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Dream Come True

Canada Proud as Armed Forces Win Individual Role in Invasion Attack



Canadian Official photo via Signal Corps Radio Telephoto

Remember Dieppe! Canadians in Normandy take their first prisoners

Canada came of military age on D Day. A Navy public-relations officer's dispatch told how: "Ships of the Royal Canadian Navy carried the men of the Canadian Army, landed the first assault waves and their reinforcements, and then commenced a sleepless period of day-and-night ferry service to the beachheads. Above, the men of the Royal Canadian Air Force held the skies."

It was news that an all-Canadian team had been formed in England to strike its own blow; that from Canada's 11,500,000 citizens had been drawn ground, sea, and air forces in sufficient strength to earn a distinct place in the greatest assault in history.

The Dream: Since Dunkerque, since the Battle of Britain (which Canadian fighter pilots helped to win), and especially since the bloody experiment of Dieppe, the Canadian Army had grimly awaited the invasion of Europe. For a time there had been hope that a full and integrated Canadian army could be employed—a dream abandoned in favor of splitting the impatient army and sending part of it to Sicily and Italy. But the dream that came true on D Day had seemed too much to expect.

For one thing, the Canadian Navy (fifteen ships in September 1939 and now over 700, including 250 combat ships) had been running the North Atlantic convoys for so long that Canadians did not think of it as an assault force. And without the navy, which would need trained personnel to man landing craft, there could be no combined assault by Canadians.

Actually, since January all three chiefs of staff in Ottawa had gone to London to correlate invasion plans. Lt. Gen. Kenneth Stuart, Vice Admiral Percy W. Nelles, and Air Marshal Lloyd S. Breadner had been planning together and with Anglo-American commanders to bring off the seeming miracle.

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Canada on D-Day

The Attack: The Canadians were in the middle at H Hour. They had crossed the channel between the mass of American and British ships while the Normandy coast was being plastered by shells from battleships, cruisers, and destroyers. The sea was rough and the troops were sick—but the first waves of Canadians got ashore, relatively dry, from small landing craft. Other waves followed quickly. Less than three hours later they had secured the beachhead (at St. Aubin and Bernières-sur-Mer, about midway between Le Havre and Cherbourg), and after some stiff coastal fighting the troops had shoved inland.

In the first 48 hours the Canadians had captured a dozen towns, taken more than 600 German prisoners, stopped a small enemy tank force outside of Caen, and then joined the British in repeated attacks on Caen. The Third Division was identified as one of the units in action.

For its part, the navy disclosed that at least three Canadian flotillas of destroyers, frigates, corvettes, mine sweepers, and motor torpedo boats were engaged in the landing operations. Commanders of the Canadian ships had been ordered, if their craft were mortally hit, to beach their ships and keep up gunfire, but no case of such necessity was reported.

The Reaction: The only man in Canada who knew the D-Day secret was Prime Minister Mackenzie King. He had kept it so well that two of his Cabinet chiefs, Defense Minister J. L. Ralston and Air Minister Charles G. Power, were away from Ottawa on routine business when the invasion news came through. King had not given them even a hint of the date.

On invasion eve, the Prime Minister talked over postwar matters with the only caller at his Laurier House residence, Canadian Ambassador to Washington Leighton McCarthy. And when he got the first flash (from the War Department in Washington), King got up for the day—he was dressed by 4 a.m.

By mid-afternoon, when the Commons assembled, Mr. King was able to announce the good news that the Canadian forces had “successfully achieved their first objective and are making progress.” Like the nation generally on D Day, the Commons was grave, but its members snapped up the chance to give vent to their feelings in singing for the first time the French national anthem on the suggestion of Maurice Lalonde, famous as a song leader in Quebec’s Labelle neighborhood.

Lalonde said the idea was not his own. A group of both English and French-speaking members had planned the tribute to the French people as their day of liberation approached, and Lalonde was the logical leader. Veteran press-gallery correspondents described the singing of the “Marseillaise” as one of the most stirring events they had witnessed in Parliament.

Port of Departure: Better than any other place in Canada, the port and city of Halifax understood the scope of in-

Canada on D-Day

vasion. Since 1939 Halifax had seen the troops leave for overseas, watched great convoys pull away with always-increasing war supplies—and this spring Halifax had not failed to note a new drive and intensity.

Waterfront authorities had once called on businessmen, students, industrial workers, and servicemen to help handle cargo, and in the pre-invasion period every shipping tonnage record for the port had been broken. But even Haligonians had hardly dared to hope that enough had been sent to England to equip a combined all-Canadian force.

