ALLEGHENY COLLEGE

History 610
Senior Project

Canada in World War II: Understanding Its Distinct and Important Role in World War II

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Department of History

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments---------- iii

Abstract---------- iv

Introduction---------- 1

Chapter 1: Lead up and Early Years of War---------- 7

Chapter 2: Operation Husky----------19

Chapter 3: Operation Overlord----------29

Conclusion----------42

Bibliography----------45

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Abstract

World War II, where we witnessed a major conflict between the Axis Powers, led by Nazi Germany, and the Allied Forces, is one of the most well know wars of modern history. No matter what country you look at, they have all been affected by World War II in one way or another. Some of the most notable countries to fight for the Allied Forces were the United States, Britain, France, and Soviet Union where each of them has their own story about the war and how they were involved. They all have their own lens that they look through to recount the events. One story that is not often looked at is Canada's involvement in World War II and how they were impacted by the war and, more importantly, how they impacted the war. In this project, I will be analyzing Canada's involvement in World War II to understand their impact. Through examples such as their participation in Operations Husky and Overlord, the early years of the war as Canada built up a military and played an unconventional but important role, and Canada as a country in the lead up to World War II as they navigated a stronger sense of independence from Great Britain, I will argue that Canada's role in World War II was both important and distinct. Canada's participation in various battles should be enough to understand the importance of their role but the project will also highlight some distinct barriers and additional responsibilities that Canada had that makes their role much more distinct from other nations. Hopefully through this project, it will be clear that not only did Canada play a role in World War II, it should be understood that Canada's role was both important and distinct.

Introduction

World War II may be one of the most notable wars in all of history. After more than 80 years, it continues to be a historically significant event and something that almost all historians can point to and identify as an event that helped change the course of modern history. Because of this, it has been thoroughly explored through a wide array of lenses focusing on various battles, people, locations, and countries. For many nations, World War II was an incredibly impactful event for a multitude of reasons. A country may have been occupied at various points in the war, it may have entered a world war for the first time, or it may have had an important role in the war. In the case of Canada, it was a country that played an important role in World War II. Not only did it play an important role, its role was also distinct. Canada is a country that does not get enough attention and recognition for the amount of support that it gave to the Allied forces. Canada is a country that is not focused on enough for what it did in World War II; a role that was distinct and important.

Canada was a very small nation when World War II began in September 1939. With a population of just over 11 million people, Canada was in the midst of a transition. Canada had been, and continues to be, a nation with strong ties to Great Britain, an empire that Canada was officially a part of until July 1, 1867, when it officially became an independent nation. Even after Canada's official inception, however, it continued to follow the lead of Britain and do much of what Britain suggested and asked. This was the case up to and during World War I when Canada declared war immediately after Britain declared war itself. Up until the end of World War I, Canada and Britain were strongly intertwined as nations, Britain being the mother and Canada being the child.

After World War I, however, Canada began to transition into a more independent nation. It made a series of international deals and agreements, including signing into the Commonwealth of Nations agreement with other countries who were formerly a part of the British Crown.[1] Canada also began to make more independent decisions on the home front instead of listening to and following much of the policy that Britain would introduce in their own government. This shift in the relationship between Canada and Britain came to the forefront when World War II became a reality. Unlike in World War I where Britain's declaration of war automatically triggered Canada's declaration, Canada took time to make its own decision as to whether it should or should not declare war. After discussing in Canada's House of Commons and weighing the pros and cons of entering the war, Canada finally declared war exactly one week later.[2]

Once Canada declared war, it was in a very unique position, it did not have an active military.[3] This meant that Canada's early years of the war would be devoted to unconventional support of the Allied forces while Canada was in the process of building up its military. It was not in a position to support in the conventional way by sending men immediately overseas to help fight in the war unlike many of the other Allied nations. Canada's unconventional support came in many forms but its main support came through the Air Force and the Navy.

Canada's support in the air force came through a program called the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP).[4] This program saw thousands of men from various commonwealth nations come to Canada to participate in air training in many capacities such as

[1] W. David McIntyre, *Commonwealth of Nations: Origins and Impact, 1869-1971,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1973), 183.
[2] Robert Rieffel, "Canada Declares War!" *The Globe and Mail,* September 11, 1939.
[3] J.L. Granatstein, *The Best Little Army*, (Toronto: Harper Perennial, 2015), 7.
[4] Iain E. Johnston, "The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan and the Shaping of National Identities in the Second World War," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 43, no. 5 (2015): 903-926, DOI: 10.1080/03086534.2014.982416.

pilots, mechanics, and other support roles that would be needed to have a large and successful air force. It was the biggest program for the Allies and Canada was charged with organizing and running it. This program allowed Canada to be the most important nation in terms of air force training for the Allies in World War II.

Canada's other form of unconventional support came through its support in the Navy. During the early years of the war, Canada was paramount in helping support the battle taking place in the Atlantic but also was a leader in ship convoys filled with either supplies or men heading to Europe to support the Allies on the frontlines. In the early years of the war when there was not a lot of fighting on the ground, especially in Western Europe, the battles in the Atlantic were front and centre and Canada played an important role in it. Canada found ways to help support the Allies every chance that it could find during the early years of the war.

Once Canada did get boots on the ground in Europe, Canada also played an important role, with a very distinct aspect to each of its major battles. One of the most important operations that Canada was a part of was Operation Husky. Operation Husky was an operation that took place in Italy beginning in July 1943. This was Canada's first major operation on Western European soil. It was an attempt to defeat Italy, an Axis power, and work their way up into the heart of Europe while also spreading out the Axis forces.

Part of what distinguished Canada's role in this campaign was how it got to be a part of the battle plan. Unlike other countries where they were selected and expected to fight in the operation, Canada actually had to convince the Allied leaders to allow Canada's involvement in Operation Husky.[5] To that point, Canada had only participated in one other operation and therefore had not had a lot of action in the war. There was an outcry from the citizens of Canada

[5] Mark Zuehlke, *Operation Husky: The Canadian Invasion of Sicily*, June 10-August 7, 1943, (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009), 21.

and an eagerness from the soldiers of Canada to find some action in the war. After pleading its case, Canada was eventually chosen to participate in the operation. Unlike many other nations who were automatically expected to participate in Operation Husky, Canada chose its fate and convinced the Allies to allow them to join the plans.

For most of the Canadian men participating in Operation Husky, it was their first experience in an active battlefield. While they had done extensive training for the operation, they did not have any experience. While this was an issue, the Canadian men quickly overcame the problem and fought exceptionally well in the battle, advancing just as far as any other nation and completing crucial objectives to the overall mission. Canada wasn't just there to serve as a supporting nation, the was there to help lead the Allies to victory in Sicily, and that is exactly what it did.

Finally, Canada was a part of the operation that many people see as the true turning point in World War II.[6] This was Operation Overlord, more commonly known as D-Day. Operation Overlord was the attack on Normandy beach in June of 1944 which saw a full Allied force attack multiple beaches in an attempt to get troops on the ground in France to eventually take back France from the Axis powers.

Operation Overlord consisted of a multi-level attack using the air force and navy as covering and supporting fire while the main assault happened on five beaches in Normandy. Canada was responsible for one beach, known as Juno Beach. Just like the United States and Britain, the other nations participating in the main assault, Canada's objective was to clear the

[6] John Herd Thompson, "Canada and the 'Third British Empire', 1901–1939," in *Canada and the British Empire*, ed. Phillip Buckner, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199563746.003.0005.

beach as quickly as possible and work inland. At the end of day, Canada ended up furthest inland.

What is more impressive, however, is that Canada began the day at the latest time of the five beaches and had the second toughest beach to storm, after only Omaha beach. Canada was able to be very successful in one of the most important operations of World War II and was a leader in the battle.

Operation Husky and Operation Overlord both proved to be vitally important operations to the overall landscape of World War II and were both important turning points in the war for the Allied troops. Operation Husky began the halt of Axis success and Operation Overlord became the turning point in the war where the Allies began to take back land and eventually march all the way to Berlin. In both of these operations, Canada played an important role, a role that was very much different from the rest of the nations given how Canada got there and the success once it did arrive on the grounds of Europe.

