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Canada Unprepared for War in 1939

What Difference Did It Make?

LARRY D. ROSE

Abstract: This article focuses on the consequences of Canada being largely unprepared for the Second World War. Though the Canadian army did not face large scale combat until 1943 and had plenty of time to recover from pre-war neglect, the consequences of unpreparedness for the army were especially evident at Dieppe and Hong Kong. Meantime, the Royal Canadian Navy remained a training navy until 1943 and the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) was diverted from what it might have expected when the war broke out by the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. However, the article argues the RCAF could do little in the Battle of Britain, while “Canadianization” of the RCAF was much delayed.

IN 1939 THE entire regular force of the Canadian army was so small it could fit into Toronto’s then hockey shrine, Maple Leaf Gardens, three times over. There were only 4,261 members of the Permanent Force (PF).¹ The puny size of the regular force is just one measure of the state of the Canadian military at the start of the Second World War. Virtually all of the army’s equipment dated back to 1918 or in the case of a soldier’s webbing, 1908. The only large scale manoeuvres the PF held between the two world wars was in 1938 and

¹ “Strength Return Permanent Force - Month of July 1939” in C.P. Stacey, *Six Years of War*, vol.1 (Ottawa: Ministry of National Defence, 1955), 34. The same book includes a good summary of the manpower and equipment situation in chapter 1 “The Canadian Militia on the Eve of War,” 3–35.

it was a woeful disaster.² It was worse in the reserve army, the Non-Permanent Active Militia. There were nominally 50,000 members but about half were just names on a list. The rest paraded once or twice a week and, for the most part, their training was so limited that they could march around a parade square but could not defend it.³

Of the three services, the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) was probably the best equipped with six modern destroyers and four new minesweepers.⁴ But among the navy's greatest handicaps was its extremely small size which made it almost impossible to expand quickly in an emergency. There were about 1,500 regulars and, if you added in the reserves, the total came to about 3,500.⁵ Further, in the words of Ralph Hennessy, later a vice-admiral, the navy was "equipped and trained for the wrong war."⁶ Both the Royal Navy and Canada's chief of the naval staff, Rear-Admiral Percy Nelles, thought the surface raider was a greater threat than the submarine so there were only two trained anti-submarine specialists in the entire RCN.⁷ Even so, Nelles repeatedly reminded the government that experience in the First World War showed that more than a hundred well armed patrol vessels would be needed to protect shipping if enemy surface raiders or submarines attacked in Canadian waters.

Meantime, the 235 pilots in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) flew a museum's worth of relics.⁸ The air fleet at the beginning of 1939

² Abridged Report on Permanent Force Collective Training, Camp Borden 1938, Department of National Defence 1939, Directorate of History and Heritage [DHH] 324.00 (D449) in Stephen J. Harris, *Canadian Brass: The Making of a Professional Army, 1860-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 198.

³ Chris Vokes, *My Story* (Stittsville: Gallery Books, 1985), 63.

⁴ Marc Milner, "On A War Footing," *Legion Magazine*, January 2007, <<http://www.legionmagazine.com/en/index.php/2007/01>>. Milner argues "the Canadian coast was not undefended in 1939."

⁵ W.A.B. Douglas and Brereton Greenhous, *Out Of The Shadows: Canada In the Second World War*, revised ed. (Toronto: Dundurn, 1996), 30. C.P. Stacey, however, argues that the government's rearmament program's biggest failure had been in maritime defence. See C.P. Stacey, *The Military Problems of Canada* (Toronto: Canadian Institute of International Affairs, 1940), 116.

⁶ Ralph Hennessy, Interview with author, 7-8 May 2008.

⁷ Marc Milner, *Canada's Navy: The First Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 74.

