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New Men in the Line

An Assessment of Reinforcements to the 48th Highlanders in Italy, January-October 1944

Andrew Brown

*“Alex told me that the hundred and forty soldiers following us had arrived in England from Canada only a month earlier. Inadequately trained and unprepared for what awaited them, they had been prematurely shipped to Italy to transfuse our wasted regiment. Marching behind us in their clean, new uniforms, they joked with one another, stared curiously at the debris of war, and sang the brave and foolish songs they had learned in Canada.”¹ Farley Mowat, *And No Birds Sang*.*

Anecdotal evidence, such as the above quotation, suggests that the Canadian Army rushed poorly trained infantry reinforcements to battle during the Second World War. Widely accepted as fact, the common perception of inadequate reinforcement training can be traced back to September 1944, when Toronto sports entrepreneur Conn Smythe issued a statement to the press lambasting the poor quality of Canadian reinforcements. Smythe, who had been wounded the previous July while commanding an anti-aircraft battery in France, claimed to have conferred during his convalescence with other injured officers from across the army who agreed that reinforcements were appallingly ill-prepared for combat. He asserted that an unacceptable proportion of men had never thrown a grenade, were unfamiliar with the Bren gun, or had never fired, or sometimes even seen, a PIAT (Projector Infantry Anti-Tank) gun. His claim alarmed the public and Cabinet,² and soon every major Canadian newspaper reproduced his story, fuelling the concern.³

Abstract: Anecdotal evidence, consisting mainly of soldiers' testimony and widely accepted as fact, suggests that Canadian infantry reinforcements in the Second World War lacked training. However, a sample of service records does not support the contention that the army sent masses of untrained men to war. Indeed, the service files of soldiers killed in Italy with the 48th Highlanders of Canada between January and October 1944 indicate that the army rushed few men into battle. Furthermore, the war diaries of units that provided refresher training to men in the reinforcement stream indicate that the army strove to ensure soldiers were ready for combat.

Smythe's allegations echoed the apparently widespread sentiments of officers fighting in Italy. According to an army historical officer's report of 20 February 1944, "All commanders in Italy agree that the mental and physical qualities of their reinforcements are high but complain that their basic training is frequently inadequate."⁴ Later that year, when the minister of national defence, Colonel J. Layton Ralston,

visited Canadian units in Italy, the regimental sergeant major (RSM) of the 48th Highlanders complained that only seven out of 72 men in a recent reinforcement draft were fully trained.⁵

Despite such compelling testimonies, it is not clear that the army rushed masses of poorly trained infantry reinforcements into combat. When, for example, Ralston pressed the RSM for the 72 names, his unit could provide only 34. Ralston ordered a review that eventually determined that all 34 men had been in the army for at least a year, a quarter had over three years under arms, and some were highly trained specialists.⁶ More recently, historians have questioned the accuracy and consistency of the anecdotal evidence suggesting that the degree to which undertrained soldiers was a problem remains a gap in the historical record.⁷ Robert Engen's examination of battle experience questionnaires completed by infantry officers during the Second World War shows that 59.9 percent of respondents felt that the general standard of reinforcement efficiency was "moderate" and



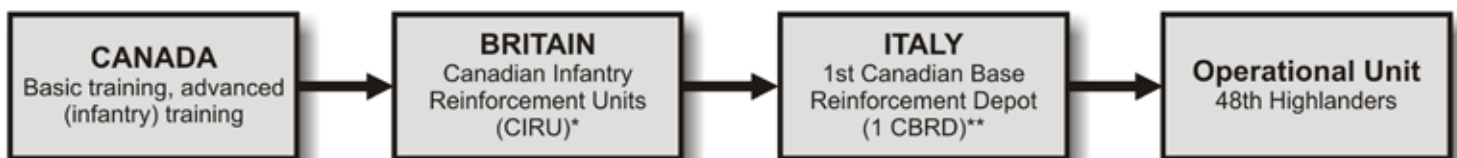
another 5.6 percent thought it was “high,” compared to 26.8 percent who answered “low.”⁸ While these numbers were not quite a ringing endorsement of reinforcement quality, they hardly reflected unanimous condemnation either. Given the lack of clarity on the matter of reinforcement training, it is useful to examine archived army records to understand better how the army prepared infantry reinforcements for combat. Evidence drawn from a sample of personnel files from a regiment that fought in Italy, the 48th Highlanders of Canada, as well as the war diaries of the army’s reinforcement training units, suggests that Canadian infantry reinforcements were, for the most part, reasonably well-trained when

they joined their battalions. While a relatively small proportion may have been inadequately trained, the body of anecdotal evidence exaggerates the extent of the problem. The personnel files consulted were those for all members of the 48th Highlanders who died during the first ten months of 1944, a period when the army was hard-pressed to maintain unit strengths in Italy due to unexpectedly high infantry casualty rates. During this period, the 48th Highlanders, a justifiably proud and hardened veteran unit of the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade in the 1st Canadian Infantry Division, lost 143 men.⁹ Their service files, available to the public without restriction,¹⁰ provide a sample with which to assess how the army prepared its men

for combat duty. These files are useful because they contain documents indicating the exact dates each soldier spent at every training, holding, reinforcement, and operational unit during his military service.¹¹

Of the 143 men who died, 89 were reinforcements who disembarked in theatre after the Canadian army landed in mainland Italy on 3 September 1943. Most of these reinforcements followed the same training and deployment pattern (see Figure 1).¹² After basic recruit and infantry training in Canada the men were transported to Britain where they were usually posted to a Canadian Infantry Reinforcement Unit (CIRU).¹³ Once called up for service in the Mediterranean Theatre, soldiers then moved to the

Figure 1: Reinforcement Training and Deployment Pattern



* Before 1943 the army called these units Canadian Division Infantry Reinforcement Units.
 ** Located at Avellino, Italy by January 1944. Before then, 1 CBRD was in North Africa.

1st Canadian Base Reinforcement Depot (CBRD) (which, by January 1944, was located in Avellino, Italy) where they trained while awaiting call-up for service in a front line unit.