In the early years of the war, Canada's involvement was a very unconventional role where it focused on training and supporting rather than actually fighting while it built up a military. While different, these roles were equally, if not more, important to the overall success of the war for the Allies. Without the early support that Canada gave to the Air Force and Navy, the Allies may not have been put in a position later on in the war to have as a strong an impact on the war as they did.

Throughout this paper, there will be many examples of Canada's involvement in World War II, specifically looking at the early years of the war, Operation Husky, and Operation Overlord. In it, the nuances of Canada's involvement in each of those will be explored and will help identify how Canada's role was distinct. By putting together all of the different examples

and understandings of Canada's involvement in World War II through its military and operation involvements, it will become clear that Canada's role in World War II was distinct and important.

Chapter 1

Lead up and Early Years of War

Throughout World War II, there were many times that Canada stood up and supported the Allies in various ways. In the later years of the war, we saw examples of this in Operation Husky and Operation Overlord once Canada was actively fighting on the front lines. In the early years of the war, while Canadians were not active members on the battlefield, it served a much needed and important role. But before one can truly appreciate Canada's actions, you first need to understand Canada as a nation and how it was a unique country that led to a unique role. Within this chapter, Canada in the lead up to World War II will be examined. Additionally, the role of Canada in the early years of the war will be discussed to understand that while Canada was not fighting during the beginning years of the war, it still served a critical role.

At the time World War II began in September of 1939, Canada had been an independent nation for over 70 years and had begun to create its own national identity. While still a part of the British Commonwealth, it had not been under British control since 1867. While Canada was and continues to have the Monarch of England as Canada's head of state and is a Commonwealth country, it is only in a ceremonial role. For everyday Canadians during the lead up to World War II, there was a strong connection with England and much of the culture encompassed aspects of British culture. Any major event in Britain was celebrated by much of Canada as well. During the time of the English Monarch's shift, Canada was a part of the change where "Live CBC radio coverage took Canadian listeners to George V's funeral, and to Edward VIII's abdication. Some 2

million Canadians rose before dawn on 12 May 1937 to listen to George VI's coronation."[1] There was a strong emotional connection with Britain for Canadians which was evident during that time period.

It is also important to note and understand Canada's population in the lead up to World War II. In 1939, Canada had a population of approximately 11.29 million people[2], which followed a steady and consistent rise year by year for Canada. To put this into context with other Allied nations allows the understanding that Canada had substantially less people capable of serving in comparison to other Allied nations. Britain, in 1939, had a population of 48.43 million[3], the United States had 137.25 million[4], the Soviet Union had 92.73[5], and France had 40.31 million.[6] It is important to understand the differences in population and to truly grasp the difference between many of the other Allied nations and Canada.

While Canadians continued to feel a strong connection with Britain, the government had begun to feel more independent from Britain and the monarch. In the lead up to World War II, the Prime Minister of Canada was William Lyon Mackenzie King, from the Liberal Party of Canada. Mackenzie King had served as Prime Minister from December 1921 to June 1926, September 1926 to August 1930 and then once again served from October 1935 to November 1948. During Mackenzie King's final term, lasting the entire duration of World War II, he actively found ways to try and build a Canadian identity. This included creating the Canadian

[1] John Herd Thompson, "Canada and the 'Third British Empire', 1901–1939," in *Canada and the British Empire*, ed. Phillip Buckner, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199563746.003.0005.
[2] "Population Past and Future," Our World in Data; University of Oxford & Global Change Data Lab, accessed March 3, 2022, https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/population-past-future?country
[3] Our World in Data, "Population."
[4] Our World in Data, "Population."
[5] Our World in Data, "Population."
[6] Our World in Data, "Population."

Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in 1936. It began as a national radio station developed through the Canadian Broadcasting Act in 1936.[7] The Canadian Broadcasting Act was established to promote and grow Canadian entertainment and find unique ways of broadcasting various events in Canada. It was through the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation that Canadians were able to connect with the British Monarch special events. They were also able to, however, learn more about Canada and grow a sense of national pride. The ability to connect people across the world allowed Canadians to be exposed to similar cultures and programming which allowed Canada to strengthen a shared identity and understanding.

What this means is that Canada was beginning to become a more patriotic nation while still having a strong connection with Britain. The older generations who would have fought alongside the British in World War I had a deeper connection with the nation and continued to feel that strong bond but the younger generations that would have been born as Canadians began to have that sense of patriotism. The problem was, however, that during this time period, Canada, like countries all around the world including the United States, was suffering from the Great Depression. This meant that people were much more focused on finding a way to live than finding a way to celebrate and have respect for their country. In 1930 "the Canadian economy descended into the Great Depression. It continued to decline until 1933, after which it began a modest recovery that lasted until 1937." [8] Until 1939 and the start of World War II, the Great Depression was a part of Canada and something that all Canadians were living with and focusing on.

[7] Debra L. Merskin, *The Sage International Encyclopedia of Mass Media and Society,* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2019), 555.
[8] Thomas T. Lewis, *The Thirties in America*, (Pasadena: Salem Press, 2011), 404.

This takes us to Canada's declaration of war in 1939. To understand the complexity of how unique Canada's declaration was, you need to understand the shift as an international figure for Canada in the lead up to the war. After World War I, Canada became more engaged in international affairs and began to try and become more of an international player. While it was independent from Britain, on the international stage, up until after World War I, Canada would follow along with whatever Britain was doing. They were more than allies, they were connected and intertwined. During World War I, Canada performed exceptionally and bravely alongside the other Allied forces and with the recognition of its role in World War I, Canada began to strive to be more present and independent on the international stage. The "wartime efforts helped Canada gain new respect on the international stage as an independent country." [9]

In an effort to become more independent, Canada began to make a series of deals and moves on the international stage. One of the biggest ones was the official introduction of the Commonwealth of Nations, a group of countries formerly a part of the British crown. During the conference to decide and negotiate the deal, "Canada and Australia led a move for separate representation."[10] At a conference where independence and cooperation were the main objectives, Canada was eager for more representation and respect on the international stage.

With the idea of Canada's will for more recognition and independence on the international stage after World War I, it is interesting to look at Canada's declaration of war for World War I and how it compares to Canada's World War II declaration. Canada entered World War I August 4, 1914, the same day that Britain declared war. In fact, when Britain declared war

[9] "First World War (1914-1918)", Government of Canada, accessed January 20, 2022, https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/wars-and-conflicts/first-world-war/ .
[10] W. David McIntyre, *Commonwealth of Nations: Origins and Impact, 1869-1971* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1973), 183.

entering World War I, it automatically declared war for Canada as well. Canada knew that if Britain declared that they would need to be ready and they began to prepare for the call. Early on August 4, 1914, before Britain and Canada declared war, it was published in *The Globe and Mail* that "Canada is making every possible preparation for self-defence and for a prompt response to any request from the mother country for military aid."[11] At this point in history, Britain was more than an ally to Canada, it was their mother country. Canada relied on Britain for support and in turn, often supported and followed any ideas that Britain had; in a sense, during the time up until World War I, Canada was the child of Britain. Canada was closely tied to Britain to the point that if Britain went to war, so did Canada. That was due to the fact that Canada had very little control over their international affairs and even for as big a decision as going to war was, Canada would not have a lot of say. Canada's declaration of war for World War I was anything but an independent decision and it certainly did not show that Canada was a powerful country on the international stage. In the lead up to World War I, it looked like Canada was nothing more than a support country for Britain.

For World War II, things were different and signified a unique and dramatic change, Canada was no longer a pawn of Britain; Canada was truly an independent nation with individual thoughts and decisions. Britain declared war against Germany on September 3, 1939. At the same time, France also declared war. Canada, however, did not declare war on Germany that day. In fact, Canada waited an entire week before finally declaring war and entering World War II on September 10, 1939. Canada took time to survey the situation, discuss in the House of Commons (Canada's government) and finally make a decision on their own accord.[12] It was in

[11] "War Summary," *The Globe and Mail*, August 4, 1914.
[12] Robert Rieffel, "Canada Declares War!" *The Globe and Mail,* September 11, 1939.

