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"Always ready for any sticky job"

The Canadian Corps of (Civilian) Firefighters in the Second World War

Keith Hart

The Canadian Corps of (Civilian) Firefighters was created in 1942 to assist the British National Fire Service (NFS) in fighting fires caused by German bombings. Some 400 specially-recruited Corps members served in Britain from 1942 to 1944 under often very hazardous conditions. Its story remains one of the forgotten and more unique Canadian contributions to the war effort.

From August, 1940 to mid-May, 1941, Britain endured horrific German bombings (the "Blitz") in which her cities suffered destruction, some 40,000 dead and nearly 140,000 injured. Incendiary bombs proved particularly destructive as these invariably set fires in the urban areas. After 1941, the newly-formed National Fire Service continued the battle against the aerial menace. Enemy air raids did lessen after the Blitz as Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Most of the air assaults consisted of lone aircraft dropping a couple of bombs - "Tip and Run." Nevertheless, the attacks remained a serious threat and resulted in damage, casualties and fires. Hard-pressed British firefighting forces did their best to cope with the emergency.

Britain's ordeal did not go unnoticed by the firefighters of Canada. In 1940, the Chief of the Vancouver Fire Department proposed that a 500 man Canadian firefighting corps be sent to help the British. Colonel J.R. Ralston, Canada's Minister of National Defence, communicated with the British government on the issue. Nothing came of the idea, however, until Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King visited Britain in 1941.

King toured London's bomb-damaged areas with Herbert Morrison, the British Home Secretary, during his stay. The destruction apparently made an impression on King and he committed to send a Canadian firefighting unit to aid the NFS. Back in Canada, King met with the Cabinet War Committee on 10 September 1941, and, as part of that meeting,

the Canadian Corps of (Civilian) Firefighters was born.

Order-in-Council PC No.76/1656 of 3 March 1942, set out the regulations and purpose of the force.

3. The Corps shall assist the National Fire Service in Great Britain in:

- (1) the extinction of fires and the protection of life and property in case of fire, in Great Britain, Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man;
- (2) the extinction of fires and the protection of life and property in ships and vessels at sea; and
- (3) rescue or salvage work for which its appliances are suitable in Great Britain, Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man.

Classed as a "civil defence" organization, the Corps came under the jurisdiction of the Department of National War Services. Rank structure reflected that of the British National Fire Service: Commanding Officer, Divisional Officer, Column Officer, Senior Company Officer, Company Officer, Section leader, Leading Firemen, Firemen, Junior Firemen.

Corps rules and regulations paralleled the Canadian Army in promotion, eligibility for enrolment and other items. Minister of National War Services J.T. Thorson summed it up in a statement in the House of Commons: "The men are put on the same rates of pay and are generally subject to the same conditions as members of the active army overseas. They have the benefit of the pension arrangements and allowances and the like." Even the Corps identification cards had "Canadian Army" printed on them in large letters.

Appeals for recruits went out to fire departments, officials of municipalities and via the media. Applicants did not have to be serving

New recruits of the Canadian Corps of (Civilian)
Firefighters march in Ottawa, May 1942.

members of a firefighting agency but potential enrollees had to apply through the nearest fire chief. If a man met the medical and other qualifications, he proceeded to the training centre at Ottawa.