Reinforcements for the 48th Highlanders during the first ten months of 1944 were, in the majority of cases, not as new to the army as one might expect. While it is true that some soldiers had less than a year in uniform on the day they reported to the unit, they were exceptions. For the 89 reinforcements reviewed, the average time a soldier had been in the army at the moment he joined the 48th Highlanders in the field was almost 26 months. If one examines only the privates, that is the group with the men most recently in uniform, the average time in service does not drop much. Sixty-seven of the 89 soldiers were privates, and as a group they averaged slightly over 23 months in the army. Only 17 had less than a year in uniform when they were "taken on strength" by the 48th Highlanders.

The amount of time spent at a CIRU in Britain and at the CBRD in Italy varied greatly from soldier to soldier. Some men spent only a few weeks in the UK, while others spent well over two years there. The average time each soldier spent in Britain was just over ten months, a considerable amount of time during which a man was available for training. Similarly, the time each individual spent at the CBRD in Italy varied greatly, with some soldiers having spent as little as one or two weeks, while others were there for many months. The average time spent at the CBRD was just over six-and-one-half weeks, suggesting that the typical soldier had time to receive a reasonable amount of in-theatre refresher training immediately prior

to joining the 48th Highlanders in the field. However, the individual service files contain little information about what training the soldiers received in the reinforcement units in Britain and Italy, making it necessary to consult the war diaries of those units.¹⁴

Infantrymen arriving in Britain from basic training in Canada went to one of seven CIRUs.¹⁵ The war diary for 1 CIRU for January to October 1944 shows that new arrivals were posted to training companies, which in January 1944 conducted

"basic refresher courses" of two, four and six weeks duration, and one "advanced training" course.¹⁶ In March 1944, all CIRUs implemented a mandatory two-week refresher course for all new arrivals. All soldiers who completed the course then had to pass weapons handling tests, known as Tests of Elementary Training (TOETs). Soldiers who failed the tests received further basic training, while the rest continued to receive advanced refresher training while awaiting call-up for service in



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Basic training at Landsdowne Park, Ottawa, Ontario.



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3-inch mortar and 6-pounder anti-tank gun courses that lasted three and four weeks respectively.²¹

From early June to early September 1944, however, reinforcements passed through the CIRUs too quickly to receive the full range of continuation training. During this period, the army was under enormous pressure to sustain a steady stream of reinforcements to its infantry units, minimizing the time soldiers could remain

Canadian soldiers train in England.

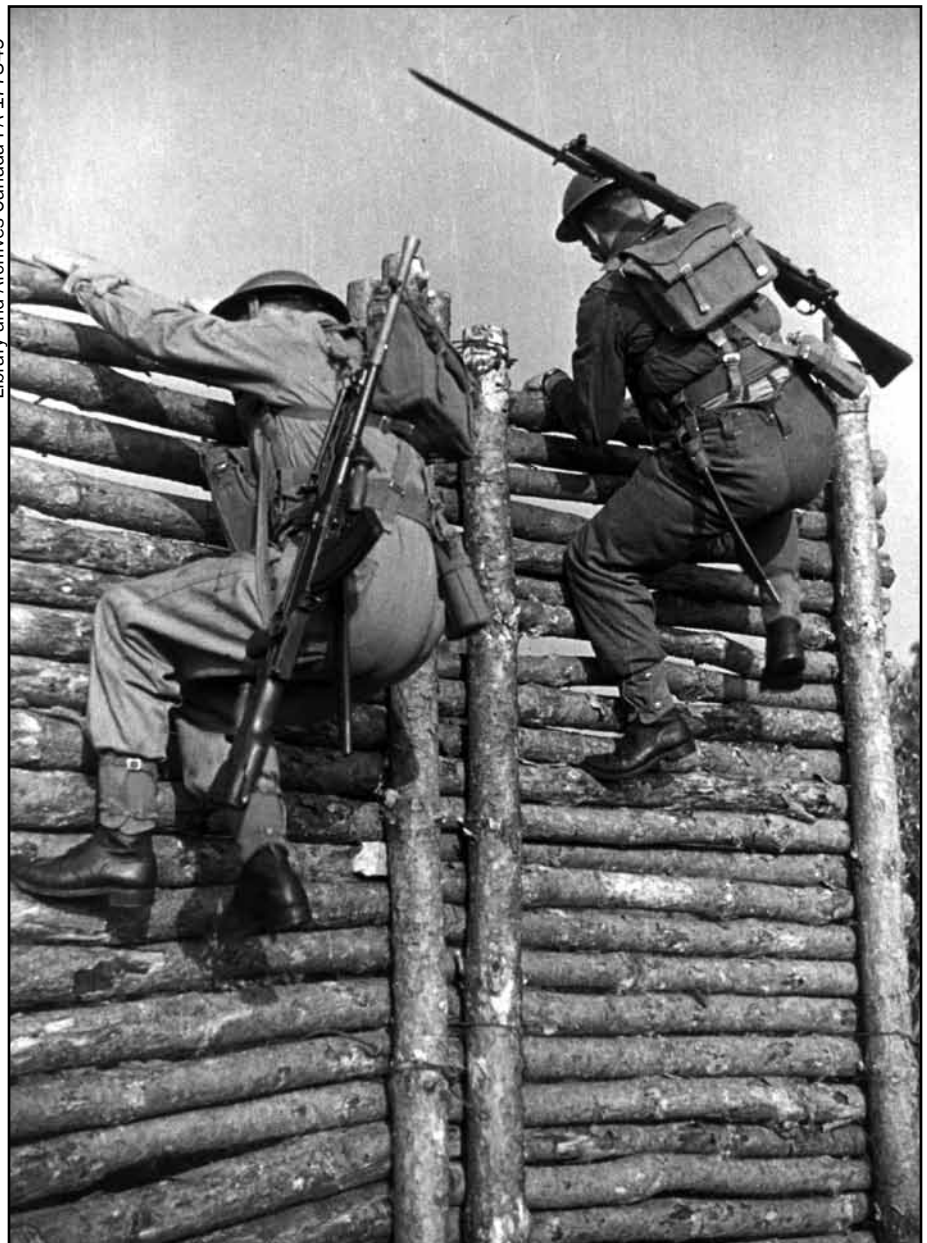
Left: Crossing a rope line high over a group of watching officers, June 1943.

Below: Two soldiers climb over a log wall obstacle, November 1941.

