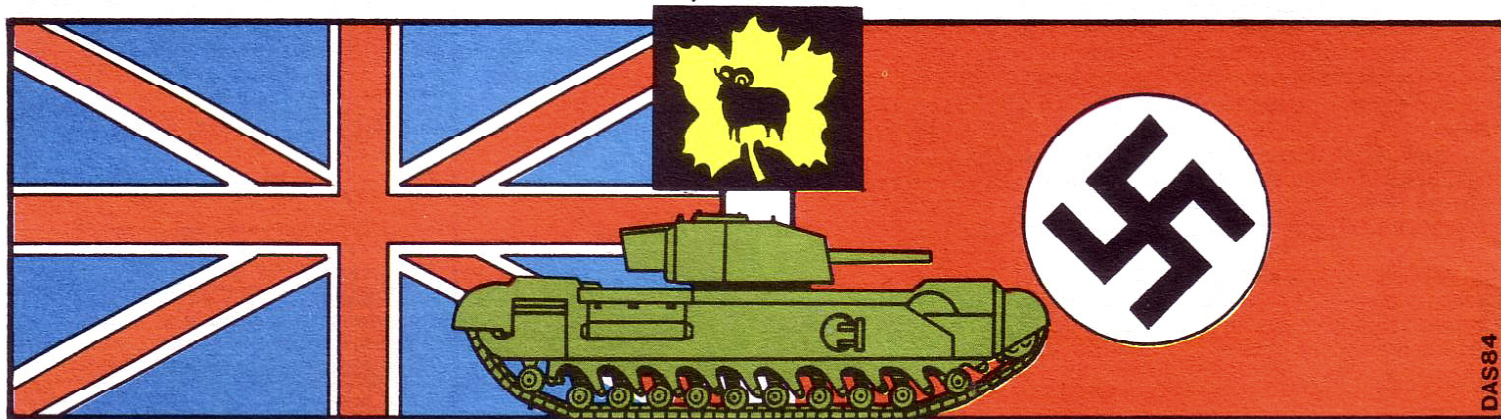


DIEPPE: CANADIANS UNDER FIRE

PANZER LEADER Scenario

By Mark L. Shannon



“Too large to be a symbol, too small to be a success.” What else would you call an amphibious assault involving over 5000 infantrymen and a regiment of tanks? Whatever historians may call it, the operation was to be one of the bloodiest repulses of Allied forces in World War 2.

The reasons behind the attack are rather difficult to comprehend at this date. But early in 1942, the Kriegsmarine was able to send home two battlecruisers and a heavy cruiser from France through the English Channel with little damage; it was a severe blow to British pride and morale. Soon after this, the German offensive in Soviet Russia once again picked up momentum and drove on toward Stalingrad; Leningrad was on the verge of surrender. Stalin demanded a show of solidarity from his Western Allies, preferably in the form of a second front. But America and Britain had recently committed themselves to landings in North Africa and simply could not devote their still meager forces to such an undertaking as the invasion of Europe.

Fully aware that some attempt to soothe Stalin should be made, English planners thought to try a larger version of their heretofore successful commando raids along the French coast. Two plans were proposed—a flanking attack using surprise as its key element and a frontal assault with a major bombardment to silence opposition. Either were aimed at taking one of the small port towns on the French Channel coastline. After lengthy deliberations and bitter argument, Dieppe was chosen as the target. With the target determined, it was decided that the flank attack could not work due to the nature of the coastline there—almost vertical cliffs except at Dieppe itself. Too, Allied Intelligence advised that the bridges leading into the town could not support the new Churchill tanks (to be first combat tested in the raid). Montgomery and Mountbatten, the chief planners, were forced to accept the frontal assault plan, provisional upon a massive preliminary bombardment from sea and air.

The only forces available in the British Isles at the time were the untried troops of the Canadian Army, the similarly untested American Rangers and 82nd Airborne, and various veteran commando units. It was decided that the 3rd and 4th Commandos, with a small force of U.S. Rangers, would take the German naval guns flanking the port. The airborne troops were to be dropped to seal off Dieppe from reinforcements. The Canadian 2nd Division was given the main chore—the capture of the town itself—and were to be supported by a regiment of tanks.