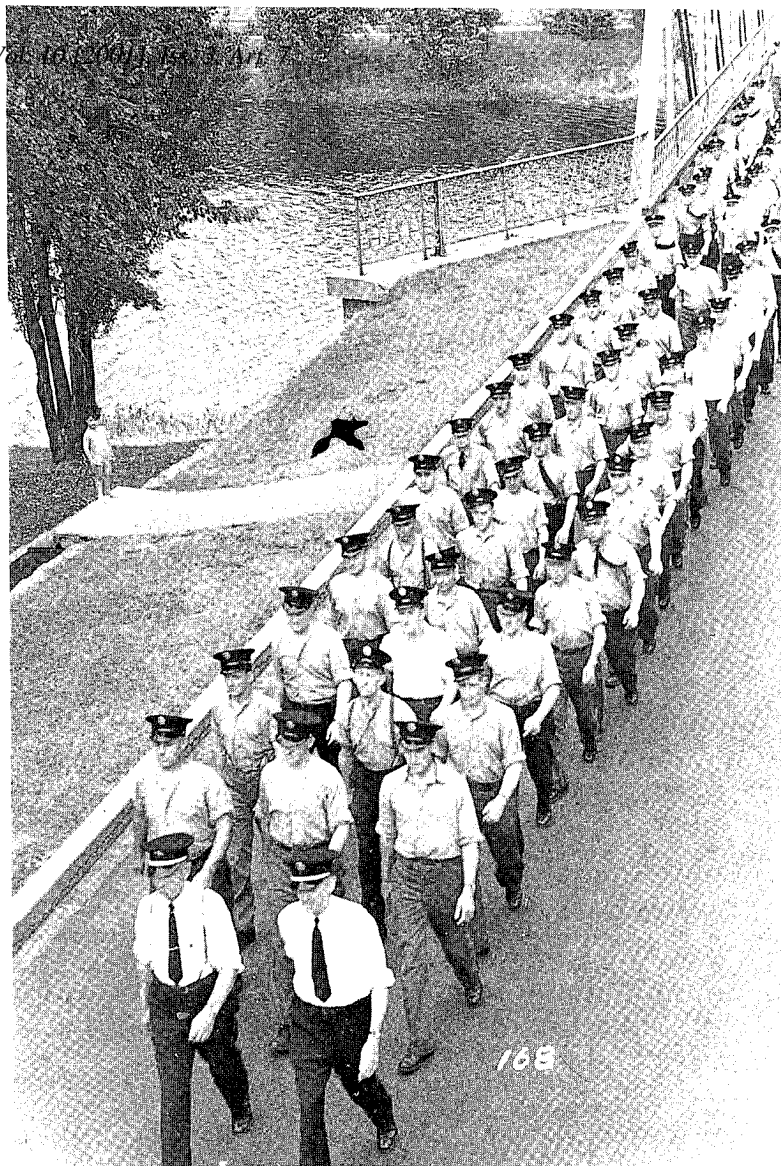
There was no shortage of candidates and the full complement of some 400 men was quickly attained. Canadian fire departments needed to retain some manpower so the unit ended up with a mixture of personnel from all walks of life. Consequently, 148 of the enlistees were from urban fire departments, 113 come from volunteer or auxiliary fire services and 149 had no firefighting experience. The ranks of the last included university students, truckers, accountants and clerks.

Flight-Lieutenant Ernest Huff, Fire Prevention Officer, No.2 Royal Canadian Air Force Training Command, Winnipeg, became Commanding Officer. Huff, a World War 1 army veteran, had been fire chief in Brantford, Ontario, prior to joining the military.

The firemen assembled in Ottawa in May 1942, where a fire hall had been transformed into a barracks and training centre. Three weeks of intensive courses followed, including instruction on gas masks, types of gas, unexploded bombs, films about incendiary bombs and physical education as per the British National Fire Service's Standard Drill Book. The men picked up their kit as well, including steel helmets, hip rubber boots, gas masks and uniforms. The last consisted of the standard navy blue fire department outfit with red "Canada" flashes on the shoulders.

After completion of training, the Corps members prepared to embark for overseas. On 9 June 1942, the unit gave a demonstration of its skills and capabilities on Parliament Hill before a large crowd. Among the attendees were the Governor-General The Earl of Athlone, Prime Minister Mackenzie King and Minister of National War Services J.T. Thorson. A formal inspection was held and six events were staged for the audience, including hose and ladder exercises, a mock rescue and sliding 100 feet down a rope from the Peace Tower.

Several dignitaries made speeches about the Corps afterwards. Thorson stated that, although the Corps was essentially a civilian force, it would be treated the same as the army in pay and pensions. Leading Firemen Herbert Magill of Toronto and other veterans related to the author that The Hon. L.R. LaFleche, Deputy Minister of National War Services,



"...made statements to the effect that we would receive any benefits which might accrue to the armed forces." The Governor-General, in fact, called the Corps the "Fourth Arm of the Service."

Though ready to go overseas, Corps members did not have to wait till then to see their first action. Some Canadian Army Commandos engaged in a training exercise on the Rideau Canal near Parliament Hill got into difficulties. Firemen watching the manoeuvre immediately jumped into the water and rescued several of the soldiers.

Soon afterward, the firemen began to sail overseas in groups of 40-50 men via Halifax. The advance party arrived in Britain on 21 May 1942 and was welcomed by Herbert Morrison, the Home Secretary, Vincent Massey, High Commissioner for Canada and A.N.G. Firebrace, Chief of the Fire Staff, among other dignitaries. All of the Corps reached Britain by December.