⁸ The RCAF manpower situation is discussed in National Defence Headquarters, "Bulletins on the Development of the RCAF 25 August-31 December 1939," DHH 181.003 D3868 found in W.A.B. Douglas, *The Creation of a National Air Force*, vol.2, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press/Department of National Defence, 1986), 343. The RCAF was starting to introduce new aircraft into its fleet. Twenty new



The South Saskatchewan Regiment departing from home, May 1940. In 1939 the entire regular force of the Canadian army was so small it could fit into Toronto's then hockey shrine, Maple Leaf Gardens, three times over. [Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies]

included the Armstrong Whitworth Siskin fighter, first introduced in the Royal Air Force in 1923. The RCAF had been the government's top priority in a re-building program that began in 1937 but it was a tepid affair, a sort of "rearmament lite."⁹ The government favoured the air force for several reasons, among them that it thought if war came, the RCAF would not likely suffer enormous casualties. If the army had been used in European combat, however, the high casualty rates that were expected could have triggered a new conscription crisis in Quebec. So the army got very little in the years just before the war.

Still, even all the above – grim as it is – fails to fully describe the breadth of the troubles in the armed forces in 1939. The army had no viable operational combat doctrine so that early training focused on the trench warfare of 1918.¹⁰ All three services were fundamentally

Hurricane fighters arrived in January 1939.

⁹ C.P. Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict*, vol.2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 201; Roger Sarty, "Mr. King and the Armed Forces" in Roger Sarty, *The Maritime Defence of Canada* (Toronto: Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, 1996), 183–216. Because of prevailing public opinion, Sarty calls the rearmament program "an act of political courage," 217.

¹⁰ J.A. English, *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign* (Mechanicsburg,

“branch plant” operations – completely dependent on the British for staff officer training, equipment and doctrine. Canada relied almost totally on British equipment which, in the crisis of 1939, was nearly unobtainable.



But, so what? What difference did it make anyway?

One might argue that the Canadian army did not face combat for more than two years while in due course a much expanded Royal Canadian Navy played a crucial role in many parts of the globe, most notably in the winning of the Battle of the Atlantic. The RCAF built and ran the stupendous British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) and still provided outstanding service in fighter and fighter-bomber operations while playing an enormous role in Bomber Command.

Nevertheless, each service paid the cost of unreadiness in different ways. For the army, J.L. Granatstein has singled out two devastating consequences of the meagre preparations for war: the defeats at Hong Kong and Dieppe.¹¹ In the fall of 1941, 1,975 Canadians, including two nursing sisters, were sent to Hong Kong to reinforce British and Imperial troops against possible Japanese invasion. Two infantry battalions, the Royal Rifles of Canada from Quebec City and the Winnipeg Grenadiers, along with supporting troops and a brigade headquarters, made up a fighting formation called C Force.

Numerous staff training courses in Britain for senior officers before the war, attended by as many as ten Canadian officers, had concluded that if fighting came to Hong Kong, it would be impossible to reinforce or resupply the colony, nor would it be possible to evacuate the troops if that was required. The Royal Navy just was not strong enough in the Pacific.¹² Nevertheless at the request of the British, C

PA: Stackpole, 2009 [1991]), 53.

¹¹ J.L. Granatstein, Notes for Address to the Royal Canadian Military Institute, 28 October 2011. Author's files. The literature on Hong Kong is voluminous but a good discussion on the Hong Kong disaster is in Galen Perras, “Defeat Still Cries Aloud for Explanation: Explaining C Force's Dispatch to Hong Kong,” *Canadian Military Journal* 11, no.3, 37–47.

¹² Paul Dickson, “Crerar and the Decision to Garrison Hong Kong,” *Canadian Military History* 3, no.1 (Spring 1994): 97–100. George MacDonell, a Hong Kong

Force was sent, only to be attacked by the Japanese within weeks of its arrival. That attack ended in the defeat of the British, Canadian and Imperial troops on 25 December 1941.

