

George Fortnum
Dieppe --- August 19th, 1942

"This is my jeep," says George Fortnum as he looks at a page in a book which chronicles - The Dieppe Raid, Canada's worst military defeat. The book contains the black and white images of disaster - burning landing craft, blown-up equipment, derelict tanks, and dead Canadian soldiers strewn across the beaches. Fortnum's jeep sits parked in the middle of the massacre, at the water's edge.

"The reason we didn't get out is because no one came to get us," says Fortnum, 77, from his kitchen table at his London home. His wife Ruby, a war bride, sits beside him. After Dieppe, Fortnum spent three years in German prison camps. And Ruby waited.

Operation Jubilee was the code name for the raid which sent 4,963 Canadian troops to the French port of Dieppe on August 19, 1942. The force that raided Dieppe that morning was made up mainly of Canadian soldiers from six infantry units in the Second Canadian Division and a Tank Regiment from Calgary. By early afternoon, 835 Canadians were dead or dying, and 1,874 were preparing to surrender. The carnage was staggering.

Fortnum was a Sapper (the equivalent to a senior private) with Division Head Quarters Royal Canadian Engineers, and he was 21 at the time. Most of the 300 engineers on the raid carried 65 lb rucksacks full of plastic explosives to blow up barricades and military targets. Fortnum carried 1,000 lbs of explosives on his jeep.

"The explosives I was carrying were supplement for whatever the engineers could use. I had a pile in the front of my jeep and a pile in the back," Fortnum recalls. He had orders to report with the explosives to a command centre that would be set up in town near the river. From there, his commander would dispatch him to wherever the explosives were needed. But like most of the Canadian soldiers that day, Fortnum never got off the beach.

Dieppe is in Normandy about 67 miles across the Channel from the southern shore of England. The town lies in a bowl made between 150 - 200 ft coastal cliffs outstretched to the east and the west. A line of small hotels, restaurants, and boarding-houses face the sea front and each building is three or four stories high. Dividing the town from the sea is a built-up promenade, an open lawn about 1,200 yards long and 150 yards wide. Running along the coastline is shale, rock beach and a sea wall which varies in height from two to six feet depending on how high the shale is piled up against it.

The raid consisted of five assault points. The main attack was a frontal assault supported by tanks on the town of Dieppe. At daybreak, half-an-hour before the frontal assault, three Canadian regiments (one each from Toronto, Winnipeg and Southern Saskatchewan) were to capture the high ground on the east and west flanks overlooking the main beach.

The raiders lost the element of surprise. In the dark, off the French coast, an hour and a half before the landing, the Allied flotilla (237 ships and landing craft) intercepted a small German convoy also heading for Dieppe (a tanker and six German patrol Boats). Fortnum remembers. "All of a sudden we see these tracers going off right in front of us just like the 24th of May." German reports filed after the raid state the entire German defense was alerted.

When the assaults on the flanks failed, the German defenses at Dieppe remained intact.

The units in the frontal assault --- the Essex Scottish Regiment (from Windsor), the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, the Calgary Tank Regiment, and Fortnum with the Royal Canadian Engineers could not have known, but the attack was already lost. The German guns were primed and waiting even before the Canadians landed.

"We were about 50 yards offshore --- and all hell was let loose. The Germans were machine gunning the boat all the way going in. I was on one of the tank landing craft with my jeep." Fortnum thinks it was about 6:30 in the morning. "I heard the bullets hitting the outside."

Four new Churchill tanks were ahead of him in his boat.

"They got off and swung to the right towards the Casino (a building at the west end of the beach)." But Fortnum did not follow. He was pinned down in the landing craft.

"We were under heavy machine gun cross fire so I sat there waiting for it to die down, but it never did," Fortnum recalls sitting in his jeep with the engine running and looking over the ramp of the landing craft toward Dieppe. "I could see a line of buildings across the front and smoke making haze through there. Why I didn't get shot then I don't know. The Germans had fortifications in the buildings and on the roofs. I was looking straight ahead and they could see right inside.