Europe.¹⁷ Refresher training included exercises on anti-tank ranges, zeroing rifles, firing Sten and Thompson sub-machine guns, throwing grenades, a special one-week mines and booby traps course, battlefield first aid, preparation of defensive positions, individual field craft, and night patrols.¹⁸ By April 1944, 1 CIRU held company commanders personally responsible for providing all their troops, including their permanent establishment personnel who could be deployed to operational units, with as much training as possible. The company commanders were also responsible to retest all troops' individual skills every three months.¹⁹

After completing the mandatory two-week refresher course, soldiers at 1 CIRU continued training until they were called forward to an operational theatre. D Company was responsible for providing this ongoing program, which sometimes included low-level collective, or group, training, such as section stalks, night patrols, and minefield drills. The aim was to exercise soldiers continually and keep their skills sharp.²⁰ As time allowed, 1 CIRU also provided some men with specialist training, such as

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in Britain. Early that summer, on orders from Headquarters Canadian Reinforcement Units (CRU), all CIRUs reduced the two-week refresher course to one week.²² The week-long syllabus included mostly weapons training and range practices. Furthermore, owing to a lack of time, 1 CIRU conducted TOETs for only two of eight drafts sent forward during this period, making it difficult for the unit to attest to the combat readiness of each reinforcement. During this "rush" period, 1 CIRU's commander, Colonel C.B. Ware, assessed that most of these men required additional refresher training. Still, 1 CIRU did what it could to make the best use of the available time. For example, the unit held classes during the weekends and evenings, and it provided additional training on mines and booby traps to soldiers who required it. Although the soldiers' training was not complete, according to Colonel Ware "no man was despatched who had not received instruction in all platoon weapons and had fired each weapon."²³

By mid-September, the situation stabilized, and CIRUs received orders to reinstitute the two-week syllabus.²⁴ This allowed 1 CIRU to revert to its previous practice of delivering the mandatory two-week course, re-training soldiers whose performance during the two weeks was insufficient, and providing ongoing training to soldiers who passed the standard course while they awaited call-up.²⁵

There is evidence that 1 CIRU periodically took measures to improve training. For example, on at least one occasion the unit managed to take into its ranks as permanent staff a group of officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) with recent experience in Italy.²⁶ Furthermore, the unit carefully assessed the level of training soldiers received in Canada prior to arriving at 1 CIRU, with the

training companies actively seeking to identify and rectify major training deficiencies.²⁷ By October 1944 1 CIRU refined the process by making the companies responsible for providing the unit chief instructor with detailed assessments on inadequately trained individuals. Each of these assessments, consolidated by the chief instructor in "State of Training – Reinforcements" reports, included an affected soldier's name, course number and dates of his training in Canada, and statements of deficiency.²⁸ On 1 September, a group of senior officers from HQ CRU and a liaison officer from Canada conducted a visit to 1 CIRU, during which the unit chief instructor provided "general criticisms and suggestions" regarding the training of soldiers in Canada.²⁹

In short, infantry soldiers passing through Britain on their way to Italy received carefully planned continuation training at one of the army's reinforcement units. Generally speaking, the longer a soldier stayed in Britain, the more training he received. Even during the "rush period" of June-September 1944, soldiers received at least a week's training to refresh their ability to use standard platoon weapons. Outside the rush period, soldiers received more training – of at least two weeks to cover the essentials – and often a great deal more for those who spent months at a reinforcement unit.

After departing a CIRU in Britain for Italy, all soldiers passed through the Mediterranean theatre's reinforcement depot, 1 CBRD, where they received yet more training before finally joining their units.³⁰ Although the army originally intended that 1 CBRD only hold reinforcements waiting to be called to their units, by 1944, the depot provided new arrivals with refresher training to make up for any deficiencies.³¹ On 22 January, the commandant of 1 CBRD, Colonel G. Hedley Bashar, issued an order that held the depot's three battalion commanders responsible

for ensuring that, "the physical conditions of personnel and their level of training is such that they will be suitable reinforcements." The battalion commanders were to sign attestations indicating that each soldier deploying forward was medically and administratively fit and that their equipment was "complete and in satisfactory condition."³² In February, the commander of 1 Canadian Base Reinforcement Group (1 CBRD's superior headquarters), Brigadier E.W. Haldenby, issued a training instruction that reinforced the fundamental importance of preparing men for combat, stating "our main consideration is testing and completing the basic training of rank and file."³³

When new drafts arrived at 1 CBRD from Britain, the unit assessed each soldier to identify any training deficiencies. Standardized written assessments of incoming drafts after January 1944 included the following headings: numbers arriving, state of training, condition of clothing and equipment, documents, physical standard, source from which draft was drawn, and general comments on military efficiency.³⁴ Completed reports attached to 1 CBRD's war diary indicate that while newly arrived drafts during the first ten months of 1944 generally needed some improvement, there were not the sort of serious shortcomings and gaps that would merit the description "untrained." For example, on 7 March 1 CBRD assessed a new draft of 320 soldiers who were destined for service with the 48th Highlanders. The physical condition of these troops appeared "to be quite good" and their knowledge of fieldcraft and camouflage was "fair." Most, however, had no experience with the PIAT or the Thompson sub-machine gun (TMSG).³⁵ (It is worth noting that soldiers arriving in Italy probably lacked training on the Thompson because the army had long since replaced it with the Sten

other subjects, weapons lectures and practice on ranges, physical fitness, mine warfare lectures, ten-mile route marches, and individual and section fieldcraft training. Night training included marches and patrol practices.⁴⁰ In April, 1 CBRD increased the pace of training so that within three weeks all available reinforcements would be fully trained and ready to join their units. Brigadier Haldenby also ordered all 1 CBRD battalion commanders to hold an eight-day field exercise without delay. He directed that units maintain “a high standard of patrol and fieldcraft training” and that they make every soldier capable of marching ten miles within two hours for “hardening” purposes. Night training was to occur at least two nights per week.⁴¹

Training regimes tailored to the requirements of specific groups were also provided by 1 CBRD. In February 1944, for example, a group of reinforcements for the Royal 22nd Regiment proved to have an “excellent” level of weapons training, but needed more practice in fieldcraft, battle drill and night operations. A custom two-week program saw the troops improve rapidly.⁴² Officers also received special attention. In mid-February 1944, 1 CBRD implemented a plan to optimize officer readiness to lead men in battle. The unit kept reinforcement officers fully involved in the troops’ training regimes. These officers were responsible for teaching basic subjects, planning and executing exercises, and rehearsing men in the conduct of reconnaissance and fighting patrols. In addition, once a week, officers attended cloth-model exercises at night, participated in radio handling exercises, and wrote papers on general military subjects.⁴³ Other programs at 1 CBRD included one and two-week specialist courses that qualified individuals as mortarmen, machine gunners, signallers, and stretcher bearers.

