteries, enjoyed some success. For the Canadians, the day was not without heroism. Honorary Captain J.W. Foote of the RHLI, and Lieutenant-Colonel C.C.I. Merritt of the South Saskatchewans both received the Victoria Cross; the chaplain Foote because he helped care for wounded troops and Merritt because he bravely led his men over the Pourville bridge and later commanded a rearguard that allowed some troops to escape. Both were taken prisoner.

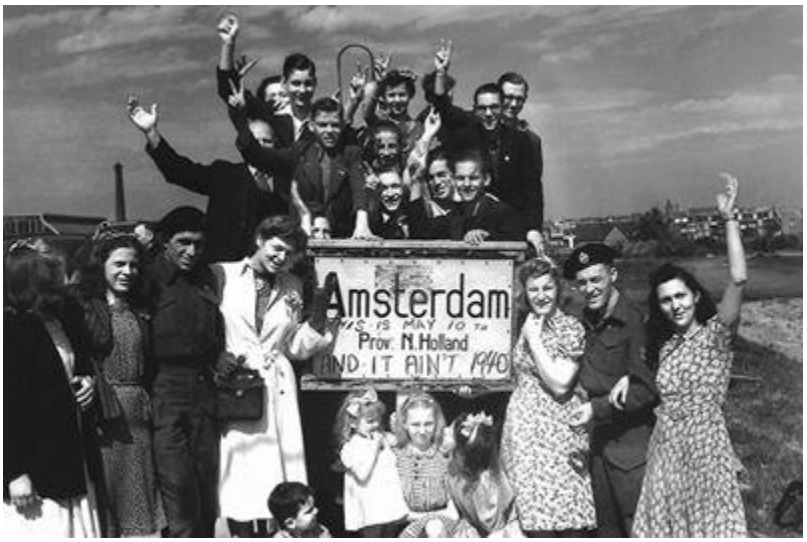
German casualties were light, outside of 48 aircraft lost. For the Allies, the raid failed largely due to poor planning and higher leadership and bad luck. The Germans did not know of the pending

raid, but they were alerted after Allied naval craft enroute to Dieppe clashed with a German convoy.

The hard lessons included avoiding further assaults on defended ports, as well as the need for better intelligence on beach conditions and German defences, better communication between personnel on and offshore, heavier naval gunfire and more bomber aircraft in support, specialized landing craft, and tanks able to overcome beach obstacles. These elements were implemented later in amphibious assaults in North Africa, Italy, and Normandy on 6 June 1944.

Liberation of the Netherlands

In the final months of the Second World War, Canadian forces were given the important and deadly task of liberating the Netherlands from Nazi occupation.



Celebration, Netherlands 1945

Canadian troops during the celebrations in Holland, 1945 (courtesy DND/PA-146284).

The liberation of Ermelo (Holland)

The people of Ermelo (Holland) liberated by "B" Squadron of the Strathcona's on April 17th 1945.

Liberation of the Netherlands

While the Americans and the British focused on the Rhine bridgehead, a German garrison of some 120 000 remained on their left flank in Holland. Commander Bernard Montgomery ordered the Canadians to clear them out.

In the final months of the Second World War, Canadian forces were given the important and deadly task of liberating the Netherlands from Nazi occupation. From September 1944 to April 1945, the First Canadian Army fought German forces on the Scheldt estuary — opening the port of Antwerp for Allied use — and then cleared northern and western Netherlands of Germans, allowing food and other relief to reach millions of desperate people. Today, Canada is fondly remembered by the Dutch for ending their oppression under the Nazis.

Antwerp

British and American troops first entered the southern Netherlands in early September, 1944, three months after the D-Day landings in Normandy. In mid-September, the Allies launched Operation Market Garden, a massive airborne assault on the Dutch town of Arnhem, hoping this would allow them a quick route into Germany, via a crossing of the Rhine River at Arnhem. The Arnhem attack failed, slowing the Allied advance and keeping most of the Netherlands under German control.

As the Allies sought another way into Germany, they needed a large harbour through which to ship supplies to their advancing armies. The Belgian city of Antwerp, one of Europe's biggest ports, had already been liberated, but the 70-kilometre long estuary of the Scheldt River, which connected Antwerp to the sea, was still held by the Germans. The task of clearing the estuary of enemy forces was assigned to the First Canadian Army.

Battle of the Scheldt

The First Canadian Army was Canada's principal fighting arm in northwest Europe during the war. A powerful strike force under the command of Canadian General Harry Crerar, it included the 2nd Canadian Corps, as well as large contingents of British, Polish, American and Dutch infantry and armoured troops. Since the Battle of Normandy in the summer of 1944, the Army had formed the left flank of the Allied advance towards Germany — with the First Canadians liberating ports and cities along the Channel Coast of France and Belgium.