"Then we took a couple of bad bangs ... There were two or three heavy hits near the front end. Then the landing craft started backing out and I thought well geez, they're going to need this load (of explosives) so off I go --- I just hoped I could get out there fast enough that they wouldn't get me.

Fortnum says the wait felt like three or four minutes, but it probably wasn't more than 45 seconds.

"I drove out approximately the length of the house (about 35 feet), but there was no place to go. The barb wire was seven feet high in places and four or five feet wide on top of the sea wall ... I could (also) see everyone was still on the beach so I stopped the jeep, grabbed my rifle, and rolled out onto the ground."

Beside his jeep, Fortnum remembers the shock of what he found. "There was the piece of a guy's belly and another piece of a hand staring me in the face. As soon as I saw that, I knew things weren't going too good."

From his jeep Fortnum crawled 20 ft up the beach, passed a communications buggy which had been run over by a tank, to the sea wall. There he found a place about two feet high to protect himself.

"I thought we might have landed a little early because the machine gun fire was still coming in. I knew that the others hadn't got to their objectives. I got off to the left and there were fellas stretched out all the way along ... (but) I didn't get too far away from my jeep because I didn't know when there was going to be a breakthrough. If we got going, I wanted to get back to the jeep. But I didn't want to stay too close in case it was hit.

Overlooking the beach, the Germans had full view of all movement. "They had the beach well taped for mortars. They could fire their mortars and just lob them at any particular point they wanted pretty well."

At the sea wall, Fortnum dug-in. "I worked at the rock by moving my feet to push some of it away, and I got down about six inches which was six inches lower than laying on top."

At approximately 7 a.m. a garbled message from the Essex Scottish reached General "Ham" Roberts, the Canadian commander of the raid, which led him to believe that the Essexes had broken through the German defenses. Tragically there was confusion. Only a handful of men had actually penetrated the town. The main force still lay pinned down on the beach. From his command ship, the Calpe, Roberts anticipated success and ordered his reserves, the Fusiliers Mont-Royal (from Montreal), to land on the beach. The order to send them in is still one of the most controversial decisions ever made in Canadian military history.

"Some of them landed between me and the harbor," Fortnum recalls, "about 75 ft from where I was," and they met heavy resistance. "They were only on the beach for a matter of seconds ... but the ones I saw got hit pretty hard. They were pouring off their boats, and Germans were just mowing them down." Fortnum knew they were the FMR because he could see the patches on their sleeves. "They were brave fellas there."

At about 11 a.m. Fortnum remembers leaving his place from behind the sea wall.

"I looked up and I could see one of our fellas on fire running back down to the beach.

His rucksack was on fire and his sleeve was burning on his jacket. I jumped up almost with him from the sea wall and the two of us ran down together ... I knew he had plastic explosives in his rucksack and was going to be in real trouble. All you had to do was put a match to them and they were gone.

"I helped him cut out of his webbing to get rid of the pack... and I pulled him down and got his sleeve in the water. Then we went back up the beach and laid down again." But Fortnum still wonders why he wasn't killed. "We were both standing up in full view, and why the devil they didn't shoot both of us I don't know ... There wasn't one shot fired at us, but if you raised your head six inches above the sea wall you were shot at ... We would have been visible from every vantage point. They couldn't have missed us."

Fortnum only fired his weapon once the entire day, and he freely admits he wonders what would have happened if he hit his target.

"I just happened to look down towards the Casino about 300 yards, and I saw this German (walking towards our line). That's what I shot at. But as it turned out, it was the German officer coming down to take the surrender. At the time, I didn't know we were surrendering. I took a shot at him but I missed" . At about 1 o'clock in the afternoon, without guidance or direction, the surrender began.

A white flag appeared from behind a tank west of the Casino. A doctor appeared on top of a landing craft with another.

"Word came along the sea wall, 'Hold your fire, hold your fire' ... and I was surprised (about the surrender) because from where I was, I didn't know what was going on."

Quietly, Fortnum rose from the sea wall, left his rifle behind, and walked up to the edge of the promenade. There he was surprised to see the number of Canadians surrendering. "I didn't think there were that many of us there, but when you get thinking about it, you begin to realize how many guys were there."