Canada's best interest to support Britain in the war and support the Allied forces but in this situation, Canada was able to make that decision on its own. Canada was able to signal to the world that it was eager to help and that it was a nation that would be willing to operate on the international stage. While there was not a strong debate against the idea of joining World War II, it was nevertheless a debate. Canada's thoughtful and considerate decision making showed the world that it was their choice to enter the war.

Once Canada declared war, the next logical step was to prepare their military to send to Europe. The one problem was that at the time of Canada declaring war, Canada did not have an active military. This is the first of two very interesting pieces of information about Canada's military. The fact was, there wasn't an active military, beyond local reservists. J.L. Granatstein put it best in his book *The Best Little Army in the World* about Canada's World War II military when he said:

> The best little army in the world did not exist on September 10, 1939, when Canada declared war on Adolf Hitler's Germany. The Non-Permanent Active Militia (NPAM), the nation's part-time soldiers, numbered some 50,000 men scattered across the land, from Prince Edward Island to British Columbia. Many of the militiamen were veterans of the 1914-19 war; others had joined because their friends and neighbours belonged to the local regiment; still others enlisted for something to do in the dreary years of the Great Depression. [13]

Canada had very few active military members who were already on in Canada's ranks but even less men had actual experience and were prepared to fight. Most of those who were considered part-time soldiers had never even gone through anything more than basic training with many of them not even having the necessary equipment, gear, or uniforms.[14] When Canada was preparing

[13] J.L. Granatstein, *The Best Little Army*, (Toronto: Harper Perennial, 2015), 10.
[14] Granatstein, *The Best Little Army*, 12.

for, they had the added difficulty of restarting a military that had not been active since World War I.

Naturally, when looking at a nation without an active military, the first assumption is that the military needs a lot of soldiers quickly. The easiest way for a nation to recruit quickly is through conscription. While it might have been seen as the most obvious and easiest way to build up an army, that is not the decision that Canada made. In fact, soldiers in the Canadian army "served in an all-volunteer army (until the very last months of the war), the only one in the Allied ranks."[15] This is something that stands out about Canada's involvement in World War II. In later chapters, we will learn more about some battles that Canadians fought in and who they fought alongside with. When put into the perspective that these soldiers were all volunteers, much of what Canada was able to accomplish becomes even more impressive. We learned earlier on that many Canadians had a loyalty to both Canada and Britain and this could be one of the reasons that Canada was not required to form formal conscription. For Canadians that had undying loyalty to Canada, they would be content to enlist to support their country. For Canadians that had undying loyalty to England, they would be content to enlist to support a country that they have close ties with; a country that Canada served alongside in World War I.

While recruiting soldiers to join the Canadian military, Canada did not initially jump into battle. For the first number of years of the war, Canada was not actively serving on the ground in Europe. Instead, Canada was participating in multiple plans that would help support the Allied troops in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. One main plan that it participated in was the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP). The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan was

[15] Granatstein, *The Best Little Army*, 12.

a plan constructed by the Allies to have Commonwealth nations train a large number of soldiers to become a part of the air force. At the forefront of this plan was Canada, which played a major role and was imperative to its success. Iain E. Johnston describes the plan and Canada's role in his journal article in *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*:

> Central to this was the role of Canada. Canadian training accounted for *over half* of the BCATP output. Canada utilised its vast open plains and relative proximity to the UK; men were trained in Canada on a mass scale and largely fed into UK Operational Training Units, to prepare for participation in the European air war. Canada filled the role as hub of advanced training, developing and altering its massive training network as necessary for operational requirements.[16]

The BCATP was a multi-nation plan to help support the Allies in the sky during the early years of the war and at the center of it was Canada, "one of the greatest air training centres in the world."[17] Especially during the Battle of Britain, it was imperative that the Allies had access to a lot of soldiers with air training experience. With Britain under attack, "the UK alone lacked the safe airspace to produce more than 100,000 aircrew, yet – with BCATP dominion assistance included – over a quarter of a million men were put in the sky." [18] Not only did Canada help the plan by supplying the training grounds, Canada also supplied more men for the program than any other nation, including Britain.

This effort that Canada led was something that many people saw as a major reason that the Allies were able to stay in the battles early and eventually become victorious in World War II. At one point, even King George described the plan to Mackenzie King as "perhaps the most

[16] Iain E. Johnston, "The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan and the Shaping of National Identities in the Second World War," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 43, no. 5 (2015): 903-926, DOI: 10.1080/03086534.2014.982416.
[17] "Premier King's Speech on Air-Training Pact," *Globe and Mail*, December 18, 1939.
[18] Iain E. Johnston, "The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan and the Shaping of National Identities in the Second World War," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 43, no. 5 (2015): 903-926, DOI: 10.1080/03086534.2014.982416.

striking feature of the magnificent effort which Canada has made in so many directions toward winning the war."[19] The recognition for this plan put Canada on the map and allowed the world to see how important Canada was to the war effort. While true recognition would not be seen until the end of the war, it was clear to all of the Allied countries that Canada was vital to any success that they would have in the air.

What the BCATP showed was that even in unconventional ways, Canada was a very important piece of the puzzle in defeating the Axis Powers. This is an example of Canada's important and unique role in World War II. Canada recognized the strengths that they had and made sure to utilize it to aid the Allies in preparation to fight in the air. They were able to offer vital resources in proximity, safety, and space that was crucial to organizing and running the BCATP. Canada was integral to the plan, which was integral to Britain getting more support in the air, which was integral to Britain surviving the Battle of Britain, which was integral to the Allies winning the war. Removing Canada from the equation and their training center would result in a very different result. Regardless of whether Canada was fighting in the early years of the war, they were most certainly doing their share to support the Allies.

Participating and leading the BCATP was a very important role that Canada had in the early years of the war but it wasn't the only non-combative role that Canada had while they were preparing to fight on the ground in Europe. Canada also played a large role in shipping goods to Europe and aiding the British Navy in the Battle of the Atlantic. With the presence of U-Boats in the Atlantic, the Allies needed to maintain a presence in the Atlantic and they needed to find strategic ways of shipping the supplies across the ocean. These strategic shipping ideas came in

[19] "King George Lauds Air Training Plan as Being Great Canadian Effort," *Globe and Mail*, December 17, 1942.

the form of convoys, a group of many ships sailing together to protect one another and avoid all boats being attacked. Canada played a very important role in these convoys and it is described saying: "effective naval control of shipping and convoy routing was one of the unheralded victories of Canada (and the British Commonwealth) in the northwest Atlantic in 1942. This was no accident. Canada was an integral part of the global British NCS and naval intelligence system."[20] Canada's role in the Battle of the Atlantic was constant throughout World War II. Oftentimes Canadians would be on the boats traveling back and forth across the Atlantic in the convoys and other times they would be the ones shipping and preparing the boats. Canada was able to utilize its strengths on the sea to bring a unique role to World War II for the Allies. Regardless, it played an important role in not only winning the Battle of the Atlantic but providing the Allied forces with the supplies that they needed to stay alive and fight. While there were many great successes crossing the Atlantic, there were just as many great losses. Detailed in one *The Globe and Mail* article, we learn about a Canadian ship being destroyed with 113 people on board who all lost their lives.[21] Throughout the war, there are countless examples of losses like this on the Atlantic Ocean. It was a dangerous task that Canada performed admirably.

For both the Battle of the Atlantic and the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, Canada operated in large roles. It often would have command or would supply large amounts of men or equipment. While it can be understandable that these plans and roles can be overlooked in comparison to many of the most iconic battles in World War II, it shouldn't diminish Canada's importance. Once Canada arrived in Europe and began to participate in battles, it performed admirably and played an important role but those battles were the beginning of

[20] Marcus Faulkner et. al., *Decisions in the Atlantic: The Allies and the Longest Campaign of the Second World War*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2019), 11.
[21] "113 Lost with Destroyer Ottawa," *Globe and Mail*, September 22, 1942.

Canada's important role. Canada was able to save many lives and help support the Allied forces to victory. Canada shouldn't just be known for the major battles it was in, it should also be known for the equally important plans, convoys, and shipping that helped propel the Allies in the beginning of the war. Canada was able to contribute greatly in the early years of World War II while still building up an army by utilizing the resources and strengths that they possessed. While some of its efforts were less visible, the efforts were nevertheless vitally important to the war effort.

