

Article:

MEMORIES OF DIEPPE

by David Cale

On a day in early July 1999 my friend Phil and I left for our annual motorcycle trip, a circumnavigation of Georgian Bay. Five days of exultation in the unique sensation of speed and freedom that comes with the rumble of a motorcycle that soon seems to be an extension of your body. That and the "camaraderie of the stop sign" where having stopped, your universe expands from the bubble of noise, wind, and rushing road.

On our first night we were to stay in a campground south of Tobermory. This took us through Warton, Ontario. It was well past noon, so when Phil had made the universal sign for lunch and a beer, I gave him an enthusiastic thumbs up. We parked our motorcycles. As it turned out we had parked just across the street from the Cenotaph. Surrounding the Cenotaph was a couple hundred or so, small (10-15 cm tall) white crosses, each inscribed with a name. I looked at Phil and wondered how it could be that such a small town had lost so many men in the wars Canada had fought in this century. Even more puzzling, there were only twenty or so names carved in the cenotaph.

We must have looked perplexed as we stood there.

"Mine will be there beside that one" a voice from behind us said.

We looked around to see an unassuming man, clearly well over eighty, short with white hair sticking

out from under a Royal Canadian Legion berray.

"I see you boys are puzzled." I hadn't been called a boy for far too many years.

He pointed at one of the small crosses. "My cross will be there right next to Charlie's."

As we looked even more confused he said,

"Each one of those crosses is for a member of the Legion that has died after the war."

Ah... the light dawned.

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We introduced ourselves, "I'm David and this is my friend Phil. We teach in the same school in Brampton."

He said, "My name is Guy Tyndal."

I told him that I was going to be in Normandy, France in August. In particular Dieppe and the D-Day beaches.

As we talked I explained my interest in World War II, and how I had been to France the summer before



visiting Vimy Ridge, Dunquerque, Dieppe and Juno beach in Normandy.

When I mentioned Dieppe his eyes looked distant.

"I lost one of my best friends at Dieppe. His name was James Paterson. He was a real character and a great friend."

"I enlisted in the RCAF and was eventually posted in England, working with the RAF in radar. I knew James was there, a member of the Hamilton Light Infantry and so when I arrived I looked him up. I didn't smoke but I brought him a carton of 'Black Cats'. He was overjoyed to have some real smokes. There was such a shortage they had been reduced to scrounging butts from the local dance hall floor and rolling their own from the unburnt tobacco. That night we went down to the local pub."

"It was James' favourite pub and he was well known there. Having been in the merchant marine, he drank... well, like a sailor. Not that that was unusual in 1941, what with the war going badly, and having to live in cramped conditions along with thousands of other young men, most away from home for the first time."

Guy went on, "James was a little older than most of them, having been at sea for several years. He was very proud of his tattoos and took advantage of any opportunity to show them off. He had the Royal Battle

Ensign covering his entire back, a spider surrounding his navel, tattoos on his fingers, arms and a fox on his rear sniffing his asshole. His favourite though was one Indian maid on his



right thigh. He could make her dance by flexing his thigh muscle.”

“The pub had a mascot, a parrot that knew every cuss word in the English language. James, having a few drinks in him, stuck his finger into the cage, teasing him. The bird bit him down to the bone. Instead of getting angry he looked at the bird with admiration and said ‘That bird’s alright. He won’t take any bullshit.’ That was a pet James could understand - caged but not tamed.”

“How did he come to die at Dieppe?” I said.

Guy replied, “Dieppe was mostly a Canadian raid and James was one of the first ashore that day...”

On “that day”, some 57 years ago, August 19, 1942, five thousand Canadians and one thousand Brits and fifty American Rangers launched a “raid in strength” on the small French harbour town of Dieppe.

I knew already that the attack on Dieppe was largely mounted for political reasons. Churchill was under heavy pressure both from Roosevelt and Stalin to open up a second front against the Germans. Roosevelt was threatening to fight Japan first, leaving England to her own devices. Stalin was threatening to sue for peace if

attacks were not mounted to draw German resources away from the Russian front. So Churchill ordered the raid, partly a trial run to try out invasion tactics, but mostly to show that any attempt at invasion now would meet with disaster. Vital information was withheld from the Canadian Commander, information that probably would have resulted in a refusal to mount the raid.

The Canadians were told that the town was lightly defended by second rate soldiers and light defences. Instead it was heavily defended with elite soldiers. It appears that a success was not desirable. They got what they expected. It was a bloody disaster.

The bombardment of the guns on the cliffs overlooking the beach was completely ineffectual. The tanks landed on the beach by the new LCTs (Landing Craft Tank) could not climb the steep flint pebble beach which acted like ball bearings under their caterpillar treads and once they sank down a bit the stones jammed and broke the sprockets on the wheels driving them. Fighter support was ineffectual and the RCAF and RAF lost more planes that day than any day during the Battle of Britain.

Any shells exploding in the flint created a hail of razor-sharp stone shrapnel. Many men lost their eyes this way. The men were trapped on the beach, sitting ducks for the hundreds of machine guns of the shore defences and the heavy guns on the cliffs. Eleven hours later when the battle ended, 907 Canadians were dead - James was one of them.

Guy went on. “He and his friends in their company knew that this was going to be a very dangerous mission, so they had filled their canteens with navy rum and by the time they landed they had a fair bit of ‘liquid courage’. Once ashore they were pinned down

by a machine gun. They couldn’t move and were being shelled from the cliffs. James and his friend decided to charge the machine gun. They didn’t get more than a few feet.”



“Later that summer I returned to Dieppe, walked the steep beach of golf ball sized stones and tried to imagine what it must have been like to have been under fire, trapped, in full view of the guns on the cliffs on each side. Where had James died? I then drove up the steep hill to the Canadian cemetery. In the two years since I had been here last, nothing had changed. The seven hundred and eighty men buried there surrounded me. Row after row of them lay silently under the perfectly manicured lawn and gardens. It was late afternoon, windy and cool. The sun occasionally broke through the clouds casting long shadows from each grave stone.”

“Every war cemetery has an alcove in which is inset a cabinet with heavy brass doors. Inside is the guest registry and a record of those buried there. I opened the book to the P’s and found J. A. Paterson, The Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, age 25, died August 19, 1942, row F #21.”

“As I walked over to his grave I read epitaphs beneath the maple leaf and cross on several stones. “Rest in

Jesus”, “Repose en Paix mon gars. Que cette terre de France te soit léger.” Messages of hope in the afterlife, records of heroism, and then James Paterson. “Soldiers don’t die, they are just transferred.”

Guy had finished his story and was looking quite tired by now. We thanked him profusely and parted ways. After lunch we headed down the road again. This time, though, the roar of the motorcycles and the hint of danger seemed very distant and not nearly so daring.