

Top: Viking Force Shoulder Patch.

Left & below: Soldiers from Viking Force engaged in training on the Isle of Mull, April 1942



Viking Force

Canada's Unknown Commandos

George Kerr

Most people interested in Canadian military history know about the elite first Special Service Battalion, formed in July 1942 as the Canadian element of the largely American First Special Service Force.¹ Few, however, have ever heard of Viking Force, Canada's first attempt at creating an elite Commando unit in the Second World War. Viking Force does not appear in any Canadian Army Order of Battle, and did not even last long enough for its members to put on the unit's horned-helmet shoulder patch, yet it played an important role in the sad story of the Dieppe fiasco. Acknowledgment of that role is long overdue.

The creation of the Vikings was a response to the political-military dilemmas facing the British and Canadian governments after the expulsion of Allied forces from the continent of Europe in June 1940. The weakened Commonwealth forces had few means of attacking the Germans directly, except for the primitive and largely ineffectual raids by RAF Bomber Command on the German heartland.

In this situation of strategic near-impotence, the British government could do little in the short term beyond authorizing small-scale raids on the coastlines of occupied Europe and training forces to carry them out.² The aims of this raiding policy were described in a memorandum to his commanders from Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery on 1 November 1941. Montgomery, then in command of British XII Corps in south-east England, stated that:

Initially, the objects of such raids, in order of priority, will be:

- (a) To bring back German prisoners, alive if possible.
- (b) To obtain information regarding the nature of the enemy's coastal defences.

(c) To inflict casualties and damage.

Montgomery stressed the small-scale nature of the proposed raids: "They are, in fact, patrols – reconnoitering patrols and fighting patrols." Large-scale enterprises intended to cause significant destruction were not part of this policy: "such raids involve all three services, and have certain repercussions, and they are planned by GHQ."³

Monty's outline raiding policy was, in other words, based on the resources in men, materiel, and expertise available to the forces in his South-East Command, facing the Germans across the English Channel. His command, of course, included the Canadian Corps forming in Britain, which would be given access to the training facilities on the south coast, and to opportunities for direct action on the other side of the Channel. Always eager to change the defensive mentality of too many officers and men in his command, Monty saw in a policy of small-scale raiding the means of preparing his men for the realities of offensive action: "we live in a training atmosphere; we now see the first beginnings of a policy which will help to fit our Army for battle."⁴

Training for the kind of engagements envisioned by Monty necessarily involved the Royal Navy, which presented its own problems: South-East Command was already training its men in assault landing techniques at HMS *Northney*, but lack of facilities – above all, of landing craft – meant that the parties of officers and men sent to the Navy base received only about a week of instruction, and even that was frequently in subjects which would better have been learned on dry land before making use of scarce naval resources.⁵ Monty's memorandum on raiding policy was a realistic but limited



The commanding officer of Viking Force, Major Brian McCool (left), along with some unidentified officers of his unit.

program for an active, aggressive role for an Army which had received a bloody nose at the hands of the Germans, and which needed time, resources, and a realistic syllabus of training to hit back at its very professional enemy.

Early in 1942, the Acting Commander of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General H.D.G. Crerar, shared the frustration of his British colleagues in finding ways of hitting back at the Germans, and had the additional problem of dealing with his own troops' frustration with higher authorities' refusal to allow Canadian troops to join other Commonwealth forces in the Middle East.⁶ A partial solution to the problem could be found in the commitment of Canadian forces to raids on the continent. With his chief, General A.G.L. McNaughton, on extended sick leave in Canada, Crerar took the initiative and wrote Montgomery:

I am conversant with the reasons which have led to the continued retention of the Canadian Corps in the Home Forces and require no additional arguments to convince me that this policy has been the sound one to maintain. At the same time...as the months go by and

opportunities fail to materialize in which the officers and men of my command can match skill and courage against the enemy, the more difficult it will be to maintain in them the desired keenness and morale.

