

Canadian Military History

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 4

1-23-2012

A Sense of Purpose: Ottawa Students and the Second World War

Christine Hamelin

Recommended Citation

Hamelin, Christine (1997) "A Sense of Purpose: Ottawa Students and the Second World War," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol6/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.



A Sense of Purpose Ottawa Students and the Second World War

Christine Hamelin

The outbreak of war in September 1939 altered the lives of Canadian high school students. A study of two Ottawa schools, Lisgar Collegiate and Glebe Collegiate, reveals the extent to which students, too young to enlist and yet old enough to grasp the severity of the war, were affected by world events. Despite the anxiety and the hardships brought about by the war, young people growing up during the Second World War took on serious responsibilities and acquired a remarkable sense of purpose.

Alice Bawden's "Fifth Form Review 1939-1944," written for Lisgar's yearbook, *Vox Lycei*, presents images of wartime student life that would seem jarring to contemporary students. Bawden remembers "Pen and copy of *Senior Latin Prose and Composition* lying face down in defeat. News of Tarawa and Sicily and Ortona...Girls knitting busily and badly on Red Cross sweaters." The inescapable reality of war affected students' social lives and deferred their dreams for the future; Bawden recalls "long talks to and from school [about] what we believe in...what we shall do...dates, careers, the war." The trauma of "seeing the boys leave" merged with ordinary scenes of student life, "first formers lying lazily in the warm grass by the canal, laughing happily through their noon meal."¹

What is striking in this passage is the blatant intrusion of serious adult concerns in the lives of adolescents who in peacetime would be

Opposite: *Annajean Holmes, a Grade 12 student and member of the Lisgar Collegiate Institute Rifle Club, 1942. Upon graduation, she joined the Royal Canadian Air Force.*

(Photo by Malak, NAC PA 192940)

otherwise occupied discussing dates, fashion, and overdue assignments. It was impossible for these students to turn away from the war, or to ignore its existence. Forced to deal with reality, they worked hard for the war effort, and put aside the normal teenage concerns.

At a time when childhood and adulthood forcibly merged, students willingly took on tremendous responsibilities. Joan Finnigan, who later became a renowned Ottawa Valley folklorist, edited *Vox Lycei* in 1944. "Youth Styled in 1944" is a poignant and thoughtful editorial describing student life during the war. Finnigan remembers going down to Union Station to say goodbye to boys "I had swapped answers with, and copied notes from, since way back in first form." There was, she explains, "laughing and singing and secret crying," and calls that "all men must be free" rang out. Pondering whether or not it was a good time to be young, Finnigan compares wartime student life with her pre-war high school days: "Those were the days of irresponsible adolescence when a youth's only political conviction was that girls' skirts should be definitely shorter."

Now, she writes:

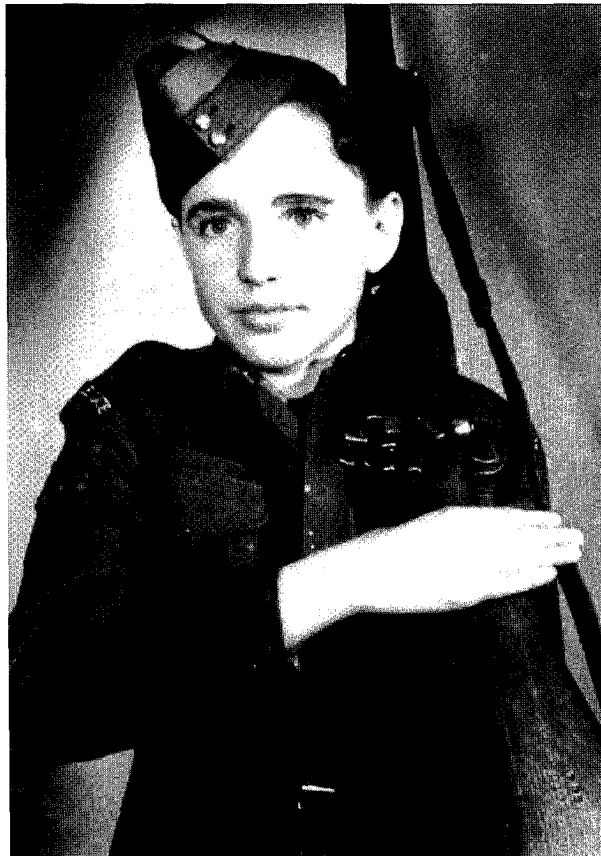
the football team ain't what it used to be – the senior boys have gone. If you have the gang in, you padlock the refrigerator and feed them arrowroot. We manage to survive without tennis balls, bobby pins and canned pineapple. We don't have formal dances and we don't buy new evening dresses....Girls are leaving school too soon, lured by quick money in temporary wartime jobs. Boys are laying down books for guns too soon, forgetting that the post-war world will require scholars as well as sailors. Yesterday eighteen



Above: Members of Lisgar Collegiate's 94th Cadet Corps parade on Parliament Hill.