Although under the operational control of the National Fire Service, the Corps stayed together as

a distinct unit. Pay, welfare and discipline remained the responsibility of the Canadian authorities. For their other needs, the men had access to the Canadian military medical, postal, supply and equipment services.

Prior to going to their assignments, the Corps members underwent four weeks of instruction with the National Fire Service. They learned to use British fire equipment such as trailer pumps, aerial trucks and "wheeled escapes" (long ladders on wheels). Mask drill, hydraulics and physical education formed part of the curriculum as well.

It was decided that the Canadians would be sent in 50-man detachments to Southampton, Bristol, Portsmouth and Plymouth in the south. Known as "target towns," these were important ports and very vulnerable to German air attack. Operational plans called for the Corps to staff six stations: Portsmouth (two stations), Bristol (one station), Plymouth (one station) and Southampton (two stations). At first the Canadian firemen worked alongside National Fire Service personnel to familiarize themselves with their assigned area. The British firemen then withdrew, leaving the Canadians to cover the sector. All firefighting equipment such as trucks and ladders come from the stocks of the National Fire Service.

Canadian firemen soon found that some differences existed between Canada and Britain in firefighting. For example, Section Leader J.R. Miller of South Porcupine, Ontario, related "...that the British system of Command from top to bottom, their school system, their unification system and even their communications systems were all new to me." In Canada, firefighting equipment often varied between cities and towns as well as provinces; British fire units used standardized equipment throughout the country. That made it fairly easy for one department to come to the aid of another. Some terminology differed as well. For example, Column Officer W.E. Graham of Ottawa noted in an interview with the *Western Evening Herald* at the time: "We call escape ladders extension ladders and turntables aerial ladders." New to the Canadians as well was certain British equipment such as trailer pumps. This was described by Leading Firemen W.H. Nicolson of Saskatoon as "...Austin towing vehicles with a two-wheeled fire pump attached to the rear."

British firefighters wondered at the Canadian fire apparel, described in the magazine *Fire* in January 1945 as "...a sensible, three quarter-length coat with a canvas exterior, a rubber interlining and, for low temperatures, an inner fleece. With this went trousers of similar construction and excellent rubber

boots with tops that could be drawn up almost to the torso." Column Officer Martin S. Hurst, in a letter to the author, stated that the London and Liverpool Salvage Corps were very interested in the Canadian coats and boots and, at the time of "...demobilization they were donated to both Corps."

Duties for the Canadians included being on call for any type of fire anywhere at any time. That included backup for other areas. For example, Section Leader Douglas M. Copeman of the Portsmouth unit recalled that "...we also were called upon to be a part of a tactical force which would rendezvous at a set locale – which could be 50 miles away – this was practice in assembling in case we had to move large numbers of vehicles in order to assist another city which was under fire." Section Leader C.L. "Curly" Woodhead of Saskatoon died when he fell from a truck while training on one of these deployments.

Firefighting in a wartime situation proved to be a new experience for the Canadians accustomed to factory, home and other such fires at home. For example, in England, firemen did not go into burning buildings. Rather, they used aerial ladders to pour water on the structures from outside. Leading Firemen James Robertson of Calgary explained why in an interview with the *Calgary Herald* on his return home, "...the buildings were dangerous to enter because of their less modern construction...and besides, you never knew when the Jerries had dropped a time bomb inside the building along with the incendiaries."

Canadian firemen performed standby duty on docks while ammunition and fuel was unloaded from ships. During one of these watches, an explosion in a ship's boiler room set fire to the gasoline. The Corps detachment fought the fire for an entire day and managed to save the vessel.

On 29-30 May 1944, German planes bombed the petroleum storage facility at Swan Vale, near Falmouth. Bombs hit two fuel tanks, causing what Sir Aylmer Firebrace called in his book *Fire Service Memories* "...a highly exciting and spectacular fire." Flames shot 70 feet into the air and fire flowed down the hillside into the valley. A National Fire Service trailer pump and equipment were caught in a fire flashback and destroyed. Canadian Corps personnel joined National Fire Service units and a United States military firefighting squad in fighting the very serious conflagration.

Another task involved spraying water on large aviation gas tanks at Southampton to prevent them from becoming too hot during a fire. Canadian

firemen worked all night and stopped the tanks from igniting.

Before the Corps left Ottawa, the Earl of Athlone had made a prophetic statement about the working conditions of the firemen overseas. He stated, "You know that you will be fighting without any chance to strike back, without any means of breaking the enemy's attack." Several incidents showed that prediction to be the rule rather than the exception. Whether on duty or off, the Firefighters found themselves constantly in peril.