Some soldiers also received advanced instruction on mines.⁴⁴

To ensure training was relevant, 1 CBRD periodically sought feedback from line units on reinforcement quality. In late February 1944, a 1 CBRD delegation visited various line units where, interestingly, there was little serious criticism regarding basic skills. The commanding officer of the Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR) advised that some troops needed more training in night fighting, night patrols, and “taking over positions.” Brigadier Dan Spry, commander of 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade, opined that units needed more men with specialist qualifications, such as snipers, mine and booby-trap handlers, and demolition experts, though he also noted that “some personnel have arrived unfamiliar with the use of grenades and tommy guns.” Brigadier T. Eric Snow, commander of 11th Canadian Infantry Brigade, advised that some personnel in a recent draft had not passed all TOETs.⁴⁵ During another visit to units in late March, front line officers were more critical of reinforcement training, advising 1 CBRD that new soldiers lacked expertise on the PIAT, the Thompson SMG, mortars, and the Vickers machine gun. (While not to be dismissive of these complaints, the Vickers and two of three mortar types in service – the 3-inch and the 4.2-inch – required specialist training). Too many reinforcement soldiers also had poor weapons maintenance habits.⁴⁶ These commentaries underscore two points: that 1 CBRD actively sought feedback from units on how to improve training, and, while units reported some problems, the deficiencies were not grave.



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Major Paul Triquet joined 1 Canadian Base Reinforcement Depot as the second-in-command of 1st Battalion. As a recent Victoria Cross recipient his battle experience would have been useful in preparing new troops for combat.

The army also sought to ensure training at 1 CBRD met front-line needs by posting veterans into the depot as instructors. In January 1944 the 48th Highlanders alone sent seven NCOs to 1 CBRD on an exchange program.⁴⁷ Later, in June 1944, the army planned to exchange officers and NCOs between operational field units and 1 CBRD’s permanent staff. The aim was to furnish reinforcements with relevant, high-quality training, while providing less stressful employment to soldiers who had served in the line for prolonged periods. At the same time, the scheme would allow instructors from the reinforcement depots to gain valuable combat experience.⁴⁸ On 21 September, the Royal 22nd Regiment’s Major Paul Triquet, a national hero who was awarded the Victoria Cross the previous December for his heroism and leadership in battle, joined 1 CBRD as the 1st Battalion’s second-in-command.⁴⁹ On 7 October, the 48th Highlanders sent another two



Infantrymen of the 48th Highlanders of Canada advancing on Point 146 during the advance on the Gothic Line near the Foglia River, Italy, 28-29 August 1944.

NCOs to 1 CBRD to assist in the training of personnel remustered to infantry.⁵⁰ Other operational units almost certainly did likewise.

For a brief period, 1 CBRD even sent formed groups forward to operational units to receive training. In mid-June 1944, Major-General Chris Vokes, commander of 1st Canadian Infantry Division, authorized 1 CBRD to attach to each of the division's infantry battalions a 100-man company of reinforcements for two weeks of training.⁵¹ On 18 June, the companies left 1 CBRD to join the field units of all three brigades.⁵² That evening, the 48th Highlanders greeted their company and prepared to execute the training scheme. At this time, the unit (indeed, the entire Canadian Corps) was in reserve, and therefore presumably had the capacity to train its future reinforcements. Some of the officers in this company of trainees – which the 48th Highlanders embraced by naming E Company – remained with the unit until mid-July before returning to 1 CBRD.⁵³

During September and October 1944, however, 1 CBRD was hard-pressed to furnish units with enough reinforcements, and this may have affected the quality of training. Indeed, by September 1944, high casualty rates and the attendant demand for new troops had all but depleted the infantry reinforcement

pool in Italy. Throughout the month, 1 CBRD barely kept up with demands.⁵⁴ On 4 September, 1 CBRD received authority to deploy tradesmen and non-trade specialists, such as cooks and drivers, for General Duty (ie. infantry) service, if required for emergencies.⁵⁵ The war diary contains no indication that the depot ultimately took such desperate measures, nor does it indicate whether or not the unit sent drafts forward before training was completed. 1 CBRD fully expected, however, that specialist courses would be cancelled in order to free men for immediate combat service.⁵⁶ Furthermore, on 18 September, 1 CBRD's commander, Colonel J.H. Christie, advised his battalion commanders that "the situation in the forward area is such that it is vitally important to send forward every available officer and man." He ordered 1 CBRD to recall all men on leave, review all cases of personnel declared "unavailable," complete all outstanding dental work, and resolve all disciplinary cases without delay.⁵⁷ The pressure to produce as many infantry reinforcements as possible continued until at least the end of October, when the Canadian Corps was finally taken out of the line and the pressing requirement for reinforcements eased.⁵⁸ If ever there was a period when 1 CBRD was hard-pressed to provide adequate

training due to a lack of time, it was in September and October 1944.

There is one group of men who do not appear to have received adequate training at 1 CBRD during this period – men transferred to infantry from other corps. In late August 1944, the army implemented a concerted remustering program to help meet the growing need for infantry reinforcements.⁵⁹ While most basic infantry training for remustered soldiers occurred in Britain, 1 CBRD trained those soldiers who transferred to the infantry corps while already serving in Italy.⁶⁰ Furthermore, in early October the army sent a group of 496 members of the Royal Canadian Ordnance Corps (RCOC) and the Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (RCEME) from Britain to Italy for conversion training.⁶¹ The training provided to this group was not extensive. Unfortunately, 1 CBRD learned only at the last minute that it was responsible for training these troops; on 6 October, just two days before the soldiers arrived, 1 CBRD's chief instructor alerted the unit that the training of these men "appears to be the responsibility of 1 C.B.R.D." He issued a rudimentary training plan, consisting of only three weeks' instruction on elementary skills and procedures.⁶² Even this program was difficult to implement owing to a shortage of instructors.⁶³ Thus, soldiers remustered to infantry and trained in Italy in October may have been inadequately trained.

