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# **“A Question of Relevance” The Establishment of a Canadian Parachute Capability, 1942-1945**

**Bernd Horn**

**T**he great trouble with starting anything new,” argued Brigadier-General William Mitchell, “is to break away from the conservative policy of those who have gone before.”<sup>1</sup> His observation was born from his own experience as a result of the inertia which existed in the inter-war years. Not surprisingly, Canada did little during this period to ensure that it was capable of participating in a modern war. The vacuum of peace was insufficient to overcome the vacillation of military and political decision makers. It was only the stunning German victories of 1939-1940, which provided the catalyst for change and a template of what a modern army required.

Predictably, Canadian officers serving overseas in the cauldron of Europe, in May 1940, formed distinct impressions of the new techniques of warfare which had been showcased. The use of airborne forces was one such innovation but proposals to establish a Canadian parachute capability were quickly rejected. The senior military command could not visualize a role for these special troops. More important, there existed an explicit institutional hostility towards the concept. Conventional military minds spurned the distinct, special or unique, and paratroops were seen as a distraction to the serious business of building an army.

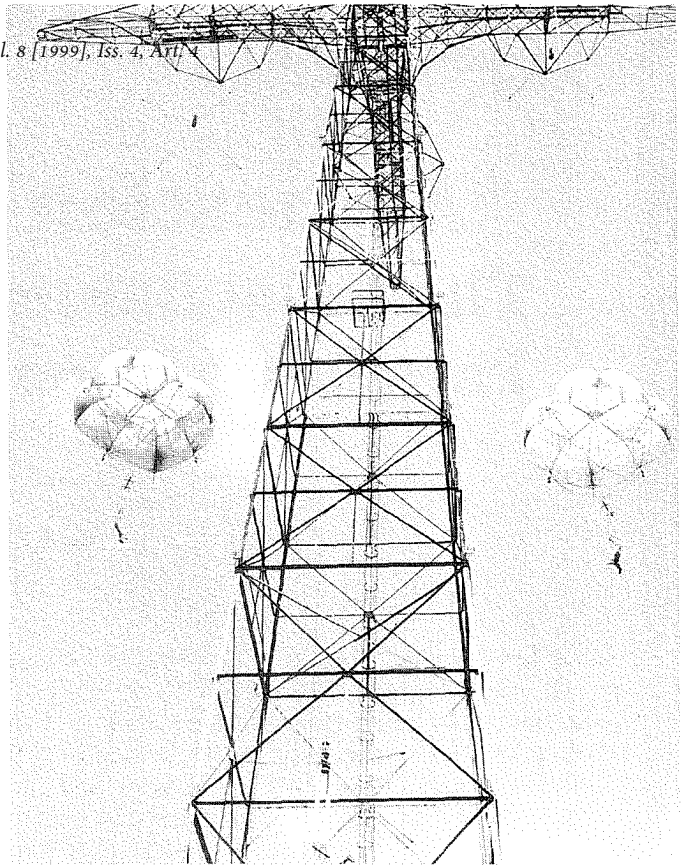
Nonetheless, the persistent efforts of Colonel E.L.M. Burns, greatly assisted by a growing American and British interest in airborne forces, eventually resulted in the organization of a modest Canadian parachute capability. The reason for this abrupt change is shrouded by inconsistencies. The relevance of a distinct Canadian airborne force was never credibly rationalized. The fact that at war's end it was

quickly dismantled provided silent testimony to its perceived utility.

