The Tide Turns:

In 1942, the tide of the war finally began to turn. The Allied forces became stronger when the United States entered the conflict in December 1941. With the American’s help, the Allies started to gain ground in North Africa. They were more and more successful against U-boats in the Atlantic and made important advances in the Pacific.

The Dieppe Raid:

By the middle of 1942, the Soviet Union, now one of the Allied powers, had lost close to a million soldiers in its desperate fight against invading Germany troops. Stalin demanded that the Allies invade Europe from the west to weaken Germany by forcing it to fight the war on two fronts at the same time.

The Allies had hoped to postpone the full invasion of Europe, but they felt ready for a trial run. A smaller raid would allow them to test new techniques and equipment, and serve as a scouting mission for a future invasion. The Second Canadian Division was chosen to be the main attack force in a raid on the French port of Dieppe. Air force bombers and tanks brought in by ship would support the troops.

On the morning of August 29th, 1942, one of the ships carrying Canadian soldiers to Dieppe met a small German convoy. The two sides engaged in a brief sea battle, and the noise alerted German troops on the shore. To make matters worse, the ships were delayed and the troops landed in daylight. They were easily machine-gunned by waiting German soldiers. Allied tanks were ineffective because they could not get enough traction to move on the steep, pebbled beach. Communication between ships and troops on land was poor. Believing the first wave of soldiers had reached the town, commanders sent reinforcements ashore. These troops, too, became trapped on the beaches. Unable to retreat or advance, they were easy targets for the German soldiers on the cliffs along the coastline.

Disaster or Learning Experience?

The Dieppe raid was a terrible failure. Causalities were high. Of the nearly 5,000 Canadian soldiers involved in the nine-hour battle, 907 were killed. Almost 600 were wounded, and another 194 were taken prisoner. Ross Munro, the Canadian war correspondent who accompanied the troops to Dieppe, described the raid and its devastating results:

*For eight hours, under intense Nazi fire from dawn into a sweltering afternoon, I watched Canadian troops fight the blazing, bloody battle of Dieppe. I saw them go through the biggest of the war’s raiding operations in wild scenes that crowded helter skelter one upon another in crazy sequence. There was a furious attack by German E-boats while the Canadians moved in on Dieppe’s beaches, landing by dawn’s half-light. When the Canadian battalions stormed though the flashing inferno of Nazi defenses, belching guns of huge tanks rolling into the fight, I spent the grimmest twenty minutes of my life with one unit when a rain of German machine-gun fire wounded half the men in our boat and only a miracle saved us from annihilation*

* Ross Munro, The Windsor Daily Star, 1942

Opinion is divided as to whether Dieppe was a valuable learning experience or a complete disaster. Some historians claim that the Allies were later able to launch a successful invasion based on what they had learned at Dieppe. Others maintain that the raid was poorly planned and taught the Germans more than it taught the Allies.

The Italian Campaign:

After the failure at Dieppe, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill felt that the best way for the Allies to recapture Europe was through what he called the “soft underbelly” of Europe: Sicily and Italy. The Allied victory in North Africa made it possible for forces to launch their attack from the south. The invasion ended up lasting almost two years and cost thousands of lives. The “underbelly” proved anything but soft.

Battle of Sicily:

On July 10th, Allied forces invaded Sicily. Once again, the Canadians proved themselves to be fierce opponents. They fought Italian and German soldiers through 240 kilometers of mountainous terrains, losing 562 soldiers in the battle. The Allies captured the island after 38 days.

This victory quickly led to Mussolini’s downfall. He was overthrown and the new Italian government surrendered. The Germans, however, continued to defend their Italian territory.

Battle of Ortona:

The Allies followed the Germans as they retreated to mainland Italy. Canadians were given the task of capturing the medieval town of Ortona on the Adriatic Sea. Before they could reach the heavily fortified Ortona, the Canadians had to capture several smaller villages, cross the river Moro, and fight across several kilometers of German-occupied territory. The regiment describes the battle:

*Throughout the night of December 8th-9th the RCR (Royal Canadian Regiment) maintained its position on the feature which came to be known as “Slaughterhouse Hill”. The fighting was most confused, the enemy appearing on several sides of the perimeter as well as within it … the incessant shellfire from both sides turned the night into pandemonium.*

* A Regiment at War, 1979

Once they reached Ortona, advances were slow and battles were often fought house by house on the town’s steep rubble-filled streets. Canadians captured the town on December 28th, 1943 but lost 1371 soldiers before the German troops withdrew. After capturing Ortona, Canadian troops advanced through Italy until they were sent to join the campaign in France. Nearly 6,000 Canadians were killed in Italy.

“Checkpoint” Questions:

1. Why was the Dieppe raid unsuccessful? Do you think that it was a disaster or a learning experience? Support your opinion.
2. Explain why the Italian Campaign was strategically important to the Allies.
3. In your own words, describe The Battle of Ortona.