Upon reaching the Netherlands, the First Canadian Army was ordered to clear the banks of the wide, multi-channelled Scheldt River between the North Sea the port of Antwerp. It was a treacherous landscape for attacking troops to operate in — flat, soggy, sometimes-flooded land, situated below sea level and enclosed by a series of dykes.

Under the leadership of Canadian Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds (who had temporarily replaced Crerar), Canadian and British soldiers fought a series of fierce battles through October and early November, including amphibious assaults from small boats against German defences along the estuary. Aside from the use of boats, the movement of men, tanks and other equipment was often restricted to narrow roadways along the top of dykes, under frequent German fire.

The First Canadian Army lost nearly 13,000 men killed, wounded or missing during the Scheldt fighting, including more than 6,300 Canadians. However, by 8 November the estuary and its large islands had been secured. The river was then cleared of mines, and on 28 November the first convoy of Allied cargo ships entered the port of Antwerp.

Battle of the Rhineland

The First Canadian Army spent the winter patrolling its portion of the front line in the Netherlands and France — skirmishing occasionally with the enemy — while American forces in Belgium fought back against Germany's surprise attack in the Ardennes Forest. In February 1945, the Allied advance in northwest Europe resumed, with a huge offensive to drive the enemy across the Rhine River. It fell to the First Canadian Army to clear the area between the Maas and Rhine Rivers, pushing German forces eastward over the Rhine.

In March the First Canadian Army was reinforced by various Allied units, including the 1st Canadian Corps, and transferred north from the battlegrounds of Italy. For the first time in history, two Canadian army corps were fighting together. And with an international strength now of more than 450,000 men, the First Canadians became the largest army ever commanded by a Canadian officer.

Food and Relief

In late March, as other Allied armies crossed the Rhine into Germany, the First Canadian Army began rooting out German forces in the remainder of the Netherlands. The Canadians faced stiff fighting in places, and were also hampered by the broken roads, bridges and other infrastructure destroyed by the fleeing Germans, who blew up some of the dykes in the western Netherlands, flooding parts of the countryside.

The Canadians were greeted as heroes as they liberated small towns and major cities, including Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague. Millions of Dutch had suffered terribly during the harsh "hunger winter" of 1945, and Canadian troops facilitated the arrival of food, fuel and other aid supplies to a population in the midst of starvation.

General Charles Foulkes, commander of the 1st Canadian Corps, accepted the surrender of German forces in the Netherlands on 5 May. Two days later, Germany formally surrendered and the war in Europe came to an end.

Remembrance

More than 7,600 Canadian soldiers, sailors and airmen died fighting in the Netherlands. They are buried today in official war cemeteries across the country. The largest, Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery near the city of Nijmegen, holds the graves of more than 2,300 Canadians.

Canadians are fondly remembered by the Dutch as both liberators and saviors who rescued millions from sickness and starvation in 1945. The joyous "Canadian summer" that followed forged deep and long-lasting bonds of friendship between the two countries.

Every year since the war, the Netherlands has sent thousands of tulips to Ottawa, in appreciation for Canada's sacrifice and for providing safe harbour to the Dutch royal family, which lived in exile in Canada during the war. The Canadian-Dutch bond is also celebrated every summer during the Nijmegen Marches — an annual, international military marching competition — at which the Netherlands' liberation by Canadian soldiers is warmly and gratefully remembered.

D-Day: The allied invasion of Normandy

CBC News Posted: Jun 04, 2009 3:40 PM ET Last Updated: Jun 06, 2013 11:47 AM ET

Troops and landing craft occupy a Normandy beach shortly after the D-Day landing. The bombardment of the beaches began at 6 a.m. on June 6, 1944, and within hours soldiers from Canada had established the beachhead at Juno Beach and the German defences were shattered. The sun was just coming up over the Normandy coast at about 5 a.m. on June 6, 1944 — D-Day. The military planners had given Canada a major role on D-Day: to take one of the five designated beaches where Allied forces were to land to begin the liberation of Europe from Nazi Germany.

The Americans had Utah and Omaha beaches in the west, then came the British at Gold, then the Canadians at Juno Beach and finally the British at Sword on the east.