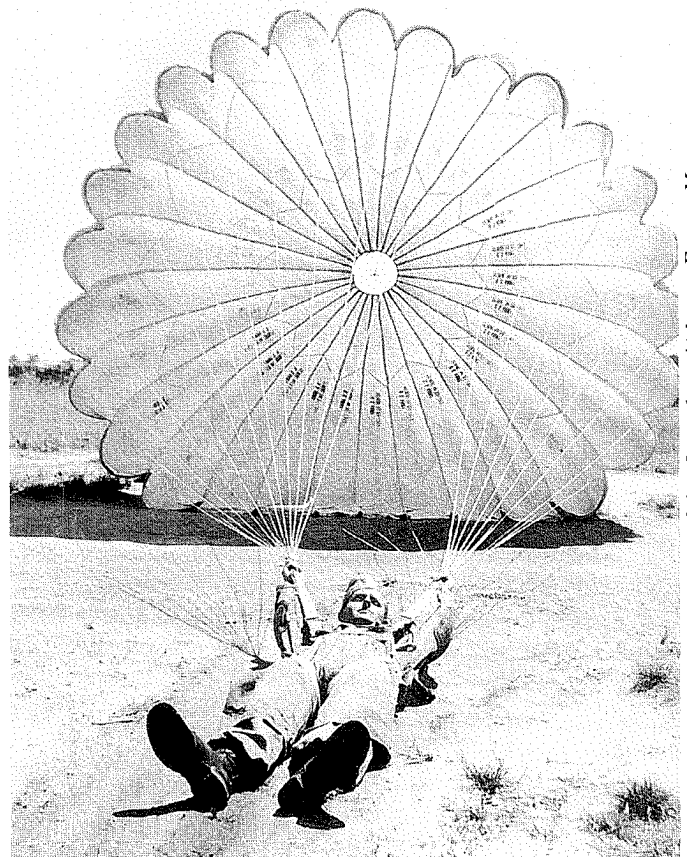
This was the reality of the Canadian airborne experience. Despite the actual performance and unrivalled reputation of the nation's paratroopers, they never gained the full acceptance of the military establishment. This became the legacy of Canada's airborne soldiers. Their existence ebbed and flowed on the basis of political expediency and powerful personalities. The failure to rationalize a realistic need for airborne forces, and develop a doctrine which would guide their employment, would remain a weakness which would be the root of their eventual destruction.

The Canadian indifference to parachute troops in the interwar period is not surprising. With the exception of Russian and later German experimentation, airborne ideas did not figure largely in the thinking of military commanders in Britain or the United States, much less Canada. However, this lethargy, which in England and in the United States was cloaked in a mantle of slow study and experimentation, was shattered by the chaos of events in Europe. British Air Chief Marshal Sir John Slessor recalled that the “bold and brutal” German airborne operations in Norway and the Low Countries, in the Spring of 1940, deeply impressed everyone, notably Prime Minister Winston Churchill.<sup>2</sup> These events became the catalyst for action.

As early as 6 June 1940, Churchill assailed his staff with proposals to develop a corps “of parachute troops on a scale of equal to five thousand.”<sup>3</sup> Winston Churchill, himself an accomplished adventurer, journalist and soldier,



**Early Training of Canadian Paratroopers:** (clockwise from top left): Aspiring paratroopers conduct static line descents. Note the "Riddel" football helmets and coveralls used for jumping; High tower training conducted to practice landings, Fort Benning, Georgia. Autumn 1942; A wind machine was used to simulate a parachutist being dragged upon landing due to an inflated canopy on a windy day; Mock-up of a aircraft fuselage used to train Canadian parachutists the proper exit drills, Fort Benning, Autumn 1942; Tower training used to practice exiting an aircraft.



Photos on this page courtesy of the Canadian Airborne Forces Museum

held a heroic and romantic image of war. His concept of conflict was irretrievably moulded during the South African War of 1899-1902. To Churchill, the offensive was all that mattered. He believed that audacity and willpower constituted the only sound approach to the conduct of war.<sup>4</sup>

Churchill became the stimulus for the establishment of paratroopers in the British Army. However, it was not an easy task. Lieutenant-General Frederick 'Boy' Browning, an alacritous advocate for the establishment of British airborne forces, recalled, "Very early we came to certain definite conclusions which we have kept before us ever since and for which we may rightly say we have fought many a stout battle against the doubters and unbelievers: it is always the same with anything new and there is nothing curious about that."<sup>5</sup>

The vehement resistance from the majority of Churchill's military commanders necessitated the Prime Minister's continual prodding for progress reports to ensure headway was being made. The opposition was initially so deep-rooted, that Churchill suggested to Anthony Eden, the British Secretary of State for War, that a case should be made of "one or two" of the reluctant officers to set an example for the others.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the airborne detractors met with limited success. They convinced the Prime Minister to be satisfied, in the beginning at any case, with a parachute corps of five hundred men instead of five thousand.<sup>7</sup>

Not surprisingly, the Canadian record is similar to the British. As already noted, prior to the commencement of hostilities no effort, either conceptually or in practise, was expended in Canada in the investigation of an airborne capability. The idea of developing a Canadian parachute force was first raised by Colonel E.L.M. Burns, in August 1940, upon his return from England.