It is not clear from the 48th Highlanders' war diary to what extent, if any, the remustered soldiers were a burden on the unit. The entry for 11 September laments the arrival of a draft of four officers, none with combat experience, and

90 men, most of whom – aside from those returning from convalescence – were remustered to infantry. Nevertheless, a surprising number of reinforcements arriving at the 48th Highlanders between the middle of August and the end of October had previous service in the unit. The regiment’s war diary notes that most of the men in a reinforcement draft of one officer and 48 men who arrived on 13 August “had been with the Battalion before.”⁶⁴ On 9 September the regiment received a draft of one officer and 53 men. The officer was one of the E Company trainees attached to the battalion during the early summer, while about half of the men “had served with the battalion before but had been evacuated through wounds or sickness.”⁶⁵ On 28 September, the unit welcomed back ten of its soldiers who had been hospitalized then temporarily posted to other units.⁶⁶ On 5 October, one major and 24 non-commissioned reinforcements arrived, “all of them Highlanders of long standing.”⁶⁷ Finally, on 27 October, 43 reinforcements arrived, “all but six of whom were previously with the Battalion.” Two were new officers who had served previously in the unit as NCOs.⁶⁸ It is therefore possible that the high number of experienced reinforcements balanced the challenges of absorbing poorly-trained remusters.

Certainly the 48th Highlanders’ war diary for the period January to October 1944 says very little about the overall quality of reinforcements, and the few instances in which reinforcement training is mentioned do not highlight poor readiness. The war diary for March 1944 contains instructions from 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade that detail the brigade commander’s expectations for processing newly arriving reinforcements. Units were to hold new troops in rear areas for up to four days, but not less than 24 hours, during which staffs were to review

each soldier’s documents, verify his personal equipment as complete, and issue his unit badges and flashes. Units were to give each soldier “smartening up drill,” consisting of “general tactical hints” and weapons handling tests. Finally, units were to place particular emphasis on educating the new soldiers on “unit history and customs.”⁶⁹ Such instructions hardly seem to reflect significant concern at the brigade level for the reinforcements’ state of training. Similarly, a war diary entry for 10 September notes that the RSM was busy “making life supremely miserable” for a draft of newly arrived reinforcements, indicating that “from morning to night under RSM CROSSLEY’s critical eye they march, salute and do arms drill and tests of elementary training in small arms.”⁷⁰ While such treatment of new arrivals was no doubt necessary to establish the unit’s standard of discipline, the emphasis on marching and saluting is not what one would expect if the unit was concerned with preparing undertrained troops for combat.

The training at the CIRUs and at 1 CBRD may not have been perfect, particularly for those men rushed through those units. But, as we have seen, many of the 48th Highlanders’ reinforcements spent a considerable amount of time at either or both locations. Still, to arrive at informed generalizations about the level of training for soldiers reinforcing the 48th Highlanders, a few benchmarks need to be established before interpreting the data contained in the personnel files.

For the purposes of this study, a soldier will be considered trained to the minimal acceptable standard if he completed – at the very least – the mandatory two-week course provided by the CIRUs. Because, as shown by 1 CBRD

assessment of incoming drafts, soldiers still generally needed a bit more training after the two-week course, a minimum standard will be taken as including at least two more weeks training at 1 CBRD. Additional time at each location needs to be allowed for arrival and departure procedures, say one week before and after training at each location. This gives a total of eight weeks for a soldier to pass through a CIRU and 1 CBRD and be considered trained to minimally acceptable standards. Taking this benchmark, the following categories have been established:

- a. Soldiers with less than eight weeks total in the UK and at 1 CBRD are assessed as probably not well-trained;
- b. Soldiers who spent eight to 12 weeks total in the UK and at 1 CBRD were probably trained to the minimal acceptable standard. Still, in order to err on the side of caution, these soldiers are assessed here as having a questionable level of training;
- c. Soldiers who spent between 12 and 20 weeks in the UK and at 1 CBRD – that is, having received between three and five months of refresher training – are assessed as probably well-trained; and
- d. Soldiers who spent over 20 weeks, or five months, in the UK and at 1 CBRD are assumed to be well-trained.

Figure 2 captures the results of 89 reinforcements assessed according to these criteria.

Training Category	Count (Percentage)
Well-trained Over 20 weeks in UK or at CBRD	39 (44%)
Probably well-trained 12-20 weeks in UK or at CBRD	24 (27%)
Questionable 8-12 weeks in UK or at CBRD	15 (17%)
Probably not well-trained Less than 8 weeks in UK or at CBRD	11 (12%)
Total	89 (100%)



Private Stanley Rodgers of the 48th Highlanders of Canada, who holds a PIAT anti-tank weapon, resting north of the Conca River en route to Rimini, Italy, September 1944.

Another group, numbering just under 20 percent, had a questionable level of training. Interestingly, these numbers correspond closely with the opinions expressed by the infantry officers reported in Robert Engen's study.

Finally, it is worth noting that information in the personnel files reviewed for this study reinforce an important, but perhaps under-appreciated, and objectionable, aspect of the army's manpower management during the Second World War: the fact that the army heavily pressured conscripts raised under the National Resources Mobilization Act (NRMA) to volunteer for service overseas. As Daniel Byers explains in his article "Mobilising Canada: The National Resources Mobilization Act, the Department of National Defence, and Compulsory Military Service in Canada, 1940-1945," while the government obliged NRMA conscripts, or "Zombies," to serve only in defence of the homeland, the army soon realized that pressuring conscripts to "go active" was an effective way to increase the number of men for overseas service. Army training centres deliberately mixed conscripts and volunteers in the same training platoons, encouraged the volunteers to pressure the conscripts, and implemented a wide array of other measures designed to pressure the NRMA men to volunteer for active service. The efforts were often brutal and coercive, and sometimes included the threatened or actual use of violence. They were also effective, with some training units achieving 100 percent volunteer rates.⁷¹ Fully a quarter of the reinforcements to the 48th Highlanders in the sample considered for this paper (22 of 89)

This analysis is subjective. Amongst other factors, certain personnel may have experienced extenuating circumstances that resulted in reduced time for training. A soldier posted to a CIRU or 1 CBRD may have spent part of his time there in detention, or in hospital, or a combination of both, though such circumstances have been accounted for where possible. Similarly, because the personnel files rarely indicate how each soldier spent his time at each unit, some men were likely occupied with duties other than training for possibly considerable lengths of time. Therefore, it is not claimed here that the results in Figure

2 represent precisely how well trained reinforcements were when they arrived at the 48th Highlanders. The results are strong enough, however, to suggest a trend. That is, most reinforcements (roughly 70 percent) were well-trained, based on the fact that they spent a minimum of three months training in the reinforcement system. With somewhat greater confidence, one can conclude that a relatively small proportion of soldiers (slightly over 10 percent) were probably not well-trained when taken on strength by the 48th Highlanders, because they passed through the reinforcement system too quickly.