In the lead up to the war, Canada was at a crossroads. It was clear that many Canadians felt and continued to feel that they had an allegiance to Britain and the Crown. They were once connected and would always remain connected. We also saw that Canadian patriotism started to emerge, specifically being pushed by the government through the creation of a national Radio, connecting the entire nation together. What this meant was when it came time to enlist to serve in the Canadian military, there were many people that chose to sign up, to either fight for their country or assist their connected nation. It was also evident that Canada was beginning to act independently on the international stage and had an urge to become more of an international power. This is evident in the shift of how and when Canada declared war in World War I compared to declaring in World War II. Canada deliberately waited a week after Britain to declare war and enter World War II. Canada wanted to show to the world that it was independent and in control of its foreign affairs. Canada was clear in following procedure with proper discussion and analysis of the risks and benefits before declaring war. Once Canada did declare war, it had the unique situation of needing to form an active military, something it lacked since the end of World War I. During the early years of the war, it did not have a presence on the ground in Europe but that did not mean that it wasn't serving an important role. Beginning in

1939, Canada was an integral part of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, an effort to train men to serve in the air force for Britain and other commonwealth countries. Canada hosted and trained all the men and also supplied the most people. It also participated in the Battle of the Atlantic helping ship goods to Europe through dangerous waters with the use of a convoy system. Canada was praised in both of these roles for the importance of their work and the importance of the plans. It is something that is remembered within Canada as much as the major battles that Canada participated in. They are incredibly proud moments in Canadian history and are aspects that helped contribute to the Allied victory. To fully understand Canada's involvement in World War II, one must understand Canada's role in the early years of the war. While much of the ground work in other nations was building up armies and preparing to enter the frontlines, Canada was already finding ways of contributing in important ways. In the next two chapters, we will be beginning to look at specific important battles that Canada was a part of but the actions of Canada during the early years of war are equally important. From the very beginning of Canada's involvement in World War II, Canada played an important role. Canada played a vital role in World War II and the early years of the war were the building blocks for Canada's success.

Chapter 2

Operation Husky

As the war began, Canada played an important, but unconventional, role in helping the Allied cause. As introduced in the last chapter, Canada was a leader for the Allies when it came to air force training through the BCATP, preparing men from various commonwealth countries to serve in the war. Canada also was a leader in navy support, sending ships full of men and, more importantly, supplies to Europe. But during this, Canada was not an active participant on the ground in Europe. This can be in large part due to the need to build up an active military. As the years progressed, Canada began to make a larger push to be on the front lines of World War II, to be on the ground in Europe. Eventually, this led to Canada's involvement in Operation Husky.

In the early years of World War II, the Axis powers, led by the Germans, were very successful in much of what they did. The Allies, not having nearly enough preparation, were on their heels and very quickly, they were losing ground. France was quickly taken by the Axis powers and there was not a counter from the Allied forces. By the end of 1941, the Axis powers controlled most of Europe and faced little opposition from the Allies, especially on the Western Front. The Axis powers had control of major countries including France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. On the Eastern front of Europe, the Soviet Union was locked in a very large and intense conflict with the Axis powers but had very little support from the Western Allied countries to help deter Axis forces away from the East.

The Allied forces began to slowly engage with the Axis powers in various parts of the world. This included Asia, where Japan was attempting their own invasion in different countries, and North Africa, where they were in a deadlock. It was clear, however, that these conflicts were

not doing enough to deter the Axis forces in Europe, which allowed them the comfortability of having a large number of troops to occupy Europe. It was clear that the Allied forces needed to start attacking the Axis powers on European soil, to gain some type of ground besides what the Soviet Union was doing in the East. Eventually, they decided on the country that they would attack that would cause large damage to the Axis powers if successful: Italy.

Italy was very much a part of the Axis powers during much of World War II. This meant that the country was supposedly a stronghold for the Axis powers. If the Allies were successful in defeating the Italians, it would be a devastating loss for the Germans and the rest of the Axis powers. If Italy fell, it would mean many things. First, it would mean that the Italians would be defeated and the Germans could no longer rely on them for support. Second, it would mean that the Allied forces would have taken land away from the Axis powers, they would be successful in their first step to taking back Europe.

To understand the challenges of taking Italy, it is important to consider Italy during World War II. Italy entered the war joining the Nazi regime as an Axis power in June of 1940.[1] In the lead up to and subsequent declaration of war, the leader of Italy was Benito Mussolini. Mussolini was a Fascist leader for Italy who ruled with an iron fist. He was someone who hoped to rise to the same power that Hitler had and after careful deliberation, he eventually decided to join the Axis powers, realizing that it would be most advantageous for him and his interests. By joining the Axis powers, Mussolini became tied to another Fascist leader in Adolf Hitler. Mussolini, due to his unpopularity amongst many in Italy and his decision making throughout World War II, was overthrown by the Italian people in 1943 and eventually was executed in 1945.

[1] Philip Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini: Italy, Italians, and the Second World War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 34.

From the moment that Italy joined the Axis powers, it was fully committed to the fighting for and with Nazi Germany. It played a significant role in fighting, putting a target on their backs; the Allies saw how important Italy was to the Axis powers which was one of the reasons they sought to attack Italy. The entire war for Italy was an intense and bloody ordeal for both the soldiers and civilians where estimates of the number of "military and civilian dead between 1940 and 1945 veer between just over 300,000 and about 450,000."[2] For many people in Italy, "the years 1940 to 1943 were ones of almost continuous military defeat, a national humiliation felt by all Italians."[3]

With all of this in mind, the Allies saw Italy as the first step in defeating the Axis powers. To defeat the Germans, it was imperative that they defeated Italy first. They needed to take away a large support the Germans had and also find a way to get boots on the ground in parts of Europe that weren't the East where the Soviet Union was fighting. By doing this, it would also draw more Axis troops to Italy, spreading out their forces and creating, and hopefully exploiting, holes in the Axis defence. Many people believed that the Italian campaign was so important that "the outcome of the Western Allied war against the Axis powers might depend on driving up the length of Italy to pierce into Austria, and then break into Germany through the backdoor north of Vienna. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill called this the offensive against 'Europe's soft underbelly.'"[4]

These plans and ideas led to Operation Husky. Operation Husky was the eventual operation that the Allies led on July 9, 1943 on the beaches of Sicily, Italy. This operation would continue on until August 17, 1943. Operation Husky's plan envisioned a coordinated attack from

[2] Morgan, *Fall of Mussolini*, 2.
[3] Morgan, *Fall of Mussolini*, 34.
[4] Mark Zuehlke, *The Gothic Line: Canada's Month of Hell in World War II Italy,* (Vancouver: Douglas& McIntyre, 2006), 16.

multiple Allied countries and branches of the military. There would be airborne attacks from the British and Americans along with landings on the beaches of Sicily led by British, American, and Canadian troops. The coordinated attack along with support from the Navy and Air Force was planned to separate and thin the Axis defence, giving the men landing on the beaches more cover and support.

For Canada, Operation Husky was a monumental moment for its participation in World War II. Up until Operation Husky, Canada had a very limited role in the actual battles that took place. As we learned in the last chapter, Canada had played a major part in the Air Force and Navy but when it came to soldiers on the ground in Europe, there had been very limited participation. There were cries from the Canadians at home for more participation in the war. In fact, it came to the point that in his New Year's Day address on January 1, 1943, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King "announced that 'all our armed forces' would be fighting before the year was out."[5] Mackenzie King had felt the pressure from the Canadian citizens but also had many Canadian newspaper war correspondents observing that "with the exception of one bloody day at Dieppe—the nation's army had yet to see real action."[6] In the early parts of the war, the Canadian soldiers were tasked with being "defenders of the British Isles against possible German invasion,"[7] but "By 1942—with the Germans heavily engaged in Russia—that danger had passed."[8]

This outcry for more Canadian participation forced Canada into figurative action to find an operation or battle to participate in. Eventually, the opportunity arose with Operation Husky.