Colonel Burns was recognized as a soldier of great ability and intellect, although one virtually without personality.<sup>8</sup> During the interwar years he was a prolific writer and actively participated in the academic debate on mechanization and the character of modern war. Despite his progressive ideas, Burns never contemplated the employment of paratroopers, or the use of air power to transport infantry tactically.<sup>9</sup> He did,



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*Following the success of German paratroopers during the attack on the Low Countries in May 1940, E.L.M. Burns became a major advocate for the creation of a Canadian parachute capability.*

however, share J.F.C. Fuller's notion of "motor guerillas" to conduct raids on the enemy's headquarters and lines of communications (the "brains and nerves" of an opponent's army).<sup>10</sup> Thus, he demonstrated early on an appreciation for the importance of "Deep Battle." This would prove important to his later support of parachute troops.

Colonel Burns' experience overseas, both on the Continent and in England, was instrumental to the eventual genesis of a Canadian airborne capability. His earlier writing demonstrated that he grasped the importance and utility of striking an enemy's command and logistical facilities. The successful utilization of German paratroopers in April-May 1940 now revealed a viable tool to accomplish this aim. Burns believed that "the successes obtained by the Germans with airborne troops seem to show that this will become a regular method of warfare."<sup>11</sup>

Of equal significance to Burns, in regard to the importance of the newly emerging airborne troops, was the subsequent parachute scare which erupted in the aftermath of the German aerial onslaught. The German Fallschirmjäger, by virtue of their stunning accomplishments, were quickly perceived by the military and general public as invincible. This created a wave of

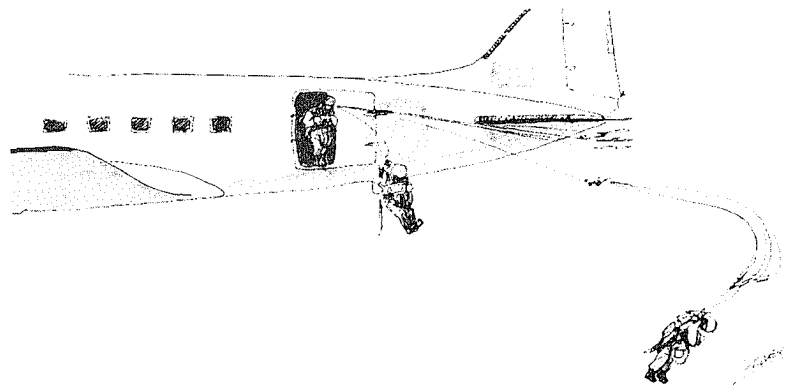


*Airborne soldiering was very physically demanding. Only 30 percent of those volunteering to become paratroopers were accepted. Of those who passed, a further 35 percent were lost during training.*



*Determined into battle. A paratrooper of 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion leaves the Drop Zone.*

**Sketches by  
Ted Zuber**



*A most irrevocable first step. Paratroopers of 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion exit a C-47 Dakota.*

paranoia which infected the still unoccupied territories in Europe, as well as in Britain. As the remnants of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and the 1st Canadian Division hastily retreated to England, the threat of an imminent invasion loomed large. "Invasion," conceded Burns in his memoirs, "seemed fearfully close in those days."<sup>12</sup> Inherent in that threat was the imminent spectre of German Fallschirmjäger dropping from the heavens.