During an air raid, all vehicles were driven out of a station and dispersed to the streets in the area. The firemen stayed in the trucks until notified by despatch riders where the fire bombs had hit. The crews then sped to the scene, connected the hose to the nearest water source and began fighting the fire. All the while, German aircraft flew overhead dropping their deadly loads. Firefighters, unlike others, could not go to shelters and were constantly exposed to the dangers of falling bombs.

In Plymouth, an incendiary bomb fell through the roof in the station (Torr House). Only pure luck prevented a disaster. Leading Fireman L.C. Shantz recalled "...that it hit a water tank on the top floor and the squirt of water from the tank kept the bomb from starting a fire." As it happened, the detachment had just left the fire hall and knew nothing of the bomb until later.

Fifty Canadian firefighters trained and worked with the London Salvage Corps. When incendiary

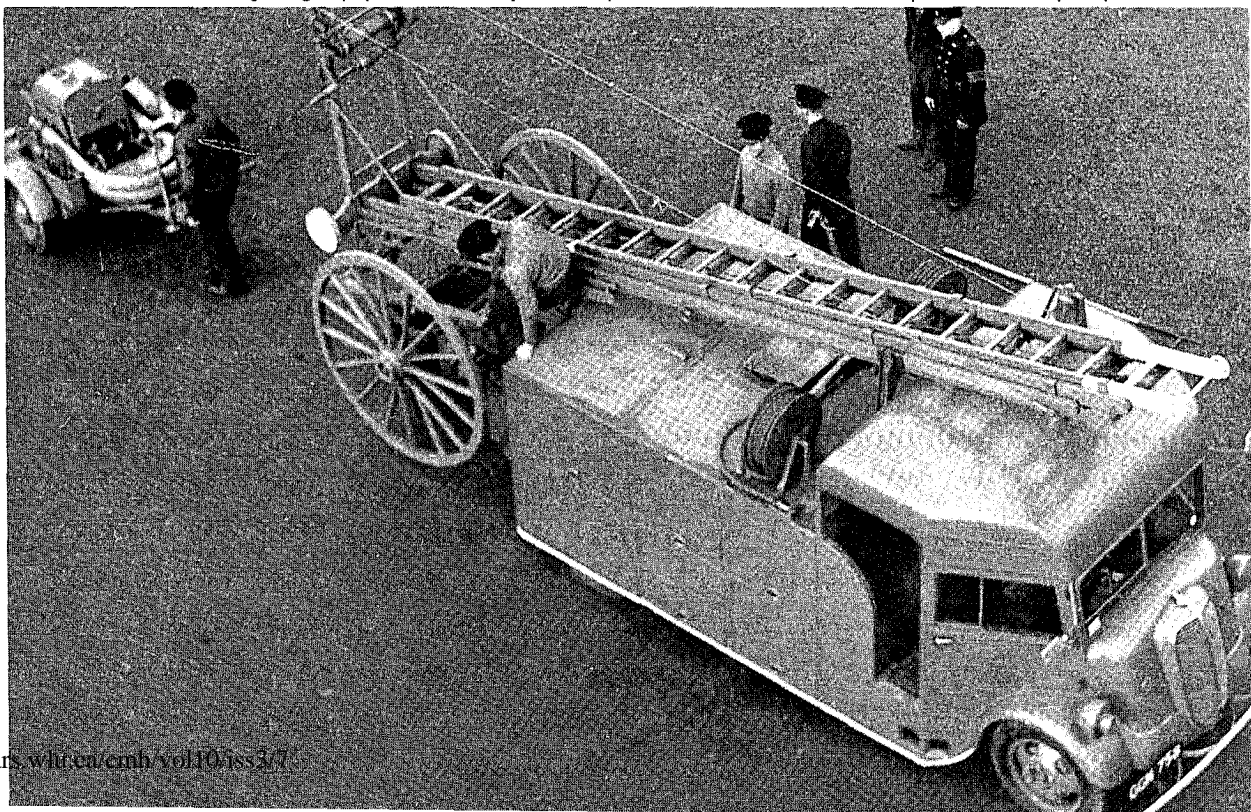
bombs started a fire, the Salvage men went into the structure to try to save valuable items. They spread waterproof sheeting to protect the lower floors and their valuables from water being sprayed from the fire hoses. Again, the firemen put themselves at terrible risk, as, for example, the building could collapse on them.

