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Will Fowler, *The Commandos at Dieppe: Rehearsal for D-Day* (Harper Collins Publishers, 2002) ISBN 0 00 711125 8, 256 pp, including bibliography.

Reviewed by Paul Dickson,

On 19 August 1942, the Allies launched an amphibious assault against the French port of Dieppe. Lord Louis Mountbatten and Combined Operations Headquarters conceived it as a test of the techniques and equipment that would be used when the Allied forces liberated Europe, a “reconnaissance in force.” The raid was also one of a series of increasingly ambitious raids against German occupied Europe, all of which had been designed to demonstrate the Allied commitment to liberating Europe, and pave the way for the much-anticipated “Second Front.” 6100 all ranks sailed from five ports along Britain’s south coast: 4963 were Canadian, 1075 were British, and the rest American and French. They were transported and supported by a naval flotilla of 237 ships, mainly landing craft of various sorts, and none larger than the 1000 ton “Hunt” class destroyers. The attack was a disaster. By the end of the day the 2nd Canadian Division had suffered 3367 casualties, including almost 2000 taken prisoner. The Royal Air Force had fought its biggest single day’s battle of the Second World War. The Royal Navy had 550 casualties, lost 33 landing craft and one destroyer. Some contemporaries characterized it as criminal, but the majority of the Allied senior military command viewed, or came to view it, as a necessary wake-up call regarding the difficulties of executing an amphibious operation against a well-defended coast. Many subsequent studies have reiterated that interpretation, although they make no attempt to provide evidence linking the two landings. Will Fowler’s book, subtitled *Rehearsal for D-Day*, falls into that historiographical tradition; the Normandy landings are barely mentioned and indeed, the focus is on only one of the commando units involved at Dieppe. In that sense the author’s approach is unremarkable, and the title somewhat misleading. What is unique is the way

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he focuses on, and explains, the one success of that day in August: Operation “Cauldron,” the assault by No. 4 Commando against the “Hess” battery on the far western flank of the main landings at Dieppe.

Fowler’s goal is straightforward: “This is the story of the men who fought and won at the Hess Battery that summer morning.” The book painstakingly details the preparation, training and execution of Operation “Cauldron.” In that sense, the author has accomplished much of what he set out to do. It is thorough. That said, the book sits, sometimes uncomfortably, between a narrative popular history and an analysis, based on a solid grounding in the resources and an exhaustive use of first hand accounts of every surviving participant. The book is well researched, although it has few citations, and the story is held together by personnel recollections and first hand accounts of the attack. It also contains a wealth of technical information on weapons and craft, information, which facilitates an understanding of the experience of the men and reveals much about the state of, and constraints on, amphibious and combined operations in 1942. These accounts and descriptions are not always weaved seamlessly into the narrative or used as critically as one might like, but the author is clearly comfortable with the weapons specs and these help round out our understanding of the story of the attack. There are times when the author seems intent on demonstrating the extent of his research rather than using it for analysis. But it is also one of the factors that make the book compelling, and useful: the naval and army elements of this combined operation are understood from the perspective of the participants at the sharp end.

The success of No. 4 Commando is why this book is of interest to naval historians. From his perspective, success was rooted in preparation, training, and much good luck, particularly in terms of the German response to the commando landings. What is also clear, however, is that the contribution of the Royal Navy was equally important to No. 4 Commando’s success and their ability to take advantage of a few lucky breaks.

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Captain John Hughes-Hallett, the Naval Force Commander for the raid, commented on one another overlooked aspect of the raid, describing in his after-action report the operation as “interesting” because it was “perhaps the first occasion on which light naval forces (i.e. coastal craft and landing craft), manned almost entirely by the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, have been employed on a large scale and under conditions of extreme difficulty.”¹¹ He concluded that, with the exception of a few minor mistakes, none decisive, the naval contribution had been carried out “as well as was possible under the conditions which became increasingly difficult.” This may be true, but it was an experiment, and as such highlighting the success of No. 4 Commando raises a number of important questions about the naval aspect of the raid where the landings failed, as well as its place in the history of amphibious warfare.

It is not Fowler’s purpose to address these questions, but his approach sheds some light on them. As he points out, No. 4 Commando’s run in was uneventful, but this was due, at least in part, to skill of the naval officer leading their flotilla, Lieutenant-Commander Hugh Mulleneux. A Royal Navy navigator, his selection was significant. Lord Lovat, the CO of No. 4 Commando, had rejected the first selection, a naval reserve officer who was known to him, but had, in his opinion, a laissez-faire attitude. Lovat concluded in his after-action report that he believed that the presence of a Royal Navy officer made “all the difference when difficult decisions and changes to plans may have to be made at short notice.” This is an avenue that bears exploring for the other landings as well; was the inexperience an element in the complete failure of the raid? There is evidence of problems, and inconsistencies in the reports sent to Hughes-Hallett. There was sufficient concern that a Court of Enquiry was established to look at what went wrong during one of the landings. The naval personnel in charge of the landing craft suggested to the enquiry that a number of soldiers, horrified by the carnage in front of them, refused to leave the landing craft and had to be forced off by their officers. There seems little evidence to support this contention, although it is hard to believe that there

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was not some natural hesitation. Some army accounts suggested undue haste in withdrawing and this may account for the perception that some soldiers lagged. In general, it is an area that warrants a fresh look. By examining and highlighting the success as a combined operation, Fowler sheds light on No. 4 Commando's success and raises useful questions about the failures elsewhere.

[\[1\]](#) PRO, WO106/4197, Hughes-Hallett, Covering Letter to Report on Operation "Jubilee," 30 August 1942