A Canadian soldier fires a PIAT anti-tank weapon at a training school west of Ortona, Italy, 10 January 1944.

were either conscripted under the NRMA then went active, or chose to volunteer for General Service when it was clear that they were about to be conscripted (for example, after having received call-up notices).

Farley Mowat's quote at the beginning of this paper refers to a draft that arrived at his unit, the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment, on 24 December 1943. The other two infantry regiments in the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade, the 48th Highlanders and the Royal Canadian Regiment, also received drafts the same day.⁷² In fact, 14 of the 89 reinforcements reviewed for this paper were part of the 24 December draft reinforcing the 48th Highlanders. But whereas Mowat learned that the soldiers arriving at his unit had apparently "arrived in England from Canada only a month earlier," the soldiers arriving at the 48th - at least the 14 whose records were examined here - spent on average over 15 months in England. And, to a man, they also spent about six weeks at 1 CBRD before joining the 48th Highlanders in the line. The same is probably true for the troops Mowat greeted.⁷³

By and large the reinforcements arriving at the 48th Highlanders during the first ten months of 1944 spent enough time training in Britain and Italy to be reasonably well-prepared for combat. This contradicts the mass of anecdotal information which maintains that the army rushed reinforcements into battle before they were ready. Nonetheless, additional research regarding reinforcement training is required to confirm or refine the results presented here. The examination of a larger sample of data, such as for all three infantry units in the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade, would be valuable. Further



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scrutiny of the training provided to remustered soldiers would be equally important. Nonetheless, it is difficult to accept that soldiers who generally spent a fair amount of time training in the reinforcement system arrived at their units utterly incapable of basic tasks.

Explaining the anecdotal evidence of the reinforcements' allegedly poor readiness is difficult. Some complaints were probably well-founded. Ten percent of the soldiers examined here did not spend enough time in the reinforcement system to receive adequate refresher training. Some observers of these personnel may have painted all reinforcements with the same brush. For brief periods of time, the CIRUs and 1 CBRD (from early June to early September 1944, and September to October 1944 respectively) were challenged to keep the stream of reinforcements flowing, and soldiers passing through those units during those periods likely received abbreviated training regimes. Furthermore, there may be some truth to the notion, as suggested by the army's official

historian, C.P. Stacey, that "no commanding officer ever admits that the reinforcements his unit receives have been properly trained."⁷⁴ By 1944 the Canadian infantry battalions in Italy were hardened and veteran units, fighting a determined and resourceful enemy in difficult terrain and weather conditions that favoured the defenders. Units such as the 48th Highlanders had through grim experience developed techniques tailored to these difficult conditions. It would be surprising if reinforcements did not lack the specialized skills resident in these veteran outfits. In addition, other critics may have complained of poor reinforcement quality in an effort to convince the government to send NRMA soldiers overseas to support the fighting units. Conn Smythe, for one, concluded his famous public criticism of the quality of reinforcements by calling for taxpayers to insist that the government support the fighting units by ordering the NRMA men overseas.⁷⁵ Perhaps others were tempted to decry poor reinforcement training to mask other problems that resulted in poor

battlefield performance, such as weak leadership at low levels. Finally, C.P. Stacey relates that some infantry officers suggested that soldiers may "have deliberately understated their training in the hope of getting safer assignments," though he offers no further detail.⁷⁶

The mass of anecdotal information claiming that infantry reinforcements during the Second World War were poorly-trained is at odds with army personnel records and reinforcement unit files. Similarly, the 48th Highlanders' war diary for the first ten difficult months of 1944 contains no disparaging comments regarding the quality of its reinforcements. Few of the men reinforcing the 48th Highlanders during those months were rushed into battle. Most, though not all, spent too long in the reinforcement stream's training units to be considered untrained. A proportion – the actual size is difficult to assess, but a bold estimate would be as high as 30 percent – probably needed more refresher training, but these troops were the exception, not the rule. More research is required to clarify the factors that led to the perceptions and accusations of poorly-trained reinforcements. The military records reviewed for this paper certainly confirm the army's difficulty in generating enough infantry reinforcements during the summer and early fall of 1944. Some soldiers probably required additional refresher training, but in all likelihood the problem was not nearly as pronounced or widespread as the mass of anecdotal evidence suggests.

Notes

1. Farley Mowat, *And No Birds Sang* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979), p.245.
2. C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence and the Queen's Printer, 1970), p.440.