British writer Basil Liddell Hart said that at Hong Kong strategy and common sense were vainly sacrificed in the name of prestige while historian George Stanley argued that Canadian and British officials displayed political naiveté if they thought that two additional Canadian battalions would deter Japan from attacking.¹³ The most troubling question is why the force was sent at all. Indeed, writer Carl Vincent titled a book “No Reason Why” because his view was that there was no reason why the force should have been sent in the first place.¹⁴

George MacDonell, a Royal Rifles sergeant, commented that the Canadian government,

showed no concern for the actual military situation in the Far East and Hong Kong until the entire Canadian force had disappeared in the flaming wreckage of the defeated colony. General Harry Crerar, Canada’s senior military officer and a man who spent his life as a professional soldier, should have advised against such utter folly. Why he did not is still not explained.¹⁵

The Hong Kong disaster showed that even two years into the Second World War the Canadian army was without the capacity to weigh, examine, probe, or analyze this operation on its own. All assessments about Hong Kong came from the British – a special monthly secret intelligence Summary, a monthly confidential intelligence summary and periodic secret summaries from Hong Kong, Singapore and the Air Ministry. Those assessments discounted the probability of an attack.¹⁶

Senior Canadian officers never did request a separate military appreciation of the operation’s viability or Hong Kong’s defences from

survivor, later called the colony, “an isolated, unprepared military death trap.” George MacDonell, *One Soldier’s Story* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2002), 58.

¹³ B.H. Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (London: Cassell, 1970), 219; George Stanley, *Canada’s Soldiers: The Military History of an Unmilitary People* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1954), 380–381.

¹⁴ Carl Vincent, *No Reason Why: the Canadian Hong Kong Tragedy* (Stittsville: Canada’s Wings, 1981).

¹⁵ MacDonell, *One Soldier’s Story*, 90.

¹⁶ S.R. Elliot, *Scarlet To Green: Canadian Army Intelligence 1903–1963* (Toronto: Canadian Intelligence and Security Association, 1981), 65.



Canadian troops arrive in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong disaster showed that even two years into the Second World War the Canadian army was without the capacity to weigh, examine, probe or analyze this operation on its own. [Library and Archives Canada PA C-049743]

the director of military operations and intelligence but even if they had the Directorate was incapable of doing it.¹⁷ The number of officers handling intelligence in the Directorate of Military Operations and Intelligence had increased from one in 1940 to seven in 1941 but only one of these handled “foreign” intelligence.

A history of Canadian military intelligence concludes, “Ottawa could not and did not provide adequate information to the men it sent there to fight, and that, in itself is a condemnation of our lack of preparedness during peacetime.”¹⁸ This was compounded once C Force arrived in Hong Kong as the commander, Brigadier John Lawson, received a British assessment of the enemy that was wildly off the mark and riddled with racist stereotypes. The British estimated that there were only 5,000 enemy troops opposite the colony, that the Japanese were unused to night fighting and that they were supported by obsolete aircraft flown by myopic pilots.¹⁹

¹⁷ Elliot, *Scarlet To Green*, 374; James Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada: From the Great War to the Great Depression* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 77, 91–93. Eayrs says government departments relied “too exclusively upon Imperial sources and too little upon its own.”

¹⁸ Elliot, *Scarlet to Green*, 377–378.

¹⁹ Elliot, *Scarlet To Green*, 375.

The lack of independent risk assessment had, in fact, been discussed long before the war. Prime Minister W.L.M. King's advisor, J.W. Pickersgill, had argued that "the principle of imperial uniformity meant that there was no critical analysis of defence issues in Canada and no independent thought about what was best" for Canada.²⁰ In sum, the Hong Kong fiasco brought to light the price to be paid for Canada's being a branch plant operation.