Even the ever fiery and optimistic British Prime Minister was not immune to the wave of anxiety which swept through England. Winston Churchill estimated the expected scale of airborne attack at approximately 30,000 paratroopers.<sup>13</sup> In Britain, troop dispositions were tailored to counter the envisioned airborne invasion and vast amounts of scarce material was invested to this aim. The government adopted a policy in 1940 to safeguard the country by ordering all open spaces (meaning virtually every park and playing field) all over Britain to be seeded with long spiked poles, concrete blocks and other obstacles which would impede paratroopers.<sup>14</sup>

The Canadian Expeditionary Force in England, now tasked with the defence of the British Isles, was also very conscious of the parachute menace. Canada's Overseas Commander, Lieutenant-General A.G.L. McNaughton stated that "invasion was a real threat," and the Canadians were in essence, "a mobile reserve with a 360 degree front."<sup>15</sup> He affirmed that they may have to operate anywhere in Great Britain to meet seaborne or airborne attacks.

This chaotic and desperate environment deeply influenced Colonel Burns, when in July 1940, he returned to Canada at the direction of Major-General Crerar, who himself was recalled to take over the position of Chief of the General Staff (CGS). Burns was appointed Assistant Deputy CGS. The CGS tasked Burns with special assignments concerned with the organization and development of Canada's Army. An all out effort now commenced. "With the fall of France," recounted Burns in his memoirs, "the limits which had been imposed by the previous cautious policy of Mr. Mackenzie King's government were set aside, and the question now was: how much could we do within the limits of Canada's

manpower and political situation to build up and train and equip those formations needed for the task?"<sup>16</sup> Burns' fertile mind, enhanced by his recent experience in Europe and Britain, now set to work on modernizing an Army for the new method of warfare.

Colonel Burns wasted little time. He believed that parachute troops were "no longer just a 'stunt,'" but rather, because of their mobility, an important element of any modern army.<sup>17</sup> On 13 August 1940, he submitted his first proposal for the establishment of a Canadian airborne capability to Colonel J.C. Murchie, the Director of Military Operations in NDHQ. Murchie, dismissed the idea. He expressed the concern that "although the value of the parachute troops in certain situations was very great, the provision of such troops by Canada would be a project of doubtful value to the combined Empire war effort in view of the expenditure of time, money and equipment which would be involved."<sup>18</sup> Colonel Murchie further explained that any Canadian parachute units would likely be part of a UK Parachute Corps and as a result, be difficult to administer and more importantly, would be largely out of Canadian control during operations. He counselled that "if any additional commitments are accepted these should be limited to the formation of units to which Canadians are particularly adapted by reason of the nature of this country."<sup>19</sup>

The issue of national command remained an important one for Canadians during the Second World War. General McNaughton fought fiercely throughout his tenure to retain strict Canadian control. "We had to keep the command in our own hands," he insisted, "otherwise we would have had a succession of people coming in and the order and counter-order would have been similar to what we'd been through on Salisbury Plain in 1914."<sup>20</sup> McNaughton recalled the struggle to claim national control over the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) during the Great War. Those successful efforts transformed the CEF into a distinct national entity. Its achievements fuelled national pride and a sense of collective accomplishment. As a direct result, over time the Canadian Corps became enshrined in the minds of Canadians. McNaughton was intent on applying that hard earned lesson to the present conflict.<sup>21</sup>

Colonel Burns remained undaunted despite the initial rejection, as well as the larger issue of national command. He submitted a second memorandum to the CGS two weeks later. This time, Burns wisely reverted to a venerable Canadian approach when discussing a suggested increase to the nation's military capability. He cloaked his proposal in the mantle of home defence. He argued:

In the defence of Canada against raids or a serious attempt at invasion, they would be the quickest means of building up a front against an attacker, and also could harass his communications. We have often thought of the problem of preventing an enemy from establishing a base for supplying submarines in remote sections of the coast which could not easily be reached by land. If we had even a battalion of Paratroops who could be landed to counter-attack such bases, it would make their establishment very much more difficult for an enemy; it would probably be necessary for him to send about a brigade of troops for land defences.<sup>22</sup>

Burns further attempted to sweeten the idea by emphasizing the stimulating effect that parachute training would have on the morale of the public and the armed services.<sup>23</sup> The year 1940 was a very low period for the Allies. Defeats, retreats and withdrawals, seemed to be all there was. Perhaps, Burns thought, the training of a corps of aggressive and inherently offensive-minded paratroopers, could be a potential tonic to the war effort.