I believe that occasions will increasingly present themselves for small raids across the Channel opposite the Army front...In default of a reputation built up in battle the Corps undoubtedly would receive great stimulus if, in the near future it succeeded in making a name for itself for its raiding activities – a reputation which, incidentally, it very definitely earned for itself in the last war.⁷

To this combination of appeals to political considerations, morale-building, and history, Monty replied the following week in encouraging terms, reminding Crerar of the continuing landing-craft shortage, diplomatically reassuring him that “your men should be quite first class at raiding,” and giving him the green light to run Canadian raiding activities from the port of Newhaven.⁸

Thus emboldened, Crerar held discussions on the Canadian Corps' future role in cross-Channel raids with Montgomery and with the

deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff [DCIGS], General Archibald Nye, before meeting with the CIGS himself, General Alan Brooke.⁹ These conversations led to two meetings on 6 March 1942 with the Director of Combined Operations [DCO], Lord Louis Mountbatten, the DCIGS, and other high-ranking officers involved in the growing area of combined operations. Crerar's presentation at the first meeting, minuted by his Brigadier-General (Staff) [BGS], Guy Simonds, was essentially a recapitulation of his letter to General Montgomery. The DCO was initially reluctant to employ a Canadian force because it would "dilute" the role of the Commandos, who were, according to an agreement with the Commander-in-Chief Home Forces, to have a monopoly on raiding. Mountbatten was nothing if not acutely tuned to the political issues involved in every military organization and operation, and agreed to make an exception for a purely Canadian force. Significantly, he also voiced his opinion "that very small raiding parties were useless, and that the minimum strength should not be less than 100 and preferably stronger." Mountbatten then laid out two conditions for the Canadians to meet:

(a) That ample time should be allowed for proper organization and training – this was stated to be six to eight weeks.

(b) That the enterprise should be known only to the Corps Comd and B.G.S. and a limited number of his own [ie. Mountbatten's] staff.

General Crerar readily agreed to these conditions.

At the second meeting later that afternoon, Crerar and Simonds discussed the arrangements for training the proposed Canadian commando unit with Brigadier J.C. Haydon, the Commander of the Special Service Force (after it was realized that the Force's initials were unfortunate, the name Commando was reinstated). The discussion ended with an agreement to set up a Canadian Commando of about 200 men, to begin training by the middle of March.¹⁰

If Crerar could be considered the father of Viking Force, Guy Simonds was its midwife, and he carried out his duty with characteristic briskness. After further discussion with Haydon, Simonds visited the 2nd Canadian Division

headquarters and passed on verbal instructions from his superiors to the Division's Acting commander, Brigadier Hamilton Roberts, and his GSO 1, Lieutenant-Colonel Churchill Mann, to the effect that organization of the force was to begin immediately and that it should be as representative of the 2nd Division as possible.¹¹

Within a fortnight, 267 volunteers from the Division were training at Seaford in the muddy estuary of the Cuckmere River in Sussex. The Vikings' organization was essentially that of a British Commando, albeit on a smaller scale. The Detachment HQ Section was headed by an officer with the rank of major, and comprised 24 officers and ORs. A further 36 officers and men staffed Intelligence, Signals, and Medical Sections. The remaining 130 were divided into two troops, each consisting of five officers and 60 men. Personal equipment reflected the nature of the tasks undertaken by Commandos: oilskin coats and sou'westers, Mae West life jackets, wire cutters, blued torches, toggle ropes, and scaling ladders. The Vikings, like their British exemplars, placed heavy emphasis on firepower: in addition to the standard .303 Lee-Enfields, each troop carried four Bren light machine guns and eight Thompson sub-machine guns, as well as two anti-tank rifles and a two-inch mortar. Additional support could be provided by HQ Detachment's three-inch mortar.¹²

In short order, instructors began to winnow them down to the unit's official complement of 190 officers and ORs.¹³ During this initial training period, Brigadier Roberts visited the troops on 20 March and Crerar observed them three days later.¹⁴ From 4 April, personnel from the Special Service Force joined the Vikings to increase the intensity of their training and begin to turn them into Commandos before they went on their "killer course" in Scotland.¹⁵

During their initial training in Sussex, the Vikings had enjoyed a variety of billets and a degree of individual freedom which would not have been tolerated in a regular unit, and would not have worked in a regular unit anyway. The men had volunteered for a particularly hazardous, if unknown, duty, and were treated as if they were individuals with a sense of responsibility along with their other qualities. The unfit were quickly weeded out as intended, and the survivors of Seaford could paint the



Soldiers from Viking Force engaged in training on the Isle of Mull, April 1942

Sussex coast red every night if they wanted to – just as long as they could complete a fifteen-mile route march or spend eight hours a day in cliff-climbing if that was what their instructors laid on as the day's entertainment. At Seaford, they practiced with the usual personal weapons – .303 Lee-Enfield, .38 Webley, .45 Thompson sub-machine gun, as well as Brens, mortars, and the Boys anti-tank rifle. In addition, they learned to kill swiftly with Fairbairn knives and strangling wires – which served double-duty as rabbit snares to supplement the always-inadequate British rations. To test their susceptibility to sea-sickness, the Vikings were sent out in little fishing boats into the unpredictable waters of the English Channel, to face the Commandos' refinement of the medieval Ordeal by Water: being thrown overboard with full packs to test their ability to survive in the worst conditions.