In the end the decision to send troops was essentially political.²¹ In two years of war the Canadian Army had not fired a shot in anger so the pressure to do "something" was intense. But it is unthinkable that the government would have sent the troops if it had not been for the endorsement of the chief of the general staff, General H.D.G. Crerar. He simply rubber stamped the British request. However, the issue of Hong Kong is broader than simply a bad, if understandable decision. The crucial point is that the government deserved to be fully informed about the military risks and it was not.²²

One further point. It is true that political reasons to go to Hong Kong were compelling so it has been said that having a separate Canadian intelligence assessment would have made no difference. General Crerar's biographer argues that the general's assessment of Japanese intentions was "no worse, and no better than that of the British or Americans."²³ It may be that the outcome would not have been different but historian Galen Perras says for one thing, more still needs to be known about Crerar's actions.²⁴ As far as Crerar doing no worse than the British, his assessment was the British assessment.



Only months after Hong Kong, Canadian troops were hurled into another inferno: Dieppe, the worst disaster in Canadian military

²⁰ Stephen J. Harris, "The Canadian Way of War, 1919-1939," in Bernd Horn, ed., *The Canadian Way of War: Serving the National Interest* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2006), 207.

²¹ See for example Maurice Pope, *Soldiers and Politicians* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 173. Also, Crerar himself said "political and moral principles were involved, rather than military ones." Vincent, *No Reason Why*, 39-40.

²² Perras, "Defeat Still Cries Aloud For Explanation," 43.

²³ Paul Douglas Dickson, *A Thoroughly Canadian General: A Biography of General H.D.G. Crerar* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 173.

²⁴ Perras, "Defeat Still Cries Aloud for Explanation," 45.

history. More Canadians were killed there on 19 August 1942 than on any other single day of the war. The mainly Canadian force of about 6,100 troops supported by nearly 4,000 men at sea and in the air conducted a frontal assault on the heavily fortified port. On the day of the battle pretty much everything went wrong.²⁵ In the end almost 60 percent of the Canadians were killed, wounded or captured. The Royal Regiment of Canada, for instance, suffered 524 casualties while only 65 members managed to get back to England.

Historian John Keegan said Dieppe “in retrospect, looks so recklessly hare-brained an enterprise that it is difficult to reconstruct the official state of mind which gave it birth and drove it forward.”²⁶ The commando leader Lord Lovat, whose force attacked heavy gun emplacements in the only successful part of the operation, said the entire affair “was a bad plan and had no chance of success.”²⁷

As with Hong Kong, the operation was drenched in politics. Winston Churchill wanted action everywhere and at all times. He was unable to deliver a second front in 1942 which outraged Josef Stalin, whose USSR was heavily engaged against the Nazis. So, big raids became a substitute. Churchill picked Admiral Louis Mountbatten to head Combined Operations and expected swift results. As in the Far East earlier, both the British and Canadians needed “something.”²⁸ W.A.B. Anderson, later a lieutenant-general, noted the troops themselves were also desperate to fight:

You have to put yourself back in the context of 1942. The British were fighting all over the world. The Canadian army had done bugger-all. We were just training and training. The pressure was on that we had to get into action! ... In that context it would have been unthinkable for any Canadian to say, “We won’t do it,” or “We shouldn’t try this.”²⁹

While Canadians were eager participants in Operation Rutter/Jubilee, it was really run by the British who did not relish senior

²⁵ J.L. Granatstein, *Canada’s Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 210.

²⁶ John Keegan, *Six Armies in Normandy* (London/New York: Viking, 1982), 120–121.

²⁷ Brian Loring Villa, *Unauthorized Action: Mountbatten and the Dieppe Raid* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3.

²⁸ For Canadian and British political imperatives, Denis Whitaker and Shelagh Whitaker, *Dieppe: Tragedy to Triumph* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1992), 59.

²⁹ Whitaker and Whitaker, *Dieppe*, 97.

Canadian officers trying to horn in on decision making. General A.G.L. McNaughton, Canada's top commander in Britain, made a number of attempts to have a direct liaison with General Bernard Paget's Home Forces headquarters but he was rebuffed on the grounds that that would create many difficulties.