Right: Cadet Billy Pratt models the new Royal Canadian Army Cadet uniform.

(Photos from the Lisgar Collection)



was a pathetic broad-jump from childhood. Today at eighteen we are men and women. We are forced to become men and women when we are confronted with big issues, big responsibilities."²

Students' lives were infused with genuine feelings of fear. The future was, to say the least, uncertain; the absence of security coloured the lives of students at Lisgar and Glebe, who were immediately forced into adult roles. Their lives were affected by food rations, by daily newscasts, and by the departure from school of peers who had enlisted. The usual adolescent concerns, frivolous luxuries reserved for peacetime life, were now only distant memories.

Every student was prepared to do something to help win the war. British children who had emigrated to Canada for the duration of the war were warmly welcomed at Glebe – "Knowing them personally has made a bond between us and our common motherland stronger than anything else"³ – and students busied themselves knitting and raising money for those suffering in England. Students at Lisgar and Glebe had developed a tremendous sense of social responsibility. Rather than excluding other students to empower their adolescent selves, they behaved like mature adult citizens in welcoming the foreign children.

In buying War Savings Stamps, according to a column in the 1941 Glebe yearbook, *Lux Glebana*, "we all feel some sort of glow knowing that some concrete evidence of our willingness to...help has been shown." The writer expresses the frustration of the students, who felt helpless and ineffectual:

There are probably very few of us who have never secretly pictured ourselves pouncing on Hitler and his tribe, with the very same methods they employ. It gives us a chance to rid ourselves of a little of our disgust and anger. Yet it can only relieve our feelings temporarily. The newspapers arrive, the radio news is turned on, soldiers march by, or something we wanted to buy has gone up in price or cannot be bought at all....then the feeling comes back again, and this time it is more acute.⁴

News of the war was unavoidable, and students' fears for their own and their families' safety translated into frustration and anxiety. No one could reassure them. But instead of expecting explanations and comfort from their parents and teachers, they accepted reality and did their part to help the less fortunate.

In 1941, Glebe students bought \$4,110.75 worth of War Savings Stamps.⁵ Every Tuesday

morning, during War Savings Stamp period, boxes were passed around each classroom, and the students contributed pennies and dimes. The money was used to “buy a complete outfit for some boy or girl in England every two weeks, and wool and material to keep busy fingers flying.”⁶ Canadian students became used to the idea of self-sacrifice, and did not question why it was necessary for them to work for the benefit of others.

The girls in the Glebe Red Cross Club spent their spare time knitting garments for soldiers and civilians at home and abroad. Between September and December 1941, “5 sweaters, 42 pairs of socks, 58 sweaters for children, and 43 pairs of mitts, not to mention afghan squares and diapers,” were produced. A record of each girl’s work was kept on file.⁷

The knitting clubs reflect the unity of purpose of the Canadian students, who took their efforts to help the less fortunate very seriously. It was impossible for a student not to be involved, or not to care. The overwhelming unity of these students, who were led by fear and by a common cause, is hard to imagine today.

Not only did students contribute by welcoming the European students and knitting

for the children and soldiers overseas, but there was also serious military training going on at Lisgar and Glebe. The rifle range in the basement of Glebe was reconstructed in 1941 “with a view to training cadets in the use of firearms.”⁸ At Lisgar, the time-honoured 94th Cadet Corps, affiliated with the Cameron Highlanders and led by science head L.H. Meng, became an important force. Cadets were trained on the fourth floor, where a shooting range was built – and where wartime graffiti remains to this day – and also at the Drill Hall next door. The cadets, who were present at the unveiling of the War Memorial in 1939, were trained in all aspects of modern warfare. Instructed by officers from the Canadian active army, they learned signalling, first aid, knots and lashings, and general military practice. Wartime photographer Malak Karsh often photographed the training sessions at Lisgar. In 1943 the Corps was inspected by Defense Minister J.L. Ralston and earned a trophy for being the best cadet corps in the Ottawa area. Many members of the 94th, well prepared by their training at Lisgar, eventually went on active service.

The 94th offered Lisgar students a sense of connection with the drama unfolding overseas. The *Vox Lycei* includes wartime anecdotes and military jokes:

Cadet Major Sid Bateman shows Ann Thompson how to don a respirator.

(Lisgar Collection)





Nurse Helen Hulse checks a patient's temperature.
(Lisgar Collection)

"Cadet Stotesbury: "Would you blame me for something I didn't do?"