[5] Mark Zuehlke, Operation Husky: The Canadian Invasion of Sicily, June 10-August 7, 1943, (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009), 23.
[6] Zuehlke, *Operation Husky,* 24.
[7] Zuehlke, *Operation Husky* 24.
[8] Zuehlke, *Operation Husky*, 24.

It was Canada that pushed to participate in Operation Husky, not the Allied forces asking them to. In fact, Mark Zuehlke explains that:

> Canada could have avoided invading Sicily. Indeed, it required the intercession of senior generals and the minister of national defense, Colonel John Ralston, as well as a personal plea by Prime Minister Mackenzie King to Sir Winston Churchill before Britain reluctantly invited Canadian troops to join the venture. From the British perspective, there was little to recommend diverting forces from First Canadian Army in England for service in the Mediterranean theatre.[9]

This is a very interesting part of Canada's involvement in Operation Husky, maybe in all of World War II. Canada actively sought out the chance to send men to fight in an operation, to possibly send hundreds of young men to their deaths. This wasn't about a search for glory; it was about honour. Canada wanted to feel like it was contributing to the war. Canadians saw the atrocities that were happening in Europe and the citizens of Canada and their soldiers wanted an opportunity to help the cause.

It was clear that the Canadian men were ready and wanted to have a first taste at a true operation; their first chance to see real action. The lack of experience meant that most of the Canadian men landing in Sicily would be in an active battlefield for the first time. While this was a problem, this situation also had its benefits. With the men having no active role in the war, they had plenty of time to train for Operation Husky. Once it was determined that Canada would be participating in the operation, the training ramped up to not only prepare for battle but to prepare specifically for Operation Husky. Mark Zuehlke explains that "back in England, the training increasingly concentrated on combined operations involving amphibious landings against contested shores—a clear indication, everyone hoped, that the Canadians were being readied for

[9] Zuehlke, *Operation Husky*, 21.

an offensive operation. 'We'll never be readier,' Lieutenant Farley Mowat of the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment wrote in his journal."[10]

With Canada's lack of participation on the ground in Europe, it became clear that it needed to find a way to prove itself that it would be capable of supporting the Allies on the battlefield, Canada would need to find a way to join an operation, to get on the ground. This meant that they were in a situation where they were asking to participate in the operation, something that was not common during World War II. The Canadians at home and most certainly the Canadians in the military were tired of endless training without any active battles. While the lack of participation was frustrating to many people, it did allow for the Canadian soldiers to have additional training to prepare for Operation Husky. By the time that they arrived on the beaches of Sicily, their endless training would pay off and they would get a real first taste of significant action as a part of the Allied forces.

For months on end, there was continuous planning and training done by the Allied forces to prepare for Operation Husky. Eventually, it was decided that the invasion would begin on the night of July 9, 1943 with the main assault on the beaches happening early the next day on July 10. Canada along with Britain and the United States would have soldiers land on the beach and immediately attempt to push inland. With Canada not participating in the airborne divisions that began their landings on July 9th, all the Canadians could do was wait and reflect before seeing their first action and "as night descended around the Canadian Fast Assault Convoy, thousands of soldiers faced the prospect that this might be their final night on earth. Yet there seemed little visible apprehension."[11] Even when staring danger and death in the face, the Canadians didn't blink. They were physically and mentally prepared for what lay ahead.

[10] Zuehlke, *Operation Husky*, 24.
[11] Zuehlke, *Operation Husky*, 75.

July 10th had finally arrived and the Canadian forces were going to get their feet on the ground in Sicily. What has to be understood is Canada's responsibilities in the beginning of Operation Husky were very important. It wasn't simply there to support the other nations or to provide men wherever was necessary. Canada was there to carry out a part of the operation.

> The Canadians had four objectives for July 10—to secure Bark West, protect the left flank of XXX corps, capture Pachino airfield and make it operational for Allied aircraft, and begin advancing towards a road that cut along a sharp southwest-to-northeast axis from the coastal village of Pozzallo inland to Rosolini. This would enable them to conform to, and continue protecting, the western flank of 51st Highland Division as it pushed inland.[12]

This list of objectives for the day was crucial to having a successful first day of Operation Husky. They all needed to be achieved if the Allies had any hope of moving up through Italy, a goal that they had and needed to accomplish if there was any hope of defeating Italy and weakening the Axis powers:

In the end, the Canadian men in Sicily were able to complete those lofty goals, in fact, "First Division had achieved considerable success in the early stages of its advance by manoeuvring and infiltrating."[13] While Canada was very new to fighting on the ground, it still had a very strong beginning to the operation. Canada was able to advance Operation Husky by achieving what it had to achieve. Its successes were all the more significant given the fact that, "Sicily was 1st Division's introduction to combat."[14]

The capture of Sicily was the main first step in Operation Husky. It would lead to many things that would help the Allies in their attempts to not only capture Italy but also help defeat the Axis powers. It is clear that very early on, that Canada had a large role in Operation Husky

[12] Zuehlke, *Operation Husky*, 76.
[13] William J. McAndrew, "Fire or Movement?: Canadian Tactical Doctrine, Sicily—1943," in *Military Affairs* 51, no. 3, (1987), 144.
[14] McAndrew, "Fire or Movement", 141.

with the roles that they played and those objectives helped defeat the Axis forces in Sicily. Because of Canada and the entire Allied forces efforts, "the capture of Sicily reinforced and made irrevocable Allied control of the Mediterranean and secured the shortest route (via the Suez Canal) to the far East."[15]

The initial success of Sicily was imperative for the Allies to have any chance at reaching their goals of completing Operation Husky and pushing up through Italy. It was a very important first step that Canada was able to have a large role in. After the initial landing on the beaches of Sicily, the Allies were happy with the progress so far but by no means was the job done. Canada, like the rest of the Allied nations, continued with fighting after it got off the beaches, to continue to push to defeat Italy forces wherever they could. For many Canadians, that meant going much further into Italy, to continue the offensive.

> Two days later the Canadians were more than thirty miles in land, despite a shortage of wheeled transport that had been aboard the lost ships and an enervating combination of heat, humidity, malarial mosquitoes, and fine white dust. Soon they were moving up into the mountainous centre of the island, but it was not until the fifth day, just outside the village of Grammichele, that they first came under German fire. Men of the 1st Infantry Brigade and tanks of the Three Rivers Regiment took the village by noon at a cost of twenty-five casualties. The next day, July 16, fighting over higher, rockier ground unsuitable for tanks, the infantry lost another twenty-seven men clearing Piazza Armerina.[16]

Canada's role after battling on the beaches was to work inland and clear various villages and bases. It was very important to continue the momentum that it had previously gained in Sicily but there were many problems standing in their ways. This included a lack of transport due to the loss of the ship carrying the vehicles which happened on the morning of the invasion of Sicily. With a lack of transportation, it made the trekking through Italy much harder. It meant that

[15] W.A.B Douglas and Brereton Greenhous, *Out of the Shadows: Canada in the Second World War,* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1995), 139.
[16] Douglas and Greenhous, *Out of the Shadows*, 134-136.

instead of driving, the Canadians would be forced to walk. Even with walking, there was very uneven ground and poor conditions that affected the Canadians' ability to perform yet they were still successful. They took very unique and unfortunate circumstances and were able to overcome them to still complete the mission, to make sure that they were successful in their important role.

Canada's role in Operation Husky was not of support, it was not there for additional men to storm the beach but then wait back once the main assault on Sicily and Italy began. Canada was in the thick of things, on the front lines every step of the way. For a smaller nation, this is impressive to begin with but considering that, for most of the Canadian men, it was their first true battle experience, it is even more astounding. The Canadians and Canada wanted to be there, they wanted to contribute to the war, and they made sure that they played an important role in Operation Husky.

Operation Husky was a turning point for many people in World War II. First and foremost, it was a turning point for Canada and its armed forces. Up until that point, Canada had not participated in many ground operations, in fact most of the soldiers had yet to see any action since Canada had declared war in 1939. That is why Prime Minister Mackenzie King pushed so hard for Canada to be involved in Operation Husky, he knew that if Canada was involved, they would be able to gain some experience and become more important in the European campaign. In the end "for the Canadian officers and soldiers involved, Sicily was a proving ground and a place where many lessons were learned that would serve the army well over the course of the rest of the war."[17] Beyond Canada aiding the Allies in Operation Husky and playing a very important role, it was also able to use that experience to help prepare them for the many battles that it would be a part of in the future. Canadians were able to gain the skills and also prove to

[17] Zuehlke, *Operation Husky*, 283.

themselves, the people at home in Canada, and the Allied forces that they could be trusted with important operations and roles. Operation Husky was truly a turning point for Canada.