The 2nd Canadian Division commander and eventual scapegoat, Major-General J.H. Roberts, knew that this was his first opportunity to prove himself and that another might not be coming for a long time. McNaughton at one point asked General Crerar (by this time in Britain) to review the entire plan. In a comment eerily similar to his advice on Hong Kong, Crerar said, "I should have no hesitation in tackling it, if I were in Roberts' place."³⁰

One of the enduring myths of Dieppe – certainly one promoted by both Mountbatten and Crerar – was that the operation at least taught lessons that were invaluable on D-Day in 1944. In contrast Generals George Pearkes and E.L.M. Burns, for example, maintained that little was learned.³¹ If there were lessons, Granatstein has said "most of them would have been obvious to a second lieutenant fresh out of officer cadet classes."³² Above all, Dieppe showed that after three years of war the British and Canadian commanders still could not put together an operation on this scale that would succeed. The Canadian Army was not ready to take on the Germans; Dieppe showed how far short of the mark it was.³³



For the Royal Canadian Navy one of the worst consequences of being unprepared in 1939 was that it remained essentially a training navy until 1943. Or at least most of it was. The RCN was in reality two

³⁰ Villa, *Unauthorized Action*, 191.

³¹ For Pearkes see Reginald Roy, *For Most Conspicuous Bravery: A Biography of Major-General George R. Pearkes, V.C., through Two World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1977) 172–173; E.L.M. Burns, *General Mud: Memoirs of Two World Wars* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1970), 115.

³² J.L. Granatstein, "Dieppe 60 Years On," *National Post*, 19 August 2002; Stacey lists the lessons learned official and otherwise in *Six Years of War*, 400–401. He says "yet it had not been necessary to attack Dieppe in order to learn them."

³³ English, *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign*, 237–246. English argues further that the Canadian army was not prepared for modern war even in the Normandy campaign of 1944.

navies when the war began: The regular RCN and its destroyers, which initially operated mostly as a part of the Royal Navy, and the reserves – the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve and Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve – which underwent crash expansion and training to crew the new corvettes, and thus became the sheepdog navy of Battle of the Atlantic fame.

By the end of the war the RCN grew to 775 ships and 92,000 men and women. No navy could have expanded 50 times its size in six years and not suffered devastating growing pains. When the new corvettes began to arrive in December 1940 totally green officers and sailors were thrown aboard. It was a full time job for many captains simply to keep steam up and the ship off the rocks. Convoy veteran James Lamb said of that time, “Our object was mere survival, pure and simple.”³⁴ Robert Welland, who had joined the navy in 1936, pointed out, “the crews weren’t properly trained. There was no time to train them. They were shoveled out – which was better than not putting them there at all.”³⁵ As a result, one of the most notable consequences of the size of the pre-war navy was what failed to happen – the failure to sink U-boats.

By the end of 1942 Allied shipping losses from U-boat attack amounted to a staggering 7.8 million tons representing 1,664 ships. Eighty per cent of the ships torpedoed in the Atlantic in November and December of 1942 were hit while being escorted by Canadian groups.³⁶ Of course, there were mitigating circumstances including that Canadian ships were used to escort the more vulnerable slow convoys. In terms of losses the merchant navies (the main U-boat targets) paid a steeper price than RCN crews did. Operational scientist P.M.S. Blackett argued in early 1943 that nearly a quarter of the merchant ship losses could have been saved by increasing the size of escort groups from six to nine ships.³⁷ Some early convoys had only a single escort vessel to protect them in the mid-Atlantic. Precise numbers may be a dodgy business but Welland has said, “If we had been decently prepared we probably should have lost only half the ships in the Atlantic.”³⁸

³⁴ James Lamb, *The Corvette Navy* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1979), 58.

³⁵ Robert Welland, interviews with author, 11 January and 17 May 2008. Welland was later a rear-admiral.

³⁶ Tony German, “Preserving The Atlantic Lifeline,” *Legion Magazine*, 1 May 1998.