Mr. Meng: "Of course not."

Cadet: "Well I didn't come out on parade."

Even though the students were not old enough to enlist, the jokes and anecdotes in the yearbook made them feel very connected to those men, often friends only a few years older, who were active soldiers. Like the news broadcasts on the radio, the yearbooks forced students to see the war as an unavoidable reality.

The yearbook also includes letters home from former members of the 94th who had enlisted and were serving abroad. They report on joyful reunions with other ex-Lisgarites in England. In the 1943-44 *Vox Lycei*, Sgt. Mel Buncan (RCAF) writes, "So far I have met two ex-Lisgar men – a chap named McEvoy, he was a couple of forms behind me at the school but we recognized each other and fell all over each other."¹⁰ Dwaine Merkley (RCAF) describes meeting up with a former school chum at the Leave Club in London: "I rushed up to his room and gave him a hearty shake. I wish you could have seen the expressions come over Al's face."¹¹ And Frank McCaffery, US Army, writes wistfully, "I certainly would like to be home in Ottawa going

back to Lisgar this year. School must be starting just about now."¹²

Just as the Canadian students had one foot in the world of adolescence and the other pointed towards adulthood and war, the students who had recently become active soldiers also walked a fine line between youth and maturity. Forced to mature virtually overnight, these men surely longed for the simplicity of youth and normal adolescence when they thought of their peers returning to high school in September.

That Lisgarites were extremely proud and possessive of the 94th is revealed by the adoring poems written in tribute to them:

Salute to Lisgar C.I. 94th Cadet Corps
There's something about a soldier
There's something about a soldier
There's something about a soldier
That is fine, fine, fine.
He may be a fifth form student
Who's witty, wise and prudent
He may be a single fellow of
Grade nine, nine, nine.

But there's something about his bearing
That's due to the crest he's wearing
There's something about his spirit
All ashine, shine, shine
So we'll be there with the rest
And place them with the best
And cheer the 94th
Because it's yours and mine!¹³

Songs like this, in which the innocence of being a student mixes ominously with the reality of being a soldier, reflect the discourse of patriotism to which the students adhered. Students were encouraged to see the 94th Cadet Corps as "their own," as brave boys representing and protecting their interests overseas. Rather than listening to pop songs, Canadian students, who could not afford the usual confrontation of authority that often marks adolescence, were actively involved in international affairs.

Not only did students' pride and growing sense of responsibility increase during the war, but gender roles were subtly altered. For the first time, women were seen wearing uniforms, and there was a growing sense that women had an

Opposite: Members of Lisgar's 94th Cadet Corps undergoing military training in 1943. The Grade 12 student leaping from the top of the fence is Andrew Kniewasser.

(Photo by Malak, NAC PA 182925)



important contribution to make, one that went beyond the usual domestic sphere.

Early in the war, the only rifle shooting at Lisgar was undertaken by the 94th Cadet Corps. But in 1941, the Lisgar Girls' Rifle Club was "brought to light after many long years of hibernation." A meeting was called, and so many girls attended that the club was restricted to fourth and fifth formers. Although very few "had ever had their finger on the trigger before," they progressed quickly, and put up several perfect scores.¹⁴ The military training of girls reflects both the very real fear of these students, who must occasionally have imagined themselves being called upon for active service, and the expanding definition of women's roles in Canadian society. Women were no longer left to the side to await the return of the men, but were increasingly allowed and expected to make a significant contribution to national defence.

A January 1942 article in *The Evening Citizen* explains that "the girls of Lisgar thought that shooting wasn't an affair for the boys only, and so they decided to do something about it." Every week, the girls met at the shooting gallery on the fourth floor to practice their skills. "Friday is the day that the comely young misses, dressed in warm ski slacks, gather during the lunch hour in the chilly, dimly-lit gallery atop the school to lend their feminine charms to the firing of the cadet corps' B.S.A.'s at targets some 20 yards away." The girls, instructed by "a lady teacher," contributed money to help pay for their ammunition.

The condescending, patriarchal tone of the *Citizen* reporter belies the fact that many of these girls actually believed that one day, they might be called upon for active duty. In fact, their fears were very real; they were reacting rationally and intelligently to the reality with which they had been presented. One enthusiastic member of the Lisgar Girls' Rifle Club said, "We'll be able to lick the Hun if he ever comes."¹⁵ This remark reflects how seriously the girls took their contribution and their commitment.