Operation Husky was also a turning point for the Allied forces. By attacking and eventually defeating the Axis powers in Sicily and then Italy altogether, it weakened the Axis powers, gave the Soviet Union the additional support that they needed, and started cutting off Hitler's support system. It was an invaluable operation that helped kickstart the change of tides in the war that eventually led to the defeat of Axis powers in Europe.

By no means did the success of Operation Husky mean that the Allies were guaranteed to defeat the Axis powers completely and eventually win World War II but it was still a very important first step. During that first step, Canada was there the entire way. From the moment that it landed on the beaches to marching up through Italy, Canada was there. Canadian forces played an important role in Operation Husky. What made it so much more interesting was the backstory to Canada's army in the lead up to the operation. It is very plausible that Canada could never have been a part of the operation if it had not insisted on being included. Canada sought out ways to be a contributing force in the Allied operation, even if it meant that this crucial operation was their first important operation for most of their men.

Chapter 3

Operation Overlord

When someone looks at World War II, there are many different parts of the war that stand out for a typical person. Many people are aware of the Battle of Britain and the devastation that England faced during the early years of the war. Others see the horrors of the Holocaust and all of the horrible things that the Nazi Party did. World War II has become an event that people from around the world understand and have taken lessons from. This is because so many people have personal connections to different aspects of the war; world wars truly affect the entire world. At the forefront of all the individual stories and battles from World War II stands Operation Overlord, more commonly known as D-Day or the Battle of Normandy. This is for many reasons including the portrayal of D-Day in Hollywood productions including *Saving Private Ryan* and the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*. It is also known for the horrifying images and stories of thousands of soldiers losing their lives. Above all though, Operation Overlord is known for one of the main turning points of World War II which saw the Allies start their push that eventually led to victory in Europe, especially when looking through the lens of Western countries like Britain, the United States, and Canada.[1] In this chapter Operation Overlord will be discussed and learn how, through the plans, development, and eventually execution, the operation helped lead the Allies to total victory. Additionally, the role of Canada in this operation will be outlined to better understand how Canada's role in Operation Overlord was important and distinct. It will be clear that Canada was more than just a supporting nation, it was front and center in Operation Overlord.

[1] John Buckley et. al., *D-Day in History and Memory: The Normandy Landings in International Remembrance and Commemoration,* (Denton: UNT Press, 2014), 23.

It will be clear throughout this chapter that Operation Overlord was more than just a battle victory for the Allied forces; it signaled a shift in the landscape of the war where the Allies began to make serious ground and eventually defeat the Axis forces. To understand the magnitude of Operation Overlord, it is first important to understand the situation and climate of World War II in the lead up to the fateful day on June 6, 1944 when Canada and the rest of the Allied forces stormed the beaches of Normandy.

By 1944, the Allied forces had begun to start pushing back on the Axis forces which resulted in the stalling of the German momentum that they had carried through the early years of the war. We saw in various parts of Europe the fight that the Allied forces had been undertaking. In Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and the Axis Forces were locked in a grueling and bloody stalemate with numerous campaigns and attacks. Slowly, but surely, the Soviet Union was able to hold off the German attacks and had begun to start pushing back with Stalingrad becoming a main turning point on the Eastern Front. In Italy, we already learned about the movement of the Allied forces up through Italy starting with Operation Husky in Sicily. This movement signaled another point of attack that the Allied forces had in their effort to take back ground and begin their offensive attack against Germany and the Axis Powers.

While there was a shift in the war with the Allied forces halting the Axis movements and beginning to gain ground back, Germany still had a stronghold of Western Europe including France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. The Allied forces saw the occupation of Western Europe and knew that the only way to overcome Germany and the Axis powers was to first start by liberating those Western European nations; they saw the significance in those countries in the overall goal of winning the war. The problem was however, Germany also saw those nations as equally important to their plan of occupying Europe and had no intentions of giving up their

occupied states without a fight. To completely destroy the Germans and fully defeat the Axis powers, the Allies would need to get into Germany, and for the Western powers, who wanted to get there before the Soviet Union, the time was now.

Very quickly, it became clear that Western Europe was going to be a massive campaign that would help determine the outcome of the war. For the Allied forces, it meant that the plan of attack on Western Europe, most likely France, would need to be well thought out, involve multiple layers, and require a lot of troops. For the Germans, it meant that they would need to be on high alert, fortify the coastline, and be prepared for whatever the Allied forces were planning to throw at them.

By 1944 when Operation Overlord occurred, Canadians had already played a significant role in World War II. As we learned in Chapter 2, Canada's involvement in Operation Husky was one of the Allies' first advancements on European soil that was not in Eastern Europe. We also know about the planning and preparation that Canada was involved in during the early years of the war. But Canada was also a part of other battles in the lead up to Operation Overlord. Most notably, Canada was a part of another mission that attempted to land in France in 1942. A mission that had many positives but just as many negatives. It was an event that helped shape the lead up to Operation Overlord.

On August 19, 1942, Canadian forces led a "6,000-strong Allied force that counted in its ranks 4,953 Canadians"[2] onto the beaches of Dieppe. This was actually before Canada's involvement in Sicily and "marked Canada's combat debut in Europe."[3] Unfortunately, unlike

[2] Mark Zuehlke, *Juno Beach: Canada's D-Day Victory: June 6, 1944*, (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005), 23.
[3] Zuehlke, *Juno Beach,* 23.

the battles that took place on the beaches of Normandy, the fight on the beaches of Dieppe was not successful for Canada and the Allied forces. In fact, only 2,210 Canadians returned to Britain and 807 men were killed along with 1,946 taken prisoner. It was an utter failure with a clear winner and loser.

Operation Jubilee, the official operation name of the Dieppe Raid, saw Allied forces, predominantly Canadians troops, launch an attack on the Dieppe port in Northern France, which was held by the Germany forces. There were many reasons that this attack took place. One reason was external pressure from the Soviet Union to begin fighting on the Western front, to divert the Axis attention away from only focusing on the Eastern Front and the Soviet Union.[4] Another reason was for the Allies to begin their attack to take back France and begin the march towards Berlin. One other very important reason for the attack was to learn and gain information on the enemy. The Allied forces ultimately knew that the raid on Dieppe could not be the only attack on the Northern coast of France if they had any plans on truly taking back France. Throughout the planning, it was clear that the mission would be used as a way to understand the defense that they would be faced against and, more important, to understand what would and would not work for the Allies in their attempt to regain control of France.

It was eventually decided that Canada would lead the raid on Dieppe and produce the majority of men for the operation. On August 19, 1942, Canada attacked the port of Dieppe. The attack focused only on the port with the bulk of resources going to those on the front line; the ones actually doing the raid. The plan was for all soldiers to land at the port and quickly unload tanks onto the soil of France. There was little in the way of aerial or naval support from the

[4] Mark Zuehlke, *Tragedy at Dieppe: Operation Jubilee August 19, 1942*, (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2012), 15.

Allies. In the end, that is what failed the thousands of Canadian troops that landed on Dieppe, with little in the way of air support or naval support, they were left to themselves.[5] Regardless, however, of how much support was given to the Canadian troops, the Allies also learned that attacking a port would end in disaster. With the ports significantly more fortified than beaches, the Germans had many more resources concentrated on the single area.

While this example is not a shining moment of Canada's involvement in World War II, the battle of Dieppe was nevertheless important for many reasons. For Canada in particular, it showed that Canada had a stake in the war. It had attempted to land in France and failed. Canada had lost men and it were unable to complete the objective. With that in mind, Canada was most certainly not going to let a failure like that happen again while invading France. Canada was invested and served a primary role in the attempt to liberate Western Europe to help change the tide of war. It had already committed themselves to the goal once and they were keen to finish the mission. In fact, "rather than dampen Canadian military ardour, Dieppe fueled the growing demand at home that Canada's army get into the fight."[6] When looking at different countries and their roles in helping liberate Western Europe which helped lead to defeating the Axis powers in Europe, Canada cannot be overlooked because it was one of the first countries to try.