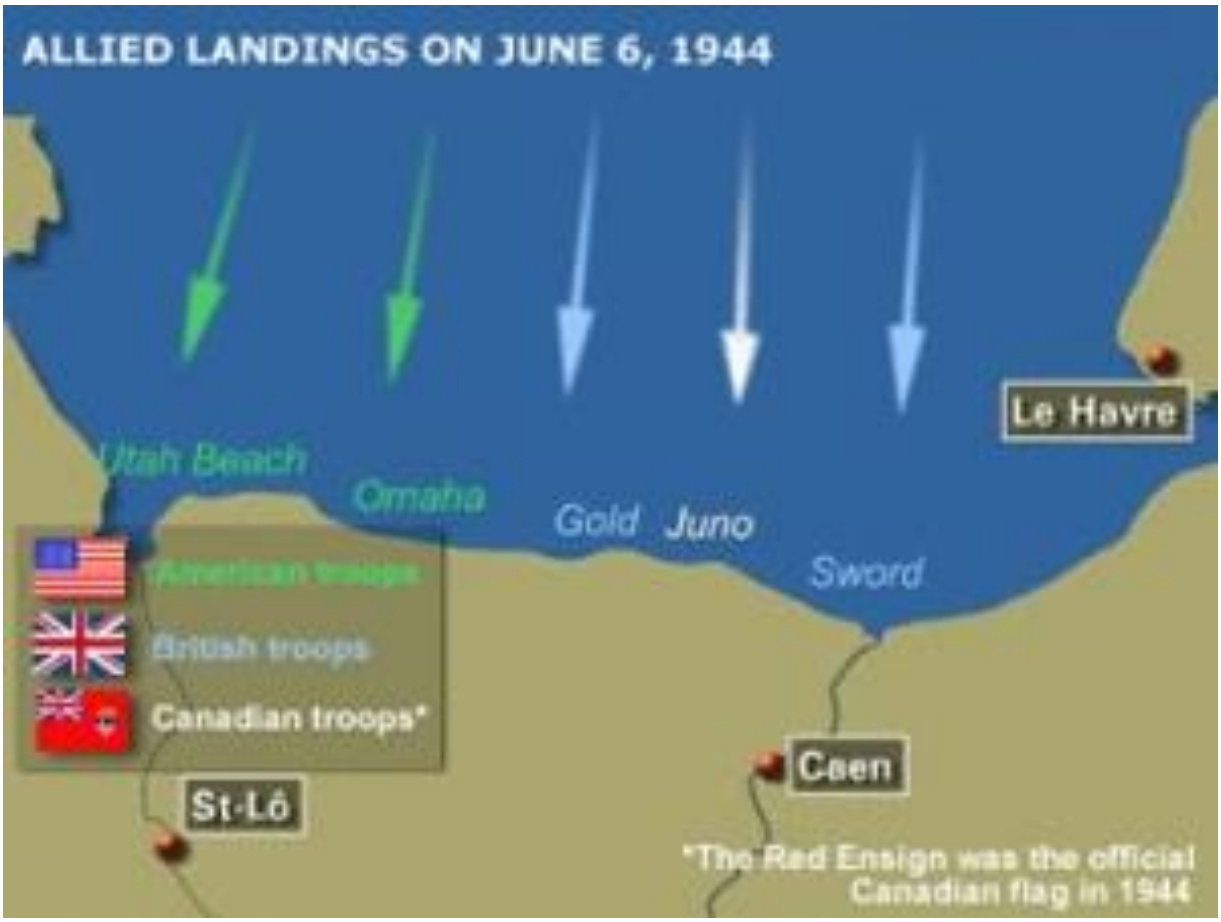
About 155,000 soldiers, 5,000 ships and landing craft, 50,000 vehicles and 11,000 planes were massed for the greatest seaborne invasion in history. (The Canadian Press)

The greatest seaborne invasion in history was aimed at 80 kilometres of mostly flat, sandy beach along the Normandy coast, west of the Seine River, east of the jutting Cotentin Peninsula. Canada's objective was right in the middle.

There were about 155,000 soldiers, 5,000 ships and landing craft, 50,000 vehicles and 11,000 planes set for the coming battle.

For Canada, 14,000 soldiers were to land on the beaches; another 450 were to drop behind enemy lines by parachute or glider. The Royal Canadian Navy supplied ships and about 10,000 sailors.

Lancaster bombers and Spitfire fighters from the Royal Canadian Air Force supported the invasion.



The Canadians who landed on Juno Beach were part of Britain's Second Army, under the command of British Lt. General Miles Dempsey, who had served in North Africa and Italy with the overall British commander, Bernard Montgomery. The Canadian assault forces were the Third Canadian Infantry Division, commanded by Major General R. F. Keller and the Second Canadian Armoured Brigade, with Brigadier R.A. Wyman in charge.

The units were from across the country; from east to west, from the North Nova Scotia Highlanders, to the Canadian Scottish from Victoria.

The bombardment of the beaches began at 6 a.m. Within an hour the lead landing craft were away from the ships.

Two hours later, the German defences at Juno Beach had been shattered and Canada had established the beachhead.