

Canadian veterans return to Dieppe, 70 years after tragic battle

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Left to right, Dieppe veterans Fred Engelbrech, 92, Arthur Rossel, 92 of Brampton Ontario, Roy Wozniak, 93, Russ Burrows, 93 of Picton Ontario, and David Lloyd Hart, 95 are seen during the commemorations to honor Allied soldiers killed 70 years ago in a failed World War II invasion, in Dieppe, northern France, Sunday Aug. 19, 2012. (Michel Spingler/AP)

A handful of Canadian veterans were treated to a heroes' welcome Sunday when they returned to the French coastal town of Dieppe to mark the 70th anniversary of one of the bloodiest and most disastrous raids of the Second World War.

Thousands of people lined the streets to greet the seven veterans, now all in their 90s, who are in northwest France to attend the commemorative ceremonies.

The veterans many who are now using wheelchairs or walking canes proudly wore red poppies to pay their respects to the 900 fallen comrades killed within hours after 5,000 Canadian troops stormed the pebbled beaches of German-occupied Dieppe on Aug. 19, 1942. Nearly 2,500 others were either wounded or taken prisoner.

Under grey, foggy skies, local residents, along with the French military and other government officials, honoured the few returning veterans. Canadian flags could be seen flying in windows and outside buildings as people stopped to applaud and shake the hands of these wartime heroes.

The veterans were obviously moved. Many had tears in their eyes.

It left Canadian Veterans Affairs Minister Steven Blaney visibly moved.

"It goes to your heart," Mr. Blaney said. "I'm speechless ... and overwhelmed by the emotion we can feel here in Dieppe today."

Roman Wozniak was one of the sliders who flew a Spitfire over the beaches of Dieppe that day.

"We had no problem in the air," said the 93-year-old Vancouver man. "We did get six that day and we lost three."

But Mr. Wozniak had felt that the deadly battle was largely forgotten.

"It was a disaster," he said. "It was sort of swept under the rug and very little was said about it."

Fred Engelbrecht, 92, of Hamilton, served in the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry.

He considered himself one of the lucky ones, surviving the raid to become a prisoner of war. He spent four months tied up with ropes and shackled in chains for a further 12 months during his time as a POW. He was liberated in 1945.

"We were the best troops of England of that time and I know that," said Mr. Engelbrecht of the Canadian soldiers.

Arthur Rossell, with the Essex Scottish Regiment, was wounded during the raid and was in a coma for 18 days, spending several months in hospital.

Sunday's visit was his first return to Dieppe since the raid. He said the Allies were unprepared for the desperate conditions of Dieppe. The beaches of Dieppe are just mass of little stones and that was a handicap," said Mr. Rossell, 92, of Brampton, Ont. "You stumbled over everything."

Gov. Gen. David Johnston, the commander-in-chief of the Canadian Forces, said it was no doubt a difficult day of remembrance for the veterans.

At a ceremony at the Square du Canada, he noted those who served in Dieppe have gone on to become leaders in the effort to commemorate the sacrifices made during the Second World War.

"In the raid on Dieppe — and indeed throughout the Second World War — Canadians paid a very high price," Mr. Johnston said.

"The veterans of Dieppe understand the enormity of that sacrifice in a way that few, if any, of us can truly comprehend.

"Each of us remembers the tragedy of war in our own, private way, but together, we recognize that the Allied soldiers who fought here did so valiantly, in common cause."

The Canadians killed in Dieppe remain there in the Canadian war cemetery.

When the town was liberated two years after the raid, the Allies decided to not disturb the graves, which were put there by the Germans who buried them with their headstones placed back to back.

There has been considerable debate over the years about the justification for the raid.

Some Allied military leaders said the lessons learned from the disaster saved countless lives during the D-Day invasion on June 6, 1944.

Intelligence leaders and some historians also contend that vital data concerning German radar and codes was obtained during the raid.