

Hell was hottest on 'BLUE BEACH'



By Capt Peter Moogk

The fury of the battles around Dieppe, France, on Aug. 19, 1942, is evident at the Canadian military cemetery near the town. More than one-fifth of the 944 men buried there are unidentified. Gravestones read 'A Soldier of the Second World War/A Canadian Regiment/19th August, 1942'. Other soldiers, equally anonymous, are collectively buried in a few plots — there was not even a complete body to be interred.

One survivor called the Dieppe Raid "10 hours of unadulterated hell". Hell was hottest on 'Blue Beach' where the resort of Puits nestles in a gap in the chalk cliffs which flank the port of Dieppe. Ninety-five per cent of the Royal Regiment of Canada was killed, wounded or captured there. Instead of driving inland to seize the east headland overlooking Dieppe, most of the Canadians who landed at Puits remained trapped on the stony beach that was swept by rifle, machine gun and mortar fire.

HEADING OVERSEAS

One of the few men to leave 'Blue Beach' alive was Nelson Longueay, now



A British newspaper of the time gave a glowing account of the raid on Dieppe.

living in Port Alberni, B.C. As a student at John Oliver High School in Vancouver, he wanted to join the air force, but his parents only consented to his joining the local 1st Searchlight Regiment of the Royal Canadian Artillery. There, they felt, he would have his brother 'Chuck' to

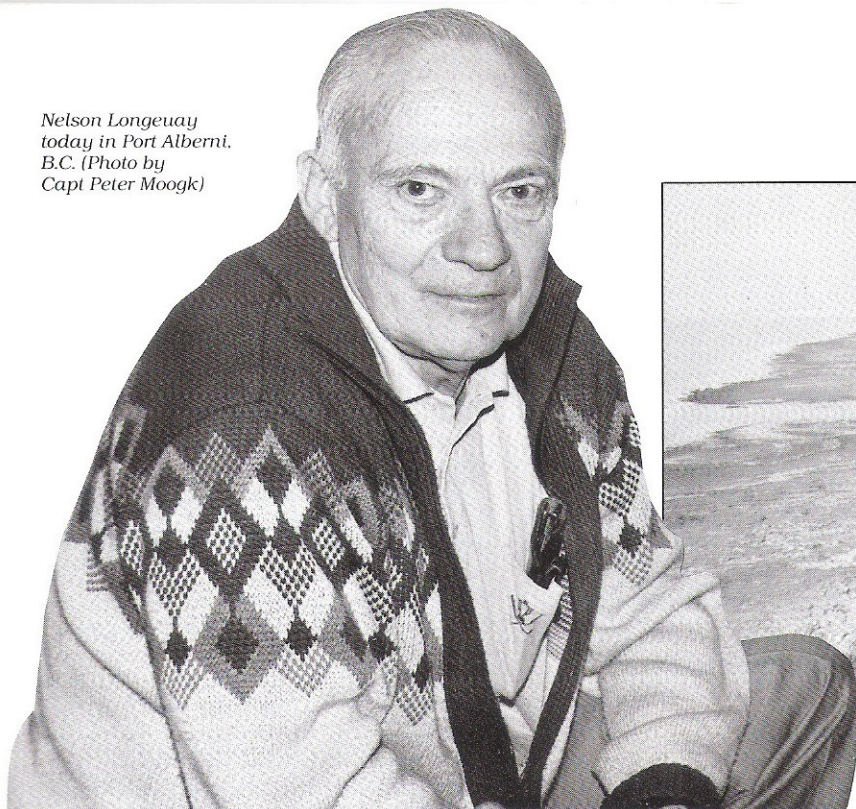
Devastation on the main beach at Dieppe after the Aug. 19, 1942 raid. (C 14160 from Public Archives of Canada)

watch over him. Nelson enlisted on Sept. 4, 1939, but soon grew tired of the home defence army routine. When his brother went into hospital in August, 1940, Nelson transferred to the 16th Light Anti-Aircraft Battery which was going overseas as part of the 3rd Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, RCA.

In England during the summer of 1942, Nelson's troop was chosen for commando training in the Isle of Wight. Under live fire, they went through assault courses and practised landings from the sea. Over a beer, a British commando sergeant gave the young gunner some vital advice in return for Canadian cigarettes. "I've been on several commando raids and you want to pick your spot in the boat. Either be among the first five men to get off or the last few men. If you're in the first five, the enemy seem to be taking aim before they open up on you...if you're in the last few, it seems about that time they're either changing magazines or getting fresh ammunition, and the last three or four men always seem to get away scot-free."