We are able to learn a lot about Canada's commitment in World War II through their effort and participation in the attempted storming of Dieppe but there was also a lot that the Allies were able to learn with the failed attempt. With each failure, the Allies were able to learn and improve. It was clear in Canada's attempt at Dieppe that "the landing force had been

[5] Zuehlke, *Tragedy at Dieppe*, 366.
[6] Mark Zuehlke, *The Gothic Line: Canada's Month of Hell in World War II Italy,* (Vancouver: Douglas& McIntyre, 2006), 17.

inadequately supported by naval and air force bombardment."[7] This was a major issue that was addressed by the Allies when planning for the next attack on France soil, which eventually became Operation Overlord. It was a lesson that was learned and when it came time to Operation Overlord, naval and air support were an integral part of the plan because they saw the dire consequences if there was not enough naval and air support for the soldiers storming the beaches. The Allies also learned about the difficulty that they would face when attacking the Germans on the shores of France. The coast would be heavily guarded which meant the specific location of Operation Overlord would need to be strategically chosen. The Allies learned from Dieppe that while all parts of the coast would be heavily defended, it would be best to avoid ports at all costs. These lessons along with many more were crucial to the successful outcome of Operation Overlord and without Canada, even in a losing effort, those lessons would not have been discovered. While it was not the most conventional way of learning and giving the Allies information, Canada nevertheless played an important role in having a successful attack on June 6, 1944.

What is interesting about the date June 6, 1944 is that it was not the original date that Operation Overlord was supposed to occur. In fact, the original date was June 5, 1944 but due to poor weather and foggy conditions, the Allies postponed the attack by 24 hours resulting in the well-known date of June 6, 1944. With so many different aspects and parts to the operation, coordination was crucial, so the conditions for the day were paramount. It truly was the most important day of the Allies' fight and they made sure that every detail was accounted for and set up the plans to ensure the best possible success.

[7] Zuehlke, *Tragedy at Dieppe*, 366.

One tactic that the Allies used was elaborate and effective security to ensure that the Axis powers, fully aware that an attack was coming, did not know the exact location of the landings. The Allies also used disinformation by leaking false reports to further confuse the German army so that they were unaware of when and where the attack would come.[8] In fact, with so little credible information for the Axis powers to work off of, their belief was that the attack would be at Pas-de-Calais which was the closest point to England.

In the end, however, the Allied forces chose Normandy as their location to attack the German army. More specifically, the Allies chose five beaches in Normandy and named the Gold, Sword, Omaha, Utah, and Juno. Gold and Sword would be assigned to the British army, Omaha and Utah would be assigned to the American army, and Juno Beach, was assigned to the Canadians.

Juno Beach, located between the two British beaches, was going to be attacked by the 3rd Canadian Infantry division as the lead, and supported by the 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade. Additionally, the 2nd Canadian Infantry and 4th Canadian Armoured Divisions served as the secondary forces, the men who would arrive in the second wave. In total, "the frontline Canadian forces numbers some 60,000 men, with additional thousands in supporting and specialist units."[9]

Just like the British and Americans at their beaches, the Canadians would travel at early dawn to the beaches and storm. Every move that they made had been meticulously planned and according to Charlie Martin, a company sergeant-major in the Canadian army, "for at least two years we'd been training and planning for this."[10] They knew what they needed to do, they just

[8] J.L. Granatstein, *The Best Little Army*, (Toronto: Harper Perennial, 2015), 62.
[9] Granatstein, *The Best Little Army*, 65.
[10] Charles C. Martin and Roy Whitsed, *Battle Diary: From D-Day and Normandy to the Zuider Zee and VE,* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1994), 1.

had to execute it. Unlike during the storming of Dieppe however, there were many more aspects to the attack. This included significant planning and utilization of the air and naval forces. Beyond just the sheer numbers and the plan of spreading out to different beaches to force the separation of the German troops, there were other soldiers and men at work. Before any men landed on beaches, paratroopers landed behind enemy lines to attack from within. They would blow out bridges, destroy artillery, and prevent reinforcements from easily arriving. There was also significant support from the air and sea dropping bombs and firing artillery onto the enemies in the early mornings to weaken the Axis powers before the main assault on the various beaches, something that they did not do in the lead up to the Dieppe Raid.

In the early morning of June 6, 1944, Canadian troops along with significant other Allied forces stormed the beaches of Normandy. Like every other beach, at Juno Beach, the objective was to land on the beach quickly and find cover. Immediately after exiting the boats, the Canadian troops experienced heavy gunfire from the Axis forces. With the German forces having the high ground and the ability to see the Canadians leaving the boats, they had a strong defense lined up with heavy machine gun and sniper fire. Luckily, however, many of the shots flew over the heads of the Canadian troops saving them from a total massacre. [11] It was imperative for the Canadian troops to get inland as quickly as possible and to find shelter. Just inland, there were large concrete walls that could be used for shelter alongside sections of barbed wire fences. [12] Unfortunately for the Canadian troops, however, many of the walls were lined with mines resulting in men getting blown up.[13]

[11] Zuehlke, *Juno Beach,* 135.
[12] Zuehlke, *Juno Beach,* 135.
[13] Zuehlke, *Juno Beach,* 135.

Eventually, however, soldiers began to reach the barbed wire. Every man on the beach knew the further inland they were, the more sheltered and safer they were from opposition fire. This meant cutting the barbed wire and moving further into the beach. Sergeant Martin describes his own experience with the barbed wire saying "I cut the strands and bent them back, making the opening just wide enough for a man to belly through. The grass gave us cover. The enemy knew we were somewhere and likely on the move, but they could not pinpoint us. We crept through. By this time there were about fifteen on us."[14]

Once getting through the barbed wire, the fight was not over however. At all beaches in Normandy, including Juno, the Germans had bunkers, houses, and shelters for the machine guns and snipers. While men had been able to get through the initial wave of heavy fire, the troops still arriving on the beaches would be in danger of being slaughtered if those machine guns were not destroyed. This meant that the men needed to attack the shelters and take out the men and the guns in them.

Some of these shelters offered serious problems to companies arriving on the beach including 'B' Company.

> 'B' Company faced a major concrete strongpoint that had 'exceptional command of the beach' with a 50-millimetre gun, several machine-gun nests, and three 81-milimetre mortars. Not only were all the case-mates here constructed of thick reinforced concrete, but steel doors and shutters protected the doors and apertures. A system of deep entrenchments provided the Germans excellent fields of fire towards every possible avenue of approach and further contributed to the strongpoint's formidable strength. Approximately a hundred Germans were defending the position.[15]

[14] Martin and Whitsed, *Battle Diary*, 9.
[15] Zuehlke, *Juno Beach,* 136.

All of these details outlined there to illustrate the conditions that the Canadians faced as they were storming the beaches of Normandy. Beyond the firepower that the Germans had, they also had reinforced strongpoints that would give the Canadians no hope of victory while they were still intact.

While the preparation of overtaking the shelters began, more soldiers continued to come ashore. With so little in the way of covering fire and places to hide, machine guns and shells continued to fire on the beaches completely smothering much of the land and pushing the Canadians to their brink. [16]

The plans to storm the shelters included flanking the larger and more fortified shelters by taking out Germans in small houses and buildings overlooking the beach. To do this, the Canadians needed to communicate with different squads and platoons the exact plans. The problem was, however, due to the landing on and in the water by the beach, much of the equipment, including radios, had been soaked leaving many of the men without proper equipment for the battle that lay ahead.

To combat this, various Canadian men risked their lives dashing from platoon to platoon to relay the message. This included Major Ralph Daughney, 'C' Company's CO (commanding officer)[17]. During the beginning of the invasion, Major Daughney was seen running from platoon to platoon relaying the message to the various NCO (non-commissioned officers) and their men.

