Allied March to Victory:

The Allies immediately followed their success in Italy with the biggest Allied invasion of the war. On D-Day, June 6th, 1944, the Allies launched a full-scale invasion of Europe called “Operation Overlord”. To avoid a disaster like Dieppe, the Allies planned and rehearsed the invasion down to the smallest detail.

The Allies launched their attack by landing their troops on five beaches along an 80-kilometer stretch of the Normandy coast in Northern France. The beaches were code-named: Sword, Juno, Gold, Omaha, and Utah. The soldiers on the beaches had massive air and naval support. The Allies were able to disrupt transportation and communication lines before the attack by dropping paratroopers behind enemy lines and bombing targets on the beaches. Their naval support also allowed the Allies to bring in more than a million troops along with military vehicles and supplies, after the initial landing.

The D-Day invasions were also successful because the Allies had managed to keep the details of the attack a secret from the Germans. Although the Germans had anticipated an attack, they thought it would come from the north. The weather also helped the Allies. A storm delayed the initial attack and the Germans believed that the Allies would not attempt a landing in bad weather. As a result, the German defence was poorly coordinated.

Juno Beach:

On the morning of June 6th, 1944, 14,000 Canadian soldiers arrived at Juno Beach as part of the first wave of the attack. They had to make their way past the German defences, including concrete barriers, barbed wire, and land mines, to take the beach. By the end of the day, the Canadians had fought their way inland by about nine kilometers. Although they were successful, causalities from the day were high – 359 Canadians died and 715 were wounded.

Battle of the Scheldt:

It took the Allies weeks of constant fighting to expand their territory before they could begin an advance through France and Belgium toward Germany. The eleven-month campaign was exhausting and there were several moving moments in which the Allies were welcomed as the liberators of Europe. In September, 1944, for example, Canadians marched triumphantly through Dieppe where only two years earlier they had suffered a terrible defeat.

In October, Canadians were given the task of clearing enemy troops from the Scheldt River in Belgium. This river was important because it connected Antwerp to the North Sea. Although the Allies had already liberated Antwerp, German forces controlled the river and access to the sea. The Canadians achieved their goal after a month of bitter fighting, allowing the Allies to bring in supplies for their final advance into Germany.

Battle of the Rhineland:

On February 8th, 1945, the Allies – including approximately 175,000 Canadians – began their attack to drive the Germans back over the Rhine River and out of the Netherlands. The fighting was slow as soldiers struggled through mud and flooded fields against fierce German resistance. Nearly 23,000 Allied soldiers were killed, including more than 5300 Canadians. The Germans lost about 90,000 men, including 52,000 who were taken prisoner. On March 10th, the German army withdrew to the east bank of the Rhine River, allowing the Canadians to continue north to liberate Holland.

Liberating The Netherlands:

Once the Allied forces had reached the Rhine River and Germany, the Canadians were given a separate task: liberating the Netherlands. This was a difficult job. An earlier Allied attempt to free Holland had failed and German troops had practically destroyed the port cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam and flooded much of the countryside. By the end of 1944, food and fuel supplies to the Dutch had been cut off and many were starving to death. The bitter winter of 1944-45 made difficult conditions even worse.

Lasting Gratitude:

After reaching the Rhine, it took another month of fighting to drive the Germans out of the Netherlands. On April 28th, 1945, the Allies negotiated a truce with Germany, allowing them to bring much-needed supplies to the Dutch people. Convoys of trucks carrying food and fuel eventually delivered thousands of tonnes of supplies to civilians.

As they liberated towns and cities throughout the Netherlands, Canadians were hailed as heroes in victory parades. Percy Loosemore, who travelled with Canadian soldiers, wrote:

*When we entered Holland from Belgium, the Dutch people seemed overwhelmed with joy at their deliverance and the end of the war; for while the Belgians had been liberated for some time, the Dutch were celebrating both the end of the war in Europe and their own immediate liberation. Bunting (fabric) hung everywhere; people cheered as we drive by … Once, when I stopped my car, children gathered around and proceeded to decorate our vehicle with flowers and coloured streamers. To witness the enthusiastic joy and happy faces of these people was a great pleasure to me … I was deeply moved.*

* Quoted in *A Soldier’s View*, 2005

Victory in Europe:

While the Allies invaded Germany from the north and west, the Soviet Union attacked from the east. Facing certain defeat, Germany surrendered to the Allies on May 7th, 1945. Hitler committed suicide in a bunker in Berlin before he could be captured. The war in Europe was over and the Allies declared May 8th as Victory in Europe (VE) Day.

Analysis Questions:

1. How, could it be argued, that the lessons of Vimy Ridge helped with the success of D-Day.
2. What was D-Day? Why was it necessary? In what ways did the D-Day invasion differ from the raid on Dieppe? What role did Canadian troops play in both of these invasions?
3. In your own words, describe the situation in the Netherlands in the spring of 1945. Why were Canadian troops considered heroes in the Netherlands?