³⁷ Marc Milner, *Battle of the Atlantic* (St. Catharines: Vanwell, 2003), 137.

³⁸ Welland, interview with author.



Canadian corvettes depart on an escort mission. Of the three services, the Royal Canadian Navy was probably the best equipped with six modern destroyers and four new minesweepers but one Canadian admiral remarked that the navy was “equipped and trained for the wrong war.” [Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies]

A further cost of unpreparedness was that it took a long time for the RCN to emerge as an independent navy. A great moment came in 1943 when Canadian Rear-Admiral Leonard Murray was appointed Commander-in-Chief, Canadian Northwest Atlantic, the only Canadian to command an Allied theatre of operations in the Second World War. Of course the victory in the Battle of the Atlantic and the many other achievements of the Royal Canadian Navy were enormous but Murray’s appointment is a significant symbol of the RCN’s greater role as the war continued.



As for aviation, the hope of Prime Minister King that civilians could put on war paint one day and be ready for air combat the next was completely unrealistic. One of the greatest difficulties the RCAF had in preparing for war was evident as far back as 1937. It received new infusions of money but its administrative staff was so overwhelmed it was unable to spend it all.³⁹ Added to that, the

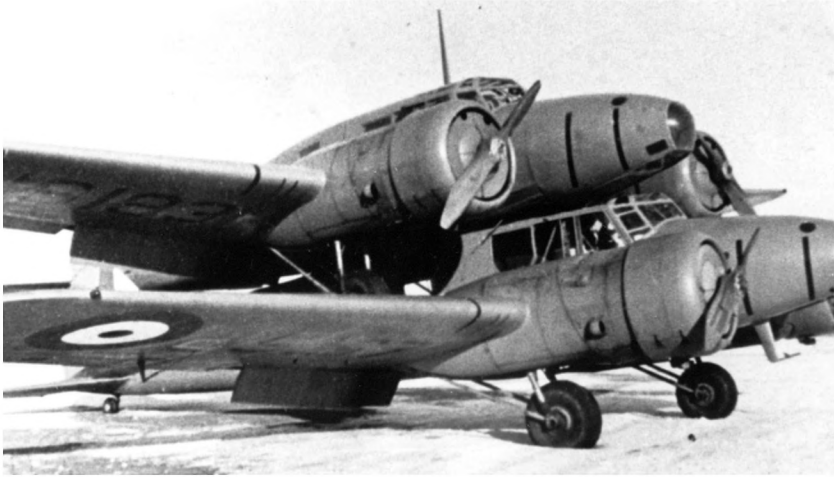
³⁹ Douglas, *Creation of a National Air Force*, 139.

RCAF had been a completely military service only since 1935 when it abandoned its civilian roles which included mapping the north and forestry patrol. In September 1939 it could muster only 15 of its planned 23 squadrons. Even then the operational squadrons were extremely limited in what they could do. An important RCAF role at the beginning of the war was coastal patrol especially on the Atlantic coast. However, the limits of the principal bomber-reconnaissance aircraft, the biplane Supermarine Stranraer flying boat, meant that the air force was confined to searching off Halifax harbour. Good luck to the Stranraer's gunner in an open cockpit in winter and good luck to a crew that tried to bomb any U-boat. On takeoff in winter, the cold water froze the bombs to the wing mounts so the plane was next to useless except as a scout. Later in the war, of course, the use of both carrier-based planes and long range patrol aircraft, including those of the RCAF, were a decisive factor in winning the Battle of the Atlantic.⁴⁰

The King government had hoped that the RCAF would be mobile – able to move quickly to where it was needed. So it is striking that the RCAF was unable to send a single squadron to Europe on the outbreak of war. Even as late as the summer of 1940 only one Canadian squadron – No.1 Squadron RCAF (later 401 Squadron RCAF) – took part in the Battle of Britain.⁴¹ About 90 Canadian pilots were part of the Battle of Britain but many were in the Royal Air Force. It was the shortage of pilots rather than shortage of planes that brought the RAF closest to defeat in the Battle of Britain. So the RCAF made a meager contribution to one of the crucial turning points of the war. Of course, one factor was that in December 1939 Canada undertook the vast British Commonwealth Air Training Plan which diverted resources from RCAF combat operations. In addition to the BCATP, the government wanted participation in air action but the RCAF struggled to cope. King had resisted British efforts to do air crew training in Canada before the war.