Meanwhile, at Glebe, the boys formed a knitting club which met twice a week after four o'clock. According to the 1942 *Lux Glebana*, "the afghan squares, though sometimes not so square, are famous for both their quality and

their quantity, not to mention the socks some of our prodigies are making....Glebe is proud to have the first such Club in the country." The column concludes with a rather ominous remark: "Some of these boys have joined the forces recently, and will see their own work. In fact they might possibly wear it some time."¹⁶

The entire football team joined 50 other boys who were involved in this effort. According to *The Evening Citizen*, "some of the girl students imparted the general idea that the boys shouldn't be sittin' without knittin' when they are not flittin' up and down the gridiron." Although "it took quite a bit of convincing female oratory to unravel the masculine mood about the gentle art of making a ball into a square," the football players defended their decision to make afghans and socks: they "will show you some 'fast flyin' fists' if you taunt them about their new pastime." The boys apparently learned to knit quickly, and even decided to buy the wool themselves.

One teacher confided that the football players could be seen earnestly knitting in various places, "at assembly, at home, in automobiles while waiting, and some were noted recently at a football game knitting energetically while sitting on the benches waiting their turn to get into the game."¹⁷

The bending of gender roles and the breaking down of social conventions epitomized by the girls' rifle training and the boys' knitting club shows the extent to which the presence of war completely altered the fabric of Canadian society.

* * * * *

Students at Lisgar and Glebe felt fortunate when they acknowledged that their lives were not more destroyed by the war. An editorial in the 1944 *Lux Glebana* notes that:

Glebe has not felt the ravages and sufferings of war in the physical sense. She has not been bombed, or torn by shells, or "occupied." In that sense she has been untouched. But the student body, has so much to be thankful for...so say the optimists. It is true: we have not seen our homes looted and burned and our families killed; we are not starving like the Greeks nor freezing like the homeless Russians; our country is not a battle-ground like that of the Italians; we have not been mercilessly slaughtered like the Jews;



The Lisgar Girls' Rifle Club at work – **Above left:** Mr. W.B. Mann checks Mary Howe's sighting while others look on. **Above right:** Members of the club practice target shooting at the school's fourth-floor rifle range. From left to right are Irene Woolford, Barbara and Nancy Robson.

we are not heart-weary for home like the thousands of refugees sheltered in Allied countries; and, most important of all, we are not soul-sick for freedom. On the other side of the balance we have our dead. But we know they died willingly, and in full understanding of the great significance of their dying.¹⁸

Even when peace finally arrived, students continued to demonstrate feelings of great responsibility for the future. Their youth was gone; jaded by the war, they could not possibly return to innocent, carefree lives. The editorial in the 1944-45 *Vox Lycei* states, "We must prepare ourselves for this greatest of all human tasks – maintaining the peace.... We must educate ourselves to the limit of our ability.... We must learn all that we can about the other people in the world and try to understand their problems as well as our own. We must be willing to take responsibilities, and must train ourselves to be able to handle them."¹⁹

Once again, there was hope, and it was possible to dream about the future. But for the students at Lisgar and Glebe, and at all other Canadian high schools, war had taken its toll. Canadian students, united in a way that would seem unimaginable to many contemporary young people, took on an adult perspective in dealing with the war. Despite their own fears and the fears of the adults around them, on whom they could not rely for reassurance, they became little adults, responsible citizens who welcomed European immigrants, donated their precious quarters and dimes, and even prepared themselves for active service. In this time of acute anxiety, much was learned, and maturity had

come quickly – but at the expense of a normal, carefree youth.

Notes

Special thanks to Marilyn Kennedy at Glebe and to Louise Derry at Lisgar, who helped me with my research, and to Lisgar's Doug Arrand, who provided copies of Malak's photographs from the school's archives.

1. *Vox Lycei* 1944, quoted in Joan Finnigan, ed., *Lisgar Collegiate Institute, 1843-1993*, p.166.
2. *Vox Lycei* 1943-44, p.5.
3. *Lux Glebana* 1941, p.16.
4. *Lux Glebana* 1941, p.17.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Lux Glebana* 1942, p.42.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *The Evening Citizen* (Ottawa), 25 November 1941, p.20.
9. *Vox Lycei* 1943-44, p.48.
10. *Ibid.*, p.10
11. *Ibid.*, p.11.
12. *Ibid.*, p.10.
13. Quoted in Finnigan, p.160.
14. *Vox Lycei* 1940-41, p.21.
15. *The Evening Citizen* (Ottawa), 15 January 1942, p.24.
16. *Lux Glebana* 1942, p.42.
17. *The Evening Citizen* (Ottawa), 5 November 1941, p.6.
18. *Lux Glebana* 1944, p.7.
19. *Vox Lycei* 1944-45, p.7.

Christine Hamelin is a graduate of Glebe Collegiate in Ottawa and has a Ph.D. in Commonwealth Literature from Queen's University. She is currently a freelance writer living in Kingston, Ontario.