The first 'reconnaissance in force' against Dieppe was cancelled in July, 1942. Since thousands of troops had

Nelson Longeuay today in Port Alberni, B.C. (Photo by Capt Peter Moogk)



From the Germans' cliff-top position, Puy's beach was an open amphitheatre without cover for the Canadian attackers. (Photo by Capt Peter Moogk)

known the cancelled operation was against Dieppe, it became impossible to maintain complete secrecy. A month later, Nelson was "surprised and horrified" to learn that the operation was back on. It was complex, involving five separate and precisely timed landings over a 16-kilometre front. It also assumed that the German defenders on the French coast could be surprised.

GIVE 'EM HELL

Nelson was aboard the *Queen Emma* as the force of 6,100 Canadian and British troops sailed toward the Normandy coast at night. He and 23 other gunners, with two officers, were attached to C Company of the Royal Regiment of Canada. The artillerymen's task was to capture German anti-aircraft guns, to man them if necessary, and to bring back their modern aiming sights. "It was one o'clock [in the morning] when they served breakfast and then we started climbing over the side of the ship into the little assault landing craft circling the mother ship." British sailors called out, "Atta boy, Canada, give 'em hell". Alas, it was to be the other way around — the Canadians got hell.

At 3:47 a.m. the easternmost landing parties (British Commandos) ran into a small German convoy. So far as the men at Dieppe were concerned, surprise had been lost. In fact, the German defence forces were not aware of this incident, nor did they need to be. On that particular morning the German commander at Puy's had all his men on dawn 'stand-to'.

A and B Companies of the Royal



Nelson Longeuay (centre) with fellow members of the 16th Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, RCA, in October, 1940. (From a photo owned by Maj Ted Edmonds)

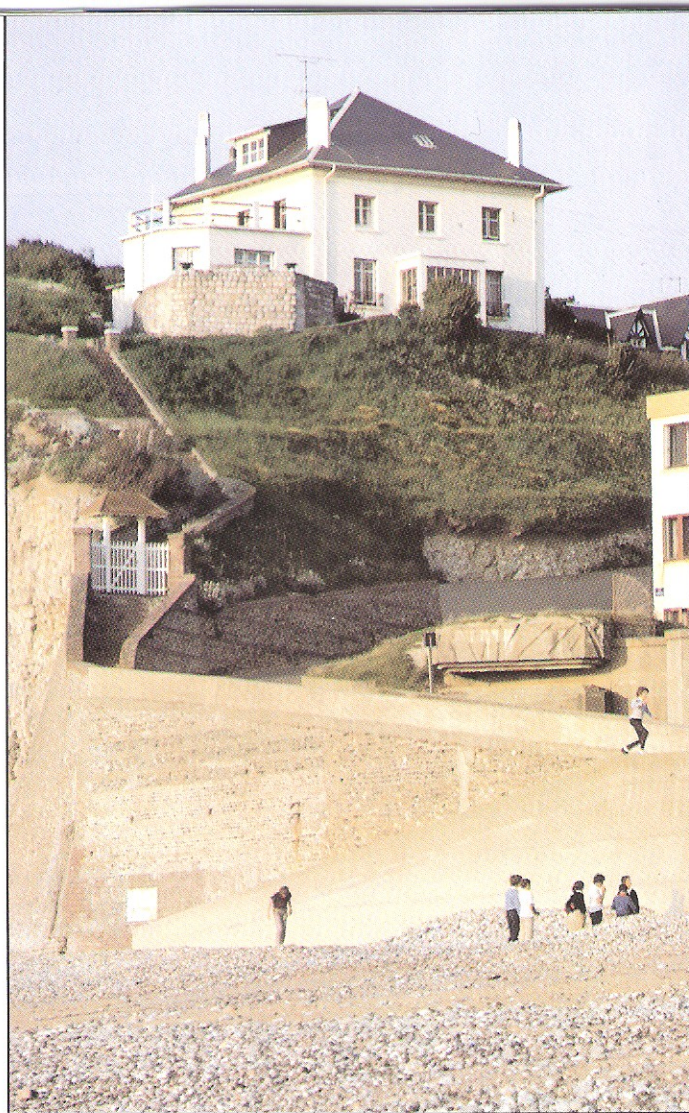
Regiment were in the first wave to land on Blue Beach. The gunners, three platoons of the Black Watch of Canada and C Company followed in the second wave. Nelson observed the fate of the first wave. "The German defences were already pouring a murderous fire on them...and [by now] it was broad daylight." As advised, Nelson was among the last to leave his landing craft — the first men were piled up dead on the ramp. While the vessel was backing away from

the beach, "I jumped into the water up to my neck and half ran to the beach. I threw myself flat on the beach and I lay there to size up the situation and...got my second wind. I saw a German soldier running across the skyline on the top of the cliffs. I upped with my rifle and fired a snap shot at him, but in the excitement I didn't have the butt against my shoulder and it knocked me over backwards. I realized I had water in my rifle, so I just threw it away." Running to the three-metre high seawall, he picked up a Bren light machine gun and sank into the shelter of a small stone buttress.