There are countless stories that can be told about Canada's efforts on D-Day and the heroic actions that emerged from it that helped the eventual taking of Juno Beach. The storming

[16] Zuehlke, *Juno Beach,* 137.
[17] Zuehlke, *Juno Beach,* 137.

of Juno Beach is considered one of, if not the most, strategically successful beaches in terms of execution and results. When looking at the state of the other beaches, the Canadians had pushed just as far as any other beach. In fact, "every Canadian unit had moved well inland, and the 3rd division was close to joining up with the British troops on Gold and Sword beaches, adjoining Juno."[18] This is all to be considered while understanding that Canada was the last to land on the beach, and still faced fierce defense of their beach.[19] It has to be commended that Canada, a smaller populated nation, was able to take a beach just like the bigger nations in the United States and Britain. In fact, Terry Copp argues that "the Canadians played a role in this victory all out of proportion to the number of troops engaged. Their performance at both the tactical and operation level was far from perfect but it compares favourably with that of any other army in Normandy." [20]

In total when looking at Canada's role in Operation Overlord, it is clear that they were successful in pushing inland and stood above the rest of the nations. They were furthest inland compared to all the other Allied nations and were close to beginning to support the British on their beaches. While they had great success, they also had great loss: "In all on D-Day, the Canadians had lost 340 killed in action, 574 wounded, and 47 taken prisoner. It was a terrible toll, the highest on the three easternmost landing beaches."[21] Only the Americans at Omaha beach faced a more difficult defense which resulted in such a high death and wounded toll. The sacrifice that Canada gave to the mission is incredible. For a nation so much smaller than the United States or Britain, they still lost just as many, a proportionally much greater loss, but still

[18] Granatstein, *The Best Little Army*, 77.
[19] Zuehlke, *Juno Beach,* 242.
[20] Terry Copp, *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 13-14.
[21] Granatstein, *The Best Little Army*, 77.

fought bravely and were able to find a way to gain land. In his book, Terry Copp even argues that the recognition given to the Allies and Canada about D-Day is still not enough and that the Allies, especially the Canadian role, is still underrated.[22]

What made Canada and their attack so different from the other Allied nations was the troops serving in the various companies and divisions. The Canadian men were able to overcome challenging obstacles and stay in the fight no matter what.[23] This was for many reasons but "the fact that the soldiers were volunteers greatly increased their esprit de corps"[24] compared to British and American troops where many were from conscription and had a tendency to hesitate or take a defensive position at the first sign of trouble or when a commanding officer was wounded or killed The fact that the Canadian soldiers were volunteers meant that they had chosen to fight and wanted to serve for their country, for the people standing next to them, and for themselves. The troops also had extra motivation because of the people they were serving beside. Most battalions in the Canadian military were formed by region. [25] This meant that oftentimes the person that they were fighting beside would have been a friend or acquaintance in civilian life. This meant that they wanted to fight for one another and were prepared to die for one another.

It can, and should, be argued that Canada played a very important role in Operation Overlord. When analyzing Operation Overlord as a whole, it is also clear that it was a pivotal turning point in World War II. Most people will argue that Operation Overlord was the beginning of the momentum that eventually led to the Allied forces defeating the Germans and

[22] Copp, *Fields of Fire,* 13.
[23] Zuehlke, *Juno Beach*, 242.
[24] Zuehlke, *Juno Beach*, 243.
[25] Zuehlke, *Juno Beach*, 243.

the rest of the Axis powers. With that in mind, Canada's important role in Operation Overlord and the success that came from it was important to the overall landscape of the war. Without those early victories at the various beaches, including Canada's on Juno Beach, the first domino would not have fallen that eventually led to the defeat of the Axis powers.

To win the war, a lot of variables needed to fall into place but one of the biggest hurdles to overcome was having the Allied soldiers back in Europe and engaged in conflict. To do that, they needed to take Normandy and go from there. Throughout the planning and the eventual execution, Canada was always there and served an important role in the operation. By serving an important role in Operation Overlord, Canada also served an important role in the eventual victory of the Axis powers

Conclusion

World War II truly was a war encompassing the entire world. From the years 1939-1945, every country in the world felt the effects of World War II and because of that, each country has their own version of the war's history and how their individual country was impacted by the war. With this in mind, it is clear that there is a vast amount of history to sift through and many different lenses to look at the war through. This makes it extremely difficult to truly understand what one individual country did because each country has their own story to tell, their own hero to talk about. Because of this, Canada's important and distinct story sometimes can be overlooked in favour of larger countries. This could suggest that because Canada's World War II history is not as publicly displayed internationally as some other nations, Canada did not have a large impact on the war. However, to put it simply, Canada had a very important role in the success that the Allies eventually had and the eventual defeat of the Axis powers. In his book about memory and perspectives of World War II, Keith Crawford says:

> Serving in every major theatre of war, Canadian troops witnessed action in Hong Kong, Sicily, Italy, and north western Europe. Canadian forces also stood on vital guard duty in Britain during the period of greatest threat of German invasion and Canadian naval vessels proved invaluable during the vital Battle for the Atlantic. Most notably Canadian forces made a huge contribution to the D-Day landings of June 1944 and the subsequent Allied advances into central Europe during 1944 and 1945.[1]

This argument about Canada's role in World War II is precisely what needs to be addressed more in World War II history. The fact of the matter is, Canada played a very important role in World War II, participating in many important battles and operations, even more than what was highlighted in this paper.

[1] Keith Crawford, *War, Nation, Memory: International Perspectives on World War II in School History Textbooks,* (Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2008), 186.

When looking at Canada's involvement in Operation Husky, unfortunately, "outside Canada, most histories of Operation Husky give [Canada's] participation less attention than seems warranted by 1st Canadian Infantry Division's exploits."[2] In reality, Canada served an important role in Operation Husky and played an important role in the overall success of the operation. But beyond Canada's role in Operation Husky, the circumstances leading up to Operation Husky also need to be analyzed. The fact is, Canada had the ability to miss Operation Husky and save hundreds of Canada men's lives but instead, Canada demanded that they be a part of the operation, to play a part in the attempt to defeat the Axis powers. In the end, they were able to participate in the operation allowing almost all of the men of 1st Division the opportunity to fight in their first battle. Canada's role in Operation Husky was very important but it was also considerably distinct from all the other nations that participated in successful Operation Husky.

Just like with Operation Husky, Canada played an important role in Operation Overlord. There can be many reasons as to why this is the case. This includes the "effectiveness of the training the Canadians had in preparing for [Operation Overlord]. The Canadian army in Britain from 1940 to 1944 engaged in steadily improving its combat prowess."[3] Regardless of why and how Canada was so prepared to participate in Operation Overlord by storming Juno Beach, the fact remains that of all the beaches that the Allied forces attacked, Canada was able to advance the furthest inland. They were able to get closest to the intended objectives and help support the other Allied nations. Canada played an important role by doing exactly what they were supposed to do and support the other nations in the process.

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[2] Mark Zuehlke, *Operation Husky: The Canadian Invasion of Sicily*, June 10-August 7, 1943, (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009), 283.
[3] Mark Zuehlke, *Juno Beach: Canada's D-Day Victory: June 6, 1944*, (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005), 243.

Finally, Canada's early years of the war were anything but conventional. What they did was very distinct from the other nations yet, they played a very important role. Canada was able to successfully host and lead the biggest scale air training center for the Allied forces. Not only did they host and run the training program, they also supplied a large portion of the men to the program. Beyond that, they were able to help the allies in the Battle for the Atlantic by supplying men and ships for convoys that sent supplies and men to Europe. Both of these roles were vitally important to the Allies in the early years of the war. While this in itself is distinct, the incredible part is that all of this was done while Canada was attempting to build up a standing army, something that they did not have in the lead up to World War II.

The argument for Canada's role in World War II should be past the point of arguing whether their role was important or not. It should be now asking the question: how important was it? The reality is that every part of World War II was touched by Canada and every time Canada was called upon, the results always helped further the war effort. Canada should no longer be considered as a secondary nation that participated in World War II. They should be considered as a primary nation. While they did not provide as many soldiers to the effort, due to the smaller population compared to nations such as Britain or the United States, Canada performed just as well regardless of size. The extra barriers that Canada had to overcome and additional responsibilities that Canada took on show that during World War II, Canada's role was both distinct and important.

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