It was not until 4 April that Brigadier Haydon could inform Canadian Military Headquarters [CMHQ] that an assault ship would be available for Viking Force's advanced training. On 14 April the camp at Seaford was closed and the Vikings were en route to Scotland, to embark on HMS *Princess Josephine Charlotte* at Greenock on 15 April.¹⁶ If Seaford had been a grueling ordeal, what awaited them on the miserably wet west

coast of Scotland was infinitely more exhausting. The language of Simonds' memo on Viking Force's training is revealing:

This training will comprise going out to sea in Atlantic and carrying out beach assault exercises in HEBRIDIES [sic] – against local Home Guard (who are reputed to be very tough).

From these minor exercises detachment again goes out to open sea and carries out assault landing exercise against one of the commandoes (also very tough)...

Before 15 Apr, 2 Cdn Div detachment must be fully organized, run in and very tough.

After describing the rigorous nature of Viking training in detail, Simonds concluded:

This will be the first detachment of Canadian Troops to undertake this advanced training with the Navy, it is most important that it should be:

- (a) Well disciplined and thoroughly organized.
- (b) Thoroughly trained in field craft and use of weapons by day and night.
- (c) Very tough.¹⁷

With the foregoing sentiments incorporated into the Corps' Training Instruction No. 7, the main responsibility for whipping the Vikings into Simonds' desired level of toughness passed to their newly-appointed CO, Major Brian McCool of the Royal Regiment of Canada.¹⁸



Above: Colonel McCool (pointing) training in the field with Viking Force, April 1942.

Right: Colonel McCool checks out the assault course on the Isle of Mull, April 1942.



The survivors of Seaford joined McCool on board the *Josephine Charlotte*. Moored in Loch-na-Kiel off the Isle of Mull, the ship was the Vikings' floating base while they learned more about the art of amphibious warfare from the Commandos. When the combined efforts of the Navy and the Vikings had drained the pubs of Bunessan, the only nearby town, McCool made sure his men received an adequate ration of Navy rum to keep their morale up.

During the last two weeks of April, the pace of training intensified: speed marches with weapons and sixty-pound packs, river crossings, leaping from crags into sand pits fifteen feet below, cliff-climbing, and night manoeuvres. The latter exercises carried their own peculiar hazards: if the men did not get back to the beaches in time to be ferried to the *Josephine Charlotte*, they had to swim back to the ship – with their equipment. Very quickly, the Vikings cohered into a unit with a particularly strong *esprit*, and a consciousness of their own high standards of military professionalism, which was bolstered when they reached the point of teaching their Commando instructors a few new tricks in the arts of cliff-climbing and river-crossing. Like Montgomery, McCool knew that military professionalism did not depend on spit and polish or rigid adherence to King's Regulations, but on individual responsibility, initiative, and willing teamwork.¹⁹

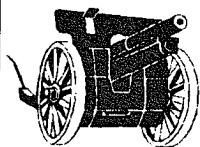
While the Vikings were carrying out their advanced amphibious operations training, the Canadian Corps was evaluating intelligence reports on suitable targets for future operations opposite South-East Command's area on the Channel coast. The most favoured objectives, the little villages of Stella Plage, Merlimont Plage, and Quend Plage, were not heavily defended and were suitable for attack by small commando-type forces.²⁰ So far, thinking at Corps HQ envisioned raiding as an essentially small-scale activity, in accord with Montgomery's outline policy the previous year. By the end of April, however, CMHQ's raiding policy was undergoing significant change, both in scale and in objectives.

On 30 April, Montgomery visited General McNaughton and it was agreed that the Canadians should form the main striking force for the planned raid on Dieppe. General Crerar had already earmarked the 2nd Division for this kind of operation.²¹ On the same day, 1st Canadian Corps HQ issued Training Instruction No. 9, which aimed to enlarge the scale of combined operations training. The document served as security cover for the main object of the change – the training of the 2nd Division's 4th and 6th Brigades in combined ops – by

