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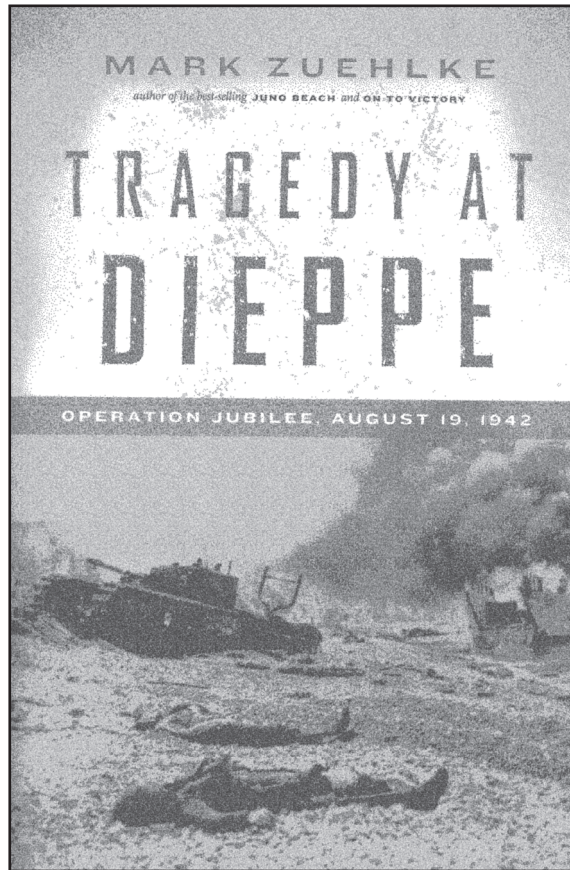
## *Tragedy at Dieppe*

Operation Jubilee,  
August 19, 1942

By Mark Zuehlke

Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2012. 436 pages. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN 978-1-55365-835-1. ([www.dmpibooks.com](http://www.dmpibooks.com))

Prolific Canadian military historian Mark Zuehlke is not the first to call the August 1942 Allied raid on Dieppe an unalloyed disaster, but his lengthy account—436 pages devoted to the story of the preparation and execution of a one-day mission—is perhaps the most comprehensive, well-documented, and authoritative testimonial to that claim. To be sure, readers may experience some disorientation and fatigue over the author’s exhaustive discussion of the mission’s plan, which was continually revised, then cancelled, and finally reborn in the months prior to the action, or by the nearly 200-page description of “Operation Jubilee” itself, retold from the perspective of commanders, multiple raiding parties, aircrews, and the Germans. However, there is method in this meticulousness. First, as the tragic denouement of the episode is widely known, the painstaking reconstruction of the route to Dieppe helps the reader understand why an operation destined for failure could have been conceived and championed by some of the era’s most celebrated military minds. The assiduous description of the preparations produces not only an extended roster of the culpable, but also a sensation of tremendous foreboding as we inch closer to the inevitable bloodbath that



produced a casualty rate of nearly 70 per cent of the roughly 6,000 (mostly Canadian) infantrymen. Secondly, the detailed account of the raid itself gives extensive voice to the participants themselves, whose testimonials drive the narrative. Ordered into an impossible mission—the first combat experience for most of the infantrymen involved—they bore witness to mechanized killing at its most appalling.

The scenes described herein are not recommended for bedtime reading, but would be of service to those who maintain romantic notions of warfare. Soldiers gutted by mortar fire struggle to hold in their entrails, others are immolated when enemy fire ignites the munitions they carry, and

two wounded raiders fortunate enough to make it back to their landing craft are subsequently crushed by a reversing tank. Regiments sent to follow the initial wave of raiders are forced to navigate not only barbed wire, mines, and German gunners, but the limbs and bodies of the dead and dying that transformed the beach into a mass grave. In his report following the attack, the dumbfounded commander of German forces defending the highly-fortified Dieppe rightly found the logic of the operation “incomprehensible” (362).