Problems first arose with the naval support promised. Sir Dudley Pound refused to risk either a battleship or cruiser in the Channel within range of

Luftwaffe airfields. Then the next blow fell when “Bomber” Harris refused to lend his heavies because they could not be spared from the nightly raids on Germany. But Leigh-Mallory promised to supply close support with Hurricane fighter-bombers, and so the plan was allowed to mature.

In practice landings on the southern coast of England, it was found that the naval landing crews were unable to keep to the schedule or the exacting placement that was required, but this was blamed on the stronger tides. Too, the “dry runs” revealed that any mistake in the complex landing scheme would spread, causing high casualties. The operation was set for the week of July 4-9. Suddenly the weather in the Channel deteriorated such that the airborne troops could not be sent in. The operation was cancelled.

But, in the meantime, Tobruk fell to the Afrika Korps. Convoy PQ17 to Russia was attacked and almost completely destroyed. Stalin’s demands for a concrete show of Allied support grew shriller. Political necessity for the operation grew. But unease held the British planners. Montgomery stated that the attack should be “off for all time” and left to take up his new command in North Africa.

Yet the politics, and the pressures of the alliance, decreed that the attack be resurrected. Churchill ordered it to take place as soon as feasible. This time there would be no paratroop landings, but otherwise the assault would take place as planned. The soldiers themselves were not told of the upcoming show and were kept in their normal training routines.

Finally, on August 17, the Canadians were put on alert and boarded their transports. There their officers found out that they were to carry out the attack that had been previously cancelled. The invasion force sailed on the evening of the 18th; so did a small German coastal convoy bound for Dieppe. Invariably, the invasion force and the convoy met and surprise was lost on the left flank where the 3rd Commando was to attack the guns at Berneval and the Royal Canadian Regiment was to land at Puits to attack the guns on the eastern headland overlooking the Dieppe beaches. The Germans had made Dieppe into an independent strongpoint, with all-round defences heavily guarded with barbed wire and pillboxes. Machineguns and artillery were set in concrete emplacements and in caves in the cliff face.

The landings began with the assaults on the flanks. On the left, where the vital element of surprise had been lost, the forces wading ashore were massacred. The Royal Regiment lost nearly 500 men. At Berneval, the commandoes were pinned down on the beaches, except for twenty men under

a young major. These were able to circle behind the battery and distracted the Germans for the important hours of the assault. On the right, the commando attacks were all successful, but to little avail. For the German defenders were in full readiness and reacted with courage and conviction.

At Dieppe the main landings were thrown into total confusion. Most of the troops were landed, as well as the 29 tanks (including three Churchill flamethrowers). However, many were out of position, and all sense of formation and purpose had been lost. Allied information was now shown insufficient, and it was found that numerous well-sited MG posts raked the sands. Dozens of men died on the beach; most of the rest were pinned down. The tanks, it was found, could not cross the seawall separating them from the town. Following troops balked when faced with the massive firepower sweeping the beachhead and had to be forced from their craft at gunpoint.

At this point, communications with the commanders at sea had broken down completely. One radio set had been smashed by a tank and the others lost, the operators dead or wounded. Only one radio still functioned on the beaches, and that was in an immobilized scout car. Any chance of reacting to the mounting disaster was hopeless without coordination. In desperation, the reserves were shortly committed. But their landing was badly off target; in effect, they assaulted a new beach and were in turn decimated.

After four hours, the order for withdrawal was issued. The massacre continued as machineguns and snipers, mortars and artillery cut down the men running from the beaches. Some could not or would not leave the cover of the seawall. Acts of bravery were rife in the ad-hoc rearguards that sacrificed themselves to allow the others to be picked from the water. Soon the surrenders began.

Of 4963 Canadians involved, 3367 were killed, captured or wounded. In the other Allied formations engaged, the proportions were smaller, but still high. Overhead, the greatest air battle to date raged over the French shore as the Luftwaffe rose to turn back the British fighter-bombers. In the end, Allied ground casualties were a shocking 68% of those in action. Almost three Canadian battalions had been hurled against one German company. They had been butchered. The raid’s true value—tarnished as it might be—was not seen until June 6, 1944, when a much better defended position was assaulted from the sea. Dieppe had been a costly lesson, but one that, to their credit, the Allies learned.