AUTOMATIC REACTIONS

Looking back at the beach, Nelson froze in shock. "Out of A and B Companies there couldn't have been more than a dozen men left alive...Then suddenly something came over me and all my training just snapped into place. From then on everything I did was like a mechanical man." Others did not recover. Fellow gunner Joseph Dessureault, who had lost all his fingers, asked Nelson to take his false teeth out of his battledress pocket and put them in his mouth. "He said he didn't want to die without his teeth being in."

Nelson now watched as a Royal Regiment officer ordered crews to man a mortar that had been exposed by the receding tide. "He yelled 'Number one crew' and they rushed out...They set up their mortar and they got off about three bombs before a mortar shell landed in the midst of them and they all just collapsed and rolled over in a circle." More crews followed with the same result.



The fieldstone terrace of this villa on the eastern slope above Puy is a former German bunker. A machine gun nest is located part way down the staircase and another bunker tops the seawall. The deadliest fire came from this slope. (Photo by Capt Peter Moogk)

"They were all wiped out...one of them was yelling for someone to come down and shoot him — half his face was blown away."

Gunner Longeuay moved to a sheltered recession in the cliff face and used his Bren gun to spray the cliff tops to keep the Germans from setting up more weapons to fire down on the beach. The covering fire also helped a party that was cutting and blowing a hole through the barbed wire entanglements at the top of the seawall. Grenades, however, were being tossed over the cliff onto the beach.

The German defenders were briefly distracted by a landing craft that came in to take off the wounded. "A naval officer came over the loud hailer and told the wounded to make a run for it...I was so surprised because a lot of people who had been 'dead' — or whom I thought were dead — got up and made a run for the boat...The Germans just concentrated several of their machine guns on the ramp and [the wounded] had to run through a wall of steel. Within two seconds, that boat ramp was piled high, about three or four feet, with dead." Gunner Dessureault was "cut in half" as he hobbled to the evacuation boat.

PLAYING DEAD

The craft grounded in the ebbing tide and Nelson joined those who rushed out to push it into deeper water. He hoped to get back to England by hanging on, but the gunfire forced him to let go. With a life jacket taken from a corpse, he floated back onto the beach — playing dead so he would not attract sniper fire.

Once again, he dodged across the beach to the seawall and found that his earlier companions had disappeared through the hole in the barbed wire. LCol Douglas Catto of the Royals had led 20 others off the beach. "There wasn't one single person within 30 feet of me that was alive or moving." Meanwhile, the enemy machine guns fired on the gap in the wire, closing that escape route. Anyone who ventured out of the shelter of the seawall was soon cut down.

SURRENDER

At around 8:30 a.m., when the Germans laid a creeping mortar barrage moving from the water line toward the seawall, a Canadian sergeant-major held up a white handkerchief. An earlier invitation to surrender had been met with the response "Go to hell". Now the

wounded were crawling up the beach to escape the barrage. "The sergeant-major was certainly right when he decided that there was no sense in fighting any more; we didn't have much ammunition, if any."

Nelson fired off the last three or four rounds in his Bren magazine and then tossed the LMG onto the beach. He climbed up one of the ladders put down by the Germans and discarded his commando knife "because I knew they didn't like commandos". When the captured Canadians turned a corner along the pathway into the village, a surprised German soldier who knew nothing of the surrender shot the lead man. In one last tragic act, Royal Air Force fighters strafed the prisoners as they were being held in a school courtyard — 17 more men were killed.

When the Canadians marched into a prison camp in Germany, they ignored the British captives' request for news. "We felt so ashamed, having been a complete failure, that we didn't want to speak to anybody."

Today, Nelson is not embarrassed about that raid 45 years ago. "When you look back on the Dieppe raid now...all I can say is 'what more could a man do than give his life?' They fought as hard — harder — than anyone and they were just slaughtered. If it was a failure, they certainly didn't fail because they didn't try. They only had one life to give and they gave it most freely that day."

The brutal lessons of the Dieppe raid and of subsequent attacks were, however, successfully applied by British and Canadian planners of the D-Day landings two years later. As a consequence, the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division and our airborne battalion suffered only 335 fatal casualties on June 6, 1944. The smaller Canadian force assaulting Dieppe had nearly three times as many — 907 — killed.

POSTSCRIPT

In prison camp Nelson Longeuay was told that he had been listed among those killed and buried at Dieppe. He imagines that the body was actually that of a friend, James 'Jay' Charters, to whom he entrusted a letter from his mother before disembarking. Charters was supposed to remain on the mother ship, but impulsively joined his friends in a landing craft. The identification was probably made on the basis of this letter. Charters is still listed as 'missing in action' and is likely one of the 189 anonymous dead in the Dieppe cemetery. ♣

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