In a general sense, the suitability of hit-and-run attacks against German-held coastal territory seemed coherent enough. The Soviets were getting pummelled on the Eastern Front, and the British and Americans worried that inaction in the west might guarantee a Soviet collapse or withdrawal. Churchill, meanwhile, was unwilling to sign on to a U.S. plan to open a second front in the summer of 1942, and believed that a high-profile raid might placate the Americans. Moreover, smaller-scale coastal attacks had produced favourable results with few casualties. Less creditable motivations also came into play. Energetic self-promoter Vice Admiral Louis Mountbatten, who as Chief of Combined Operations Headquarters oversaw the raiding program, wished to “stage something spectacular” in order to bolster the reputation of his department and himself (366). Similar aims inspired Canadian Lieutenant General Harry Creer to insist that untried Canadian troops form the core of the raiding force. While Prime Minister Mackenzie King wished to avoid missions that would produce high casualty rates and thus raise the spectre of conscription, opposition parties and English newspapers were eager to see Canadian soldiers finally engage the enemy in a conflict already three years old. Although

Zuehlke himself does not raise the matter, the legacy of Canadians’ fascination with their soldiers’ contributions to victory and nation-building in the First World War may be part of the story here. Trumpeted and often exaggerated during that earlier conflict in the works of Max Aitken and others, and largely unchallenged in the interwar years (as Jonathan Vance’s *Death So Noble* demonstrates), the prowess and heroism of Canada’s Great War soldiers would give later troops much to live up to. This martial veneration also contributed to a sense that military engagements were a sure route to national prestige, and that Canadian forces, the heralded “shock troops” of the First War, were unstoppable. In the months before the raid, a senior Canadian officer noted with some unease that “the people in Canada are calling for blood” (58). Tragically, their demands would be answered at Dieppe.

Zuehlke provides vivid portraits of the individuals who fought on the Allied side, furnishing physical and character descriptions, nicknames, and brief bios; their antagonists, meanwhile, are merely “the Germans,” or in the testimonies of the Allied troops, “Jerry,” or less charitably, “the beast” (223). In addition to the revulsion toward a heinous regime and the animosity born of war, monolithic portrayal of German troops is somewhat preordained under the circumstances, an outcome of the resources available to the author and the preferences of his readership (mostly Canadian, after all). But when we learn from one of the Canadian veterans that Germans were “either very young men or very old” (254) (the more effective members of the Wehrmacht having been shipped to the eastern front), and that many of Dieppe’s “Jerrys” were imported Poles and Hungarians, a sense emerges that this was a motley collection of individuals whose commitment

to the cause and capacity to understand it was likewise variable. Although beyond the author's scope, their own stories would make a fascinating compendium to those conveyed here.

In a brief preface, Zuehlke argues that existing books on the assault are dated and plagued by bias and use of selective evidence. It is surprising, then, that in the main body of his work he does not identify the specific failings of previous interpretations or demonstrate which of his own conclusions is new, well-rehearsed, or controversial. In fact, no previous historian or work is named in the text beyond occasional and vague identifiers such as "the Calgary war diarist," (171) or "[t]he Canadian Army's official historian" (369) (i.e., C.P. Stacey, the doyen of Canadian military history). In an epilogue, Zuehlke reveals some areas of debate among historians (Who was to blame? Did the raid provide beneficial lessons?), but does not disclose who has advanced these competing views. In a volume so carefully documented otherwise, these omissions stand out, and serve to relinquish an opportunity to make a case

for the specific contributions made by this new study. This is not to say that the author suffers from timidity. In the book's powerful concluding pages, Zuehlke deflates a series of myths upheld by those who wish to wrap the episode in at least some modicum of glory: in truth, no new strategic lessons were learned; it was not a dress rehearsal for D-Day; it was not a cover operation to allow a small group of commandos to capture Enigma machines—a theory Zuehlke labels "ridiculous" (370). Whether his latter position is able to withstand opposing claims from David O'Keefe's forthcoming work on Jubilee remains to be seen; less disputable is Zuehlke's contention that considering the raid completely unjustifiable does not defame those who fought. "We do not bestow less honour on those killed at Dieppe," he concludes, "just because their generals failed them by sending them into a battle doomed from the outset by a poor plan" (372).

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## *Arming and Disarming*

A History of Gun Control in Canada

By R. Blake Brown

Toronto: Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History and the University of Toronto Press, 2012. 376 pages. \$70.00 cloth. ISBN 978-1-442646-39-1. \$34.95 paperback. ISBN 978-1-442626-37-9. ([www.utppublishing.com](http://www.utppublishing.com))

**I**n "Arming and Disarming: A History of Gun Control in Canada," R. Blake Brown explores the evolution of gun control, defined as "a wide range of regulatory provisions that shaped the possession, use, sale, transfer, and registration of weapons as well as criminal laws designed

to punish those who intentionally or unintentionally misused firearms." Drawing on a diverse range of sources—legislative debates and speeches, newspaper articles, photographs and other artifacts, he paints a picture of the ways in which firearms were used, discussed and regulated in six