Notes

1. Most studies of Dieppe describe 2nd Division training on the Isle of Wight in some detail, but fail to mention the role of the Vikings in that training. In fact, the very name "Viking" hardly ever appears in the context of the Canadian Army, or its best-known operation of the Second World War (Terence Robertson's *The Shame and the Glory* – not considered a work of reliable scholarship – mentions Viking Force on p.88). The official history of the Canadian Army in the Second World War devotes little more than three lines to Viking Force without referring to it by name, and is much more forthcoming, as well as more detailed, on the First Special Service Battalion. See C. P. Stacey, *The Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War*, vol. 1, *Six Years of War* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1966), pp.309, 104-8.
2. J.M.A. Gwyer and J.R.M. Butler, *Grand Strategy*, vol. III, *June, 1941 - August, 1942* (London: HMSO, 1964), pp.514-515.
3. National Archives of Canada [NAC], H.D.G. Crerar Papers, MG30 E157, vol. 23, file 958C.009 (D233).
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: the War Policies of Canada, 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 1970), pp. 39-40.
7. NAC, Department of National Defence Records, RG 24, vol. 10765, file 221C1 (D126), Crerar to Montgomery, 5 February 1942
8. *Ibid.*, Montgomery to Crerar, 8 February 1942.
9. NAC, RG 24, vol. 10765, file 221C1(D126). See also Dominick Graham, *The Price of Command: A Biography of General Guy Simonds* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993), appendix I, for an important eyewitness/participant's view of Crerar's role in lobbying higher authority for a Canadian role in raiding operations.
10. NAC, RG 24, vol. 10765, file 222C1 (D126).
11. NAC, RG 24, vol. 10750, file 220CL.009 (D2).
12. NAC, RG 24, vol. 10765, file 222C1 (D126), Canadian Corps Training Instruction No. 7, appendix A, 16 March 1942.
13. NAC, RG 24, microfilm reel T7606, 2nd Division War Diary, 20 March 1942.
14. *Ibid.*, 23 March 1942.
15. *Ibid.*, General Report for week ending 4 April 1942.
16. 2nd Division War Diary, General Report for week ending 18 April 1942.
17. NAC: RG 24, vol. 10765, file 222C1 (D126), Simonds to GSO 1, 2nd Division, 11 March 1942.
18. Major McCool had been posted to HQ Canadian Corps to learn the job of "Corps raiding officer" and was a natural choice for CO of Viking Force. See Royal Regiment of Canada War Diary, 10 February 1942; and Denis Whitaker and Shelagh Whitaker, *Dieppe: Tragedy to Triumph* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1992), p.89. McCool became Principal Military Landing Officer for the raid on Dieppe.
19. The description of the Vikings' training at Seaford and in Scotland is a précis of chapter 3 of George Kerr and Doug Mackenzie, *Unlikely Hero: A Dieppe Survivor's Gift of Hope* (Aylmer, ON: The Aylmer Express Ltd., 1997). This chapter is based largely on interviews conducted in 1982-3 with Lieutenant-Colonel Brian McCool and Don Errey, one of the surviving Viking ORs (and a volunteer from the Essex Scottish). Both men were wounded at Dieppe and spent the rest of the war in captivity.
20. NAC, RG 24, vol. 10765, file 222C1. (D126), memo from Simonds, 15 April 1942.
21. Stacey, *Six Years of War*, p.399; Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: The Making of a General, 1887-1942* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1981), p.551
22. NAC, RG 24, vol. 10770, file 221C1 (D235). The document's security function certainly confused the DCCO; there is an exchange of correspondence between a confused (and seemingly peeved) Brigadier Haydon and a conciliatory Simonds over Canadian Corps' presumed excessive demands for scarce instructors and landing craft. See NAC: RG 24, vol. 10750, file 220C1.009 (D2), and NAC, RG 24, vol. 10872, file 232CL (D33)
23. *Ibid.* See also NAC, RG 24, vol. 10765, file 222C1 (D126), memo on Elementary Combined Operation [sic] Trg, preliminary to more Adv Trg, 6 May 1942.
24. NAC, RG 24, vol. 10872, file 232C1 (D34), Haydon to Roberts, 7 May 1942.
25. Memo on Elementary Combined Operation [sic] Trg, preliminary to more Adv Trg, 6 May 1942.
26. NAC, RG 24, vol. 10766, file 222C1 (D138), appendix D. Major Skrine was a planning officer at COHQ.
27. *Ibid.*, General Remarks.
28. NAC, RG 24 vol. 10770, file 221C1 (D236).

George Kerr retired from the history department at the University of Western Ontario in 1999. His most recent book, written with Doug Mackenzie, is *Unlikely Hero: A Dieppe Survivor's Gift of Hope* (1997).



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