⁴⁰ The RCAF had ordered the Bristol Bolingbroke twin engine aircraft for coastal patrol but having it built in Canada delayed its delivery. It only began operations late in 1940. Douglas, *Creation of a National Air Force*, 142.

⁴¹ The squadron was reinforced by pilots from Nos.110 and 112 Squadrons, RCAF. Also at the end of the battle, the first graduates of the BCATP began to arrive. Mattias Joost, "The Other Canadians in the Battle of Britain," *Royal Canadian Air Force Journal* 1, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 39–47.



An unorthodox landing by two British Commonwealth Air Training Plan aircraft. Prime Minister King's commitment to this training scheme meant that fewer Canadian combat pilots were available for overseas service during the Battle of Britain, one of the key turning points of the war. [Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies]

The RCAF had the hardest time in taking control of its own destiny. It remained intertwined with the RAF through most of the war while being commanded mainly by RAF senior officers. Establishing Canadian identity – Canadianization – became an issue as the war continued.⁴² Also, Canada's participation in the BCATP virtually guaranteed that Canadianization would be extremely difficult. The Air Training Plan demanded so many resources that it took the RCAF a long time to build up the strength in Europe that merited independent command. So, many Canadians were scattered throughout the RAF in the early years that transferring them into RCAF units and formations proved to be an intractable problem. By the middle of the war about 60 percent of all RCAF personnel overseas spent some or all of their careers scattered among 700 different British squadrons and wings, becoming in the process the “Lost Legion.”⁴³

⁴² See for example S.K. Edwards, “The Leadership of Air Marshal Harold (Gus) Edwards,” in W.A. March, ed., *Canadian Aerospace Power Studies* vol.1, 2009 <http://airforceapp.forces.gc.ca/CFAWC/eLibrary/pubs/SicIturAdAstra-Vol1_e.asp>.

⁴³ Hugh Halliday, “Lost in the RAF: Air Force Part 55,” *Legion Magazine*, 15 January 2013.

Apart from the prime minister, others who promoted Canadianization in the RCAF included Charles “Chubby” Power, the boozing but formidable minister of national defence for air. At one point Power, in no uncertain terms, ordered commanders to “put the RCAF on the map.” Eventually 47 RCAF squadrons were established overseas. For the air force an important date was 25 October 1942 when 11 bomber squadrons were brought together to form No.6 Group, the first all Canadian formation of that size in the UK.

While Prime Minister Mackenzie King was unpopular with many armed forces members of the time, one of the great Canadian fighter aces of the war, Jim “Stocky” Edwards, was outspoken in King’s support for Canadianization. Edwards said “He wanted to make us Canadian. He wanted all the squadrons to be Canadian but it took a long time.”⁴⁴



Canada paid a fearful price for being unprepared in 1939. Apart from the problems discussed earlier, there was a broad range of other consequences. Perhaps the greatest of them all was that Canada was unable to make a significant contribution to the Allied war effort for at least the first two years of the war.⁴⁵ After 20 years of both government neglect and public indifference, it took years – in the middle of the shooting – to build the armed forces into effective fighting organizations. Canada essentially had to tell the British (and for a while the French): you just hold off the Germans for two or three years and then we’ll be ready to help. It might have been even worse except for two things: the dedication of thousands of reservists who kept the military spirit alive in the interwar years and the professionalism of a few dozen regular officers who trained themselves on their own initiative to fight a modern war.⁴⁶ Granatstein called it a miracle of biblical proportions that the army found as many able officers as it did given the tiny pool of pre-war officers.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Jim “Stocky” Edwards, Interview with author, 24 June 2008.