As Fortnum walked across a path cut through the promenade, the extent of the German defenses became visible to him. The promenade was covered with coils of barb wire six to ten feet thick, trenches cut lines of defense, the streets into Dieppe had all been barricaded, and the cliffs were honeycombed with machine gun nests and pillboxes. What the Canadian troops were told before the raid didn't make sense to him.

"We were told there were just a couple companies of second rate troops in there." As it turns out, there were four times as many German defenders in there area. "Our intelligence reports were way off, if we used any." Dieppe was a fortress, a defender's dream, a killing ground.

Later that day Fortnum remembers marching out of Dieppe as a prisoner of war.

"The Germans got everybody together who could walk, and they marched us out. We'd been fighting all day and they marched us 10 miles to a cement factory." Fortnum remembers the prisoners deliberately marched so hard that the Germans had to change the guards three times. "We didn't want them to think we were brow beaten. We wanted to show them that we were still soldiers."

Ruby Fortnum, 74, was George's fiancé at the time, although she's quick to point out that she didn't have an engagement ring. Ruby was 18 when they met, and they fell in love while George was stationed in England. "I didn't know that George was a prisoner until seven weeks after he was captured," she says sitting beside him. "We weren't told anything." George was listed as "missing believed killed" because a Major with the Engineers, who was able to re-embark, said he saw George and his jeep blown-up.

A few days before the raid, Ruby says she remembers George in his uniform standing at the gate of her family's farm. "He came to say good-bye". George also remembers saying good-bye, "I stopped at her place, and I told her I didn't know if I'd ever see her again."

Ruby says that on the day of the raid she could hear the bombardment coming over the Channel from France. "I knew he was on this raid, at least I guessed he was. He didn't tell me. He just said 'I may never see you again.' so I figured he was there."

For the first few days after the raid, Ruby says she would go back out to the gate "to see if he was coming in the road." But for the next seven weeks, she says she just waited for news. "I just lived day to day and hoped for the best but I never thought of him being killed. Never. It never entered my head that he'd been killed."

Then she remembers the day she got news. "Mum and I were in the kitchen, doing the wash. I was helping her, and I heard the postman. I ran to get the mail and there was this card. And I said to mum 'oh it's from George' and I started to cry. It was in his handwriting saying he was a prisoner." Then Ruby sat down immediately and wrote George's mother in Canada to tell her the news. George's mother also hadn't heard.

Ruby's letter arrived in London, Ontario, at George's family's home at 379 Grosvenor Street in the same mail which also contained a letter from an army friend who claimed he had heard George was blown-up in his jeep. Ruby recalls, "George's mother opened that one first. Then she got to mine saying he was alive and a prisoner of war."

In October 1942, from Stalag VIII B, a prison camp in Poland, George wrote to Ruby and asked her if she would wait for him. "She wrote back," he remembers. "And said she'd wait forever."

Ruby says she never put much thought to how long she would wait for her Canadian soldier --- but, it ended up being three years. "I just joined the Woman's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF's)," she says to help with the war effort and pass the time away. She served until 1945 as a batwoman and switchboard operator.

Tactically the Dieppe raid failed, and the failures translated into massive casualties, but it convinced Allied leaders that they were not ready to establish a second front against the Germans. Politically the raid was a success as a sign to Stalin that the British and Americans were serious about a second front. In September, 1942 Hitler transferred 10 crack divisions from Stalingrad in Russia to the West. The move relieved some of the pressure on the Russians on the Eastern Front and helped them defend Stalingrad.

The planners of the raid made mistakes which led to the disaster - but the military leaders claimed the Allies learned from their mistakes. They use the invasion of Normandy, June 6, 1944, as proof of that but something is still missing. Will the Dieppe Raid ever make sense from a personal standpoint?

In a quiet voice from her kitchen table, Ruby has her answer. She says the only way she can make sense of it is because George was there. His story makes the raid real to her.

In the late 1940s, George answered a job ad in the London Free Press for a position in the service department of Soft Water Supply Limited, and he spent the rest of his working days in the soft water conditioning field. The company was purchased by Culligan Water Conditioning in the late 1970s. Ruby and George still live in the same home in London where they raised three sons.