Canadian firemen faced new hazards when German V-1 "Buzz Bombs" began appearing over Britain in July 1944. No one was safe from the pilotless flying bombs. That month, on 3 July, Firemen J.S. Coull and one British firefighter died when one of the rockets hit a building in London. Canadian Leading Firemen J.A.W. Cassidy suffered serious injuries. He described what happened in a letter to the author, "I was banged up quite a bit and taken to an English hospital in Putney. From there I was transferred to No.20 Canadian General Hospital near Watford. I stayed there for several months, finally went back to London Headquarters where I waited for my trip back to Canada." Leading Fireman J.R.C. Leguee of Winnipeg also survived the incident.

A phosphorous bomb literally blew up in the face of one man, causing severe burns to most of his body. Quick and skilful care by Canadian medical staff saved his life but he was out of the war for the duration. He did recover fully and returned to the Calgary Fire Department later.

Danger existed for personnel even when off-duty in wartime Britain. Two men were in a dance hall in Plymouth when the fire alarm sounded. They rushed out into the street just as a 500-pound bomb

British firefighting equipment used by the Corps – fire truck, wheeled escape and trailer pump.



exploded nearby, hurling them into the air. Miraculously, neither suffered anything more than bruises and clothing full of splinters. Picking themselves up, the firemen reported to the fire station and performed their duties.

A physical training session received a dangerous interruption when it was strafed by German aircraft. No injuries resulted but a proposal to arm the men came up soon afterward. Reports said Bren guns would be issued to the firemen and Corps members educated themselves about the weapon. That did not come to pass and the firemen continued their services without any means of defence.

Section Leader John DeWaal of Calgary suffered extensive injuries while on leave in London in February 1944. He became trapped under rubble in a burning building while volunteering his services during an air raid. DeWaal escaped when he fell through a weakened staircase and was hospitalized with severe burns for two months.

Not all the Corps activities in Britain centred around fighting fires. At Plymouth, the detachment, working with the NFS, built a new fire station. Officially opened by the Duchess of Kent on 25 March 1943, the facade bore the coats of arms of Plymouth, the National Fire Service and the Canadian Corps of Firefighters. Commander A. Drury, 19th (NFS) Fire Force, paid tribute to the Corps in January 1945, "Thanks to them, we now have in Plymouth a fire station which, I think, might well be the model for us to adopt when erecting others in this city."

Also in 1943, the Corps adopted "Blitz" families - children of London firemen killed during the bombings of 1940. Through the London Fire Service Benevolent Fund, the Canadians assumed

responsibility for three children, one aged three-and-a-half years and two aged ten. Under the Fund, the adopter's paid a weekly fixed allowance until the child reached age 14.

Chief Huff encouraged his men to further their education including attendance at Britain's National Fire College. This was important because no equivalent institution existed in Canada. Firemen took army commando training and instruction in first aid, modern warfare and hydraulics. Fourteen men enrolled in the fire engineering course at the British Institute of Engineering Technology. The Canadian Legion Educational Services offered elementary courses in subjects such as mathematics and general science.

Sport was not forgotten as the Corps took part in the various competitions staged by the National Fire Service. Firemen competed in events such as the heavy trailer pump drill against teams from British fire units. Canadian crews won so often that Sir Aylmer Firebrace remarked when the Corps left for home, "Now that you fellows are leaving, we might win some of our own competitions."

In 1944, a new chapter in the service of the Corps occurred. The NFS was forming a unit to assist the Allied Forces in the D-Day invasion and the subsequent struggle on the European continent. This deployment called for several columns of firefighters and two flotillas of fireboats. Order-in-Council re Corps of (Civilian) Canadian Fire Fighters (P.C. 4106) of 1 June 1944, permitted the Corps to contribute a contingent to the aforementioned.

A Canadian Special Service Company furnished 101 men for Column No.6 attached to the British 21st Army Group. Six months of special training followed for the Canadians. As it turned out, the

Members of the Corps work to put out a stubborn fire in Plymouth, England, 1943.





A marchpast by members of the Corps Special Service Company for service on the European Continent, 1944.

military decided that the full complement of firefighters would not be required. Only one British column (No.4) actually went and none of the Canadians. It was a letdown for the Corps as it would have added much to their experience and record of service. Leading Fireman Herbert Magill later commented in the March 1948 issue of *International Fire Fighter*, "One hundred very unhappy men returned to their detachments in England."

