



Landing craft preparing to leave for French coast, June 1944.

Photo: Gilbert Alexander Milne  
DND / National Archives of Canada  
PA - 137960

## 1939–1945

### The Canadian contribution in World War II

Following Hitler's invasion of Poland, Britain and France declared war on Germany. The date was September 3, 1939. Canada summoned a special session of Parliament and declared war seven days later. Within a month, nearly 60 000 Canadian men and women had enlisted, and in December units of the 1st Canadian Division sailed for Britain. Other divisions were soon to follow.

The first major engagement in Europe involving large numbers of Canadian troops was the raid on Dieppe in August 1942. Some 5000 Canadians made up the main assault force for a frontal attack on Dieppe as well as attacks on Pys to the west and Pourville to the east.

However, the landing craft in the eastern sector unexpectedly encountered a small German convoy, and a sharp violent sea battle ensued which alerted coastal defences. As troops leapt ashore at Pys, they were pinned back by enemy mortar and machine gun fire and forced to surrender.

The troops attacking Pourville, by contrast, achieved some degree of surprise, and initial opposition was light. But as the South Saskatchewan regiment and a detachment of the Cameron Highlanders of Canada pushed towards Dieppe proper, resistance stiffened and the Canadians were stopped short of the town. The main force of the Camerons advanced two miles towards their objective, an inland airfield, before they too were forced to halt.

The main attack across the shingle beach in front of Dieppe went badly wrong. The enemy swept the beach with machine gun fire, pinning down the infantry. A similar fate befell the tanks of

the Calgary Regiment. Of the 4963 Canadians who set out on the operation, only 2210 returned to England, many of them wounded.

### Back on the offensive: the Normandy landings

Nearly two years later Canadian troops were to return to the shores of northern France together with British and American forces. All three Canadian services were involved in the invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944.

The 3rd Canadian Infantry Division formed one of the seaborne units; the Royal Canadian Navy cleared the English Channel with its minesweepers and hammered the enemy's beach defences with its guns; and Royal Canadian Air Force bombers attacked German batteries.

In fact Canadian air crews played a vital role throughout the war in both Fighter and Bomber Command offensives, as well as during the Battle of Britain. They also formed their own RCAF Bomber Group which suffered horrific losses in bombing sorties over Germany.

The Canadian forces were assigned to establish a beachhead along the five miles between Courseulles and St Aubin sur Mer, and then push on between Bayeux and Caen to the airfield at Carpiquet. Bad weather and rough seas delayed the assault and the troops encountered fierce resistance. However, despite high casualties, the Canadians achieved their objectives and the Allies were back in Europe.

Altogether, 14 000 Canadians had landed in Normandy and they suffered 1074 casualties. But victory was still 11 months away. It took more than

Of the 619,638 Canadian men and women who fought in the First World War, 66,655 lost their lives and another 172,950 were wounded. There are 13 battlefield memorials in France and Belgium which commemorate the exploits of the Canadian and Newfoundland troops, 19,660 of whom have unknown graves.

More than one million Canadian service men and women made a contribution to the Second World War, and 45,000 lost their lives. Canada's economic contribution to the war effort was also impressive; and the nation had an important liaison role between Britain and the United States.

At present, there is no memorial anywhere in Britain which specifically marks the Canadian contribution in these conflicts, however, efforts are underway to correct this omission. A foundation has recently been created and it is hoped to erect a memorial as testimony not only to the sacrifices but also the lasting friendships established in Britain.