3. Daniel G. Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers: The Canadians in Italy, 1943-1945* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1991), p.250.
4. Canadian Military Headquarters (CMHQ), Historical Section, Report No.178, "Canadian Operations in Italy, 5 Jan-21 Apr 44," 22 July 1947, p.31. <<http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/his/rep-rap/doc/cmhq/cmhq178.pdf>>
5. Stacey, *Arms, Men, and Governments*, p.441.
6. Ibid.
7. Jack Granatstein notes that the gap between the "received wisdom" of poorly trained reinforcements and the written records requires further research. He also cites Terry Copp's review of personnel files that shows most of the men killed in action in the 5th Brigade were not undertrained. *Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p.461, n.78). Terry Copp demonstrates that the heavy losses suffered by the Black Watch on 13 October 1944 during the Battle of the Scheldt were not necessarily due to poorly trained reinforcements, as had been claimed by the unit's intelligence officer. *The Brigade: the Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade, 1939-1945* (Stoney Creek, Ontario: Fortress Publications Inc., 1992), p.150. Also, Copp's review (with Christine Hamelin) of personnel files of men killed in Le Régiment de Maisonneuve undercuts the notion that the army sent poorly trained men to battle. Copp and Hamelin add that records for the Black Watch and the Calgary Highlanders appear to show the same. "Le Régiment de Maisonneuve: A Profile Based on Personnel Records," *Canadian Military History* 8, no.4 (Autumn 1999), pp.17-25. Copp asserts that our understanding of how infantry reinforcements were prepared for battle is anecdotal, and that more research is required. *Cinderella Army: The Canadians in Northwest Europe 1944-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), p.294. Similarly, Bill McAndrew, Bill Rawling and Michael Whitby also note the difficulty in assessing the mass of anecdotal evidence. *Liberation: The Canadians in Europe* (Montreal: Art Global, 1995), p.62. Finally, University of Ottawa PhD candidate Caroline D'Amours reviewed the personnel files of men killed in Le Régiment de la Chaudière (8th Brigade, 3rd Canadian Infantry Division) and determined that the unit's reinforcements spent enough time training to suggest that they were adequately prepared for combat. "Reassessment of a Crisis: Canadian Infantry Reinforcements during the Second World War / Réévaluation d'une crise : Les renforts d'infanterie du Canada pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale," *Canadian Army Journal* 14, no.2 (Summer 2012), pp.72-89.
8. No answer was provided by 7.8 percent of respondents. Robert Engen, *Canadians Under Fire: Infantry Effectiveness in the Second World War* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), p.177.
9. The list of soldiers killed was obtained from the Canadian Virtual War Memorial registry. <<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/collections/virtualmem/advsearch>> accessed 30 November 2011. This service lists 144 soldiers of the 48th Highlanders who died between January and October 1944; however, one name appears erroneously.
10. Files for Second World War soldiers who did not die as a result of their service are publicly available for individuals who have been dead for over 20 years. Proof of death must be provided to Library and Archives Canada (LAC) to obtain access.
11. The files are at LAC in RG 24 and RG 112. The key documents in each file include the Master File Maintenance (MFM) 1 and 2 (Attestation and Service) Forms and the MFM 4/4A (Service and Casualty) Forms.
12. Nine of the 143 soldiers were men who the army remustered into the infantry in the UK or Italy. They followed a slightly different path in the reinforcement stream.
13. While enroute to Britain, some soldiers spent a few weeks at a holding/training centre in Debert, Nova Scotia. The CIRUs were established in early 1943. Prior to this, the infantry reinforcement units were each dedicated to an infantry division. For example, 1st Division's reinforcement unit was called 1 Canadian Division Infantry Reinforcement Unit. CMHQ Report No.133, "The Organization of the Canadian Reinforcement Units (United Kingdom): Historical Outline, 1940-45," 29 March 1945, pp.2-4. <<http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/his/rep-rap/doc/cmhq/cmhq133.pdf>>.
14. Some files contain documents that provide a little information on a soldier's training and qualifications, such as Soldiers Qualification Cards filled out at the CIRUs, Soldier's Service Books that individuals carried on their person, and in very rare cases, Reinforcement Training Records. However, these documents do not appear consistently in the body of files examined and are insufficient for making assessments of reinforcement training.
15. The army implemented the seven CIRU structure in early 1943 during a reorganization of the reinforcement system. However, the army later disbanded two of the seven CIRUs after the Canadian government committed troops to the Mediterranean theatre. CMHQ Report No.133, "Organization of the Canadian Reinforcement Units," pp.3-4.
16. LAC, RG 24-C-3, Vol.16,750, War Diary, 1st Canadian Infantry Reinforcement Unit, Canadian Active Service Force [WD 1 CIRU], 1943/01-1944/10, Chief Instructor 1 CIRU, "Refresher Courses in Coys," 4 January 1944.
17. Chief Instructor 1 CIRU, "Policy—New Syllabus," 11 March 1944, WD 1 CIRU.