Later the same year, as the war progressed in the Allies' favour, British and Canadian authorities decided that the Corps was no longer needed. The Canadians relinquished their duties and areas to the NFS and prepared to leave for home. A farewell ceremony, march past and luncheon in London on 2 November 1944 marked the end of the Corps' service in Britain. British and Canadian officials lavished praise on the Corps at the gathering. Miss Ellen Wilkinson, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Home Security, thanked the firemen on behalf of the British Government. She said that "...almost all of you have heard the whistle of a bomb and have seen the blue-white light of an incendiary." National Fire Service officers also paid tribute to the Canadians. One statement read, "They were always ready to volunteer for any sticky or dirty job. They looked forward eagerly to being sent on reinforcing duty, and they were never more happy than when on the fire ground."

Altogether, 408 men served in Britain with the Canadian Corps of Firefighters and three men staffed the Ottawa headquarters for the duration. The personnel averaged two years, eight months and 14 days overseas. Casualties totalled three killed (one in training, one in a traffic accident and one by a V-1 flying bomb), three wounded and three seriously injured. Twelve men left the Corps to join the Canadian military or become Auxiliary Service Supervisors with the Canadian Legion War Services, Inc., the Knights of Columbus Canadian Army Huts and other organizations.

Awards given to the Corps included the Order of the British Empire for Chief Huff, one Member of the British Empire and British Empire Medals for two others via the King's New Years Honours list. One man already held the Member of the British Empire and three others Royal Humane Life Saving Certificates. Each man received the Defence of Britain and the 1939-45 War Medal plus a ribbon for the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal. A special discharge badge, issued by the Canadian government (Order-in-Council PC 1726 – 13 March 1945) completed the list. The badge came in two classes, one for service abroad ("A") and one for domestic duty ("B").

An advance unit left the United Kingdom immediately for Ottawa to handle discharge and demobilization matters. The rest followed in drafts until, by March 1945, only 22 men remained to dispose of stores and equipment. Thus, the service of the organization came to a close, but another battle soon began at home.

From the beginning the firemen detested the word "Civilian" in their force name but never overly concerned themselves with it. Little did they know that the designation meant some surprises for them postwar.

The first shock came when the Corps learned they could not wear the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal after all. According to the Canadian government, the Corps was a civilian, not a military, organization and therefore ex-members were not eligible for the decoration.

Moreover, the government reneged on a firm promise made to the Corps men at the beginning in 1942. There were to be no equal veterans benefits for the Canadian Corps of Firefighters. This despite the fact that, as recently as 2 April 1944, The Hon. L.R. LaFleche repeated the promise in the House of Commons. He stated that, "...my department is

trying at this moment to make certain that members of the firefighters corps receive benefits identical with those granted to men who were discharged from the armed forces." Such was not to be the case.

The Fire Fighters War Service Order (P.C. 3229, 3 May 1945) contained the benefits accorded to the veterans, acknowledging that they had operated under, "...extremely hazardous circumstances...." Nevertheless, since the Corps was "civilian," the Order continued, it would not be fair to treat them benefit-wise the same as the Armed Forces. Also, the firemen found themselves required to pay full income tax on their overseas earnings unlike the military.

In 1946, An Act Respecting Benefits to Fire Fighters who served in the United Kingdom gave some hope. However, although the bill contained a provision for vocational training under the Veterans Rehabilitation Act, it did nothing else.

Successive campaigns by Corps ex-members for full veterans benefits continued throughout the postwar decades. Three times (once in 1946, twice in 1948) the House of Commons Committee on Veterans Affairs recommended to Parliament that the Corps receive full benefits. Many groups such as the Royal Canadian Legion (which accepted the firemen as *bonafide* veterans) supported the firemen's position. Prominent politicians and newspaper editorials joined the fray on the side of the firemen over the years. None of it changed the

official federal position. Apparently, the government feared that if one group got full benefits an avalanche of claims would come from others. Interestingly, the Auxiliary Supervisors, who did valuable work but were also non-military received the same benefits as Armed Forces veterans. One small victory did come just after the war when the Memorial Cross was awarded to the widows of the Corps members killed overseas.

No amount of lobbying, writing letters of support forced the authorities to budge on the issue over the years. Then, Canadian Merchant Navy veterans began a vigorous campaign for full veterans benefits and got them in 1992. In March 2000, the federal government announced a package extending the same benefits to other groups such as the Canadian Corps of Firefighters, Red Cross nurses and Ferry Command pilots. Thus, the contribution of these personnel has been finally fully recognized.

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Bound for home – The Corps' final review takes them past Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, London, November 1944.

