

Juno Beach condos are an affront to Canada's grand contribution to the Second World War



by Conrad Black

All Canadians should be irritated by a proposal to build 70 condominium units immediately adjacent to the landing site of the Canadian third infantry division and second armoured brigade on Juno Beach in Normandy, France, on D-Day, June 6, 1944. The western Allies returned in great strength to Europe to liberate those who had been overrun by the Nazis and to secure the unconditional surrender of the Third Reich in the west. Canadians landed at Juno Beach, the British at Gold and Sword beaches and the United States at Omaha and Utah beaches, with a total of seven divisions and two American and one British airborne divisions and a Canadian airborne brigade. Over 150,000 trigger-pullers pushed back and through the German army and the so-called Atlantic Wall from England to

France on that one historic day. It was by general reckoning the greatest single military operation in the history of the world, involving 5,000 Allied ships and 12,000 aircraft. Canada was accorded one of the five beaches at Normandy as a recognition of its ever-increasing stature and of its prodigious war effort, proportionately exceeding its population. Our invasion forces were composed entirely of volunteers.

What U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt said in the opening of his radio address to the world on the evening of June 6, 1944, could equally have been applied to us: "Our sons, pride of our nation, this day have set upon a mighty endeavour." His address, generally reckoned to be the greatest speech that he ever gave, concluded with a call for: "a sure peace, a peace invulnerable to the schemings of unworthy men." And so it became, in the sense that the great powers have not been at war with each other and there has been no general or world war in the 76½ years that have followed the Second World War. Even the Soviet leader, Josef Stalin, shortly volunteered the public assertion that, "The history of war does not know of another undertaking comparable to (the Normandy landings) for breadth of conception, grandeur of scale and mastery of execution." This was nothing less than the truth from a source not given to hyperbole in praise of others, and who constantly complained that Russia was carrying an undue share of the burden of the war (that he had initiated with his infamous Nazi-Soviet pact with Hitler in 1939).

On July 24, 1967, Gen. Charles de Gaulle, who had come that day in an open car from Quebec City with Quebec Premier Daniel Johnson, in his outrageous remarks from the balcony of Montreal's city hall, concluded by reciting the separatist slogan, "Vive le Québec Libre." In the course of his incendiary address, he uttered a sentence that was even more offensive than his inflammatory ending: "Tonight and all along my route, I found myself in an atmosphere of the same kind as

the liberation." Canada, unlike France, apart from the resistance, was present at the beginning of the liberation and did great honour to itself. It is one of the many under-recognized facts of military history that the principal Commonwealth countries made an immense contribution to victory in both world wars, even though they were not directly threatened until the Japanese offensive in the Pacific briefly came close to Australia in 1942. Canada volunteered in both wars, a total of nearly two million men, of whom 109,000 died and 228,000 were wounded, fighting for the abstract ideal of liberty throughout the world and honourable conduct between nations. Nowhere was our sacrifice more vivid and effective and decisively placed than on Juno Beach on June 6, 1944.

In the First World War, Canadian units had been scattered among the British forces and only were concentrated for the successful attack on Vimy in 1917, which others had failed to capture. In the invasion of Sicily in 1943, the greatest amphibious operation in the history of the world up to D-Day, and the following campaign in Italy, Canadian divisions had again been amongst the generality of units commanded by the British theatre commander, Field Marshal Harold Alexander, who went on to become the governor general of Canada. At Normandy and in subsequent operations, on the insistence of Prime Minister Mackenzie King and the suavity and diplomatic talents of the supreme Allied commander, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Canada was accorded its own beach alongside the British and Americans and, once ashore, all Canadian units were concentrated in the First Canadian Army, which functioned as a unit alongside the British Army. In this role, Canada largely liberated Belgium and the Netherlands, and although the Canadian Army was the smallest of the armies that composed Eisenhower's Western front, it gave an excellent account of itself and was much praised by Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, the northern army group commander, and Eisenhower.

In the modern history of war, there has been no higher and

nobler cause than the liberation of western Europe from what British Prime Minister Winston Churchill described as "the long night" of Nazi "barbarism," while delivering it also from the almost equally dismal and forbidding destiny of communist rule, which lumbered oppressively westwards into Europe in the baggage train of Joseph Stalin's Red Army. For Canada to have played so important a role in so historic a mission was an astonishingly rapid rise in its status as a country that only achieved full legislative independence 13 years before, with the adoption of the Statute of Westminster. We also, by the end of the war, had the world's third largest navy, as the U.S. navy had destroyed the Japanese navy, the British navy had largely destroyed the German and Italian navies, and the French navy had substantially scuttled itself. Canada was largely responsible for the safe conduct of over a million men and millions of tons of supplies across the Atlantic Ocean, and our British Commonwealth Air Training Plan trained over 130,000 aircrew members for the Allied air forces. Canada's was a prodigious contribution to victory in the ultimate just war of modern history, which was exceptionally well conducted and commanded by Roosevelt and Churchill and their military chiefs and other exceptional leaders.

Juno Beach was the principal site of applied Canadian military force at the decisive point in the greatest single turning point of the war in western Europe. The planned development will overshadow the Juno Beach Centre, Canada's Second World War museum, and is an affront to our sacrifice and to the dignity of France. It is an act of stupefying disrespect for the bravery of France's liberators and for the liberation itself that local authorities would permit the desecration of that site where 340 Canadians died and 574 were wounded in the exalted cause of evicting the Nazis from France. There are many local opponents to this project, but it must be combated at the governmental level. The Canadian government should make the most strenuous representations to France that it is running the risk of durably alienating Canada if this crass

initiative is not modified to make it inoffensive to our reasonable sensibilities. Readers are respectfully urged to contact their MPs and demand suitable action by Parliament. This must not happen.

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