18. WD 1 CIRU entries for March and April 1944.
19. Chief Instructor 1 CIRU, "ITRs," 18 April 1944, WD 1 CIRU.
20. Chief Instructor 1 CIRU, "Trg Procedure," 18 October 1944, WD 1 CIRU.
21. WD 1 CIRU, 19 June 1944.
22. Commanding Officer 1 CIRU, "Disposal of Drafts," 5 October 1944, WD 1 CIRU, and, WD 1 CIRU, 11 September 1944.
23. Commanding Officer 1 CIRU, "Disposal of Drafts," 5 October 1944, WD 1 CIRU.
24. WD 1 CIRU, 11 September 1944.
25. Chief Instructor 1 CIRU, "Trg Procedure," 6 October 1944, WD 1 CIRU.
26. WD 1 CIRU, 25 February 1944. The extent to which this occurred is not clear from the war diary. This is an area that would benefit from additional research.
27. Commanding Officer 1 CIRU, "Disposal of Drafts," 5 October 1944, WD 1 CIRU. For example, this document contains short descriptions of the quality of every draft that arrived at 1 CIRU between 3 June and 6 September 1944.
28. Chief Instructor 1 CIRU, "Trg Returns," 4 October 1944, WD 1 CIRU.
29. WD 1 CIRU, 1 September 1944.
30. There were two CBRDs in Italy. 1 CBRD held and trained infantry reinforcements, while 2 CBRD held and trained all other arms. Both units were subordinate to the Canadian Base Reinforcement Group (CBRG). By January 1944, the army co-located the CBRG and both CBRDs at Avellino, Italy. Meanwhile, 1 CBRD's 4th Battalion deployed forward to be close to the field units and to serve as the final gate through which reinforcements passed before they joined their battalions. Army Headquarters [AHQ], Historical Section (GS) Report No.53, "Canadian Organization in Theatres of Operations, 1939-1945," 11 June 1952, para.10, p.7. <<http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/his/rep-rap/doc/ahqr-rqga/ahq053.pdf>>
31. Ibid., para.13, p.9.
32. LAC, RG 24-C3, Vol.16,714, War Diary, No.1 Canadian Base Reinforcement Depot [WD 1 CBRD], Canadian Active Service Force, 1943/05-1944/06, Commandant 1 CBRD, "Outgoing Drafts-Inspection," 22 January 1944. The Depot's war diary for the period July-October 1944 is contained in vol. 16,715.
33. Commander 1 CBRG, "Trg Instruction No 2-Offr Trg," 11 February 1944, WD 1 CBRD.
34. WD 1 CIRU, 29 September 1944.
35. No. 3 Bn 1 CBRD, "Incoming Drafts," 12 April 1944, 1 CBRD.
36. 1 CBRD, "Training Report on Drafts from UK (48th Highlanders)," 7 March 1944, WD 1 CBRD.
37. Commanding Officer No.3 Bn 1 CBRD (Lieutenant-Colonel Vincent McKenna), "Incoming Drafts," early March 1944, WD 1 CBRD.
38. No.3 Bn 1 CBRD, "Incoming Drafts," 12 April 1944, WD 1 CBRD.
39. No.3 Bn 1 CBRD, "Incoming Drafts," late May 1944, WD 1 CBRD. 447 soldiers passed all TOETs, and 244 failed two or fewer of the eight tests.
40. 10 Coy Training Syllabus for period 28 February to 4 March, 3 Bn 1 CBRD, WD 1 CBRD, and, 3 Bn Training Syllabus for week ending 29 July 1944, 3 Bn 1 CBRD, WD 1 CBRD.
41. Minutes of 12 April 1944 1 CBRG Training Meeting, 14 April 1944, WD 1 CBRD. The 1 CBRD war diary, and a number of weekly training summaries contained therein, indicate that units followed the direction to conduct night exercises and increased route marching by a few hours per week.
42. 1 CBRD Chief Instructor, "Reinforcement Training," 24 February 1944, WD 1 CBRD.
43. Commander 1 CBRG, "Trg Instruction No 2-Offr Trg," 11 February 1944, WD 1 CBRD. In fact, the Commander of 1 CBRG ordered that all reinforcement officers be subject to this regime.
44. Chief Instructor 1 CBRD, "Training - Courses," 17 February 1944, WD 1 CBRD.
45. 1 CBRD report, "Visit to Forward Area, late February 1944," WD 1 CBRD.
46. Captain W.B. Gammie, "Visit to Units," 27 March 1944, WD 1 CBRD. This document is inscribed with an unsigned minute from someone at 1 CBRD stating "More time to be spent on maintenance & weapon handling."
47. LAC, RG 24-C3, vol.15,296, War Diary, 48th Highlanders of Canada, Canadian Active Service Force [WD 48th Highlanders], 1942/03-1944/04, for 23 January 1944. Volume 15,297 contains the unit's war diary for the period May 1944 to August 1945.
48. Lieutenant-Colonel Michael S. Dunn, "Exchange of Offrs & ORs-FUs and PEs Rft Bns," Canadian Section General Headquarters 2nd Echelon Allied Armies Italy (AAI), 7 June 1944, WD 1 CBRD. The army halted the scheme from mid-August to September, probably due to the urgency to send reinforcements forward as quickly as possible.
49. WD 1 CBRD, 21 September 1944.
50. WD 48th Highlanders, 7 October 1944.
51. HQ 1 CBRG message, no title, 15 June 1944, WD 1 CBRD. Also, 1 CBRD, "Training of Rfts," 15 June 1944, WD 1 CBRD.
52. HQ 1 CBRG, "Coys of Rft Bns Attached to 1 Cdn Inf Div," 17 June 1944, WD 1 CBRD.
53. WD 48th Highlanders, 18 June and 15 July 1944.
54. WD 1 CBRD, 30 September 1944.
55. WD 1 CBRD, 4 September 1944. The war diary does not state if any such tradesmen were deployed to fill infantry positions.
56. WD 1 CBRD, 9 and 11 September 1944.
57. Commander 1 CBRD, "Reinforcements," dated 18 September 1944.
58. WD 1 CBRD, 31 October 1944.
59. Remustering in large numbers began in late April-early May 1944, when 1,875 men transferred to the Canadian Infantry Corps (CIC). However, no other remusters occurred until late August, when the army launched a more sustained effort to remuster significant numbers of troops. Between April 1944 and January 1945, the army remustered 12,638 other ranks and 396 officers to the infantry. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, pp.425 and 437.
60. For example, the 4 June 1944 entry in the 1 CBRD war diary notes that 115 men who had recently remustered from other Corps were undergoing training. Also, in the first week of October alone, the army remustered 46 men in Italy and sent them to 1 CBRD for conversion training. WD 1 CBRD, 7 October 1944.
61. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, p.438; 1 CBRD, "Arrival of Rfts - Adm Details," 6 October 1944, WD 1 CBRD.
62. 1 CBRD Chief Instructor, "Training of Personnel of Various Arms Remustered to C.I.C.," 6 October 1944, WD 1 CBRD.
63. WD 1 CBRD, 7 October 1944.
64. WD 48th Highlanders, 13 August 1944.
65. WD 48th Highlanders, 9 September 1944.
66. WD 48th Highlanders, 28 September 1944.
67. WD 48th Highlanders, 5 October 1944.
68. WD 48th Highlanders, 27 October 1944.
69. 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade, "Memorandum No.13," 6 March 1944, WD 48th Highlanders. Of note, the paragraph regarding this "Reinforcement Drill" was the document's fifth subject, following paragraphs for Leave, ABCA and Information Rooms, Recreational Facilities, and Mail Instructions.
70. WD 48th Highlanders, 10 September 1944.
71. Daniel Byers, "Mobilising Canada: The National Resources Mobilization Act, the Department of National Defence, and Compulsory Military Service in Canada, 1940-1945," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 7, no.1 (1996), pp.185-201.
72. Various 48th Highlanders personnel files showing soldiers as Taken on Strength at the unit on 24 December 1944, and Colonel Strome Galloway, *Some Died at Ortona: the Royal Canadian Regiment in Action in Italy 1943* (Toronto: The Royal Canadian Regiment, 1983), p.205.
73. In fact, the reinforcements for all three regiments may have been part of the same draft. On 6 November 1943, a group of 1,600 reinforcements put ashore in Taranto, Italy. AHQ Report No.53, "Canadian Organization in Theatres of Operations, 1939-1945," p.6.
74. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, p.440.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid.

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