⁴⁵ Stacey, *Six Years of War*, 35–36.

⁴⁶ J.L. Granatstein, *The Generals: The Canadian Army’s Senior Commanders in the Second World War* (Toronto: Stoddard, 1993), 9.

⁴⁷ Granatstein, *The Generals*, See chs 5 & 6, 116–179. In 1939 there were 455 officers in the PF, and by one estimate half of them were unfit for service. Granatstein,

For the air force, Mackenzie King was wrong in thinking that the RCAF could be sent overseas as a strategy to avoid enormous army casualties and conscription. In the end RCAF casualty numbers were not much lower than those in the army.⁴⁸ There was also a costly legacy from the pre-war years in effectively excluding French-speaking Canadians from the armed forces except for the few infantry battalions that welcomed francophones.⁴⁹ There was already a fierce anti-conscriptionist, anti-armament, anti-Empire climate in Quebec but the English-only armed forces compounded the problem.

In time Canada's war industries turned out prodigious quantities of equipment but they did so from a standing start. Stacey has called the puny industrial output at the start of the war the most fundamental, the most difficult and controversial problem Canada faced in 1939.⁵⁰ That makes it even more astonishing that the auto industry, for instance, produced more than 800,000 military transport vehicles.⁵¹ The John Inglis Company in Toronto eventually produced 186,000 Bren guns during the war but, except for government dithering, the weapon could have been ready by 1938 instead of March 1940.⁵² Ford Motor Company wanted to make aero engines for Britain

The Generals, 259; Randell Wakelam, "No Easy Thing: Senior Command in the Canadian Army, 1939–1945," *Canadian Military History* 20, no.1 (Winter 2011), 21–30; Doug Delaney, "Looking Back on Canadian Generalship in the Second World War," *Canadian Army Journal* 7, no.1 (Spring 2004), 13–22.

⁴⁸ The RCAF casualties are in: Historical Section RCAF, *The RCAF Overseas*, vol.3 (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1949), 565. In the end the air force casualties (including Canadians in the RAF) were 17,101 air force and in the army, 24,800; J.L. Granatstein and Desmond Morton, *Canada and the Two World Wars* (Toronto: Key Porter, 2003), 250. For the RCN, according to Veterans Affairs Canada, losses were 4,154.

⁴⁹ Jean Allard, *The Memoirs of General Jean V. Allard* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988); Richard Jones "Politics and Culture: The French Canadian Experience in the Second World War," in Sidney Aster, ed., *The Second World War as a National Experience* (Ottawa: Canadian Committee for the History of the Second World War, 1981), 81–90.

⁵⁰ Stacey, *Military Problems*, 125.

⁵¹ J.L. Granatstein, "Arming the Nation: Canada's Industrial War Effort 1939–1945," *Round Table on Foreign Policy and Defence* (Ottawa: Canadian Council of Chief Executives), 27 May 2005, 12.

⁵² David MacKenzie, "The Bren Gun Scandal and the Maclean Publishing Company's Investigation of Canadian Defence Contracts, 1938–1940," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 26, no.3 (1991): 140–162, esp.141. Ordering the Bren light machine gun had turned into a political scandal because, among other problems, there were no competitive bids. On shipbuilding for example, see Stacey, *Six Years of War*, 36.

before the war but the King government effectively killed the deal.⁵³ In the event, Canada did not make any aero engines through the entire war.

In short, the effects of pre-war neglect were pervasive and continued right to the end of the war.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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⁵³ James Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada: Appeasement and Rearmament* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 122; Norman Hillmer, "Defence and ideology; The Anglo-Canadian military 'Alliance' in the 1930's," *International Journal* XXIII (Summer 1978): 588-612.