General Crerar, although in apparent philosophical agreement with the concept of creating an airborne force, replied, "It is not a project of importance to the winning of the war just now."<sup>24</sup> He directed that the matter be set aside and brought forward to his attention in three months time. Colonel Burns faithfully staffed yet another paper to the Chief of the General Staff on 12 November 1940. He reiterated the points from his earlier submissions and also emphasized the concept of paratroops in the form of an enhanced military capability. He asserted, "airborne troops are merely the most mobile form of land forces, and the fact that some of them land by parachute is due to the characteristics of the aeroplane."<sup>25</sup>

Significantly, in an attempt to win support for his proposal, he linked his scheme to a

distinctly national orientation and theme. He explained that "Canada is often claimed to be a country essentially adapted to air transport – witness development of the Northland." Therefore, "training air-borne troops," he argued, "would be a development in line with the emphasis on air training generally."<sup>26</sup> In this vein, he also suggested, that Canada might make a contribution in respect to the parachute training which was then being conducted in England.<sup>27</sup>

Regardless of the varied approaches Colonel Burns used to sell his plan for a Canadian parachute capability, one key idea, which he felt was central to understanding the airborne concept, was repeatedly stressed. "We hope to turn to the offensive against Germany some day," explained Burns, "and it appears that full advantage must be taken of all forms of mobility in carrying out operations."<sup>28</sup> Unquestionably, to Burns, paratroopers represented mobility and offensive power. It also personified a modern army. He argued passionately that airborne forces "would be a step towards a 'quality' army, and would show that we were actually doing something to create a force with offensive capabilities."<sup>29</sup>

At this juncture, further exploration of the concept was pursued. Crerar directed that the views of both the War Office (UK) and the Overseas Commander (McNaughton) be solicited. The War Office promptly reported that parachute troops were in fact being organized and that one 'special service battalion' was undergoing active training. The British concept of employment was explained as filling the role of Light Cavalry to "seize bridge crossings, defiles and aerodromes well in advance of the slower-moving main body of the army."<sup>30</sup> Lieutenant-General McNaughton felt that the use of airborne troops had distinct possibilities. Moreover, he favoured the idea that Canada "should commence the organization and training of both parachute and glider-borne troops."<sup>31</sup> However, he stated that he would acquiesce to Major-General Crerar's decision. Crerar in turn, proclaimed that he was "agreeable to a proportion (say a platoon) in each infantry battalion being trained in this work, [parachuting] [but] he is not in favour of training special airborne units unless the War Office make specific requests for them, which is unlikely."<sup>32</sup> As a consequence no further action was undertaken.



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In sum, Colonel Burns' aspirations at establishing a Canadian airborne capability were fraught with impediments. His attempts at marketing, and later repackaging, the need and utility of parachute troops met limited success. The greatest obstacle was the failure to convince the decision makers that a pervasive role, which was worthy of warranting the expenditure of scarce resources, existed. As a result, in late 1940, the concept of an airborne force underwent a hiatus for the next eight months. It was not until the early part of August 1941, after Colonel Burns was promoted and sent overseas, that the idea resurfaced in the faceless tomb of National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ). The re-emergence was inevitably linked to an Allied change of heart. The startling success of the German Fallschirmjäger, in their conquest of the Mediterranean island of Crete, prompted the British to adopt a more ambitious programme for airborne forces. An update from the War Office (UK) stated that a force of 2,500 parachutists was to be formed and it even implied that this number might be increased to a division-sized organization.<sup>33</sup>

The renewed attempt, however, was once again suppressed by the latent enmity to



Photo by C.H. Richer. NAC PA 115016

**Left:** The bicycle was considered one means of overcoming the airborne's Achilles' heel, namely mobility. Pictured is Pte. Tom Phelan at the reinforcement camp of 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion as he recovers from wounds suffered on 16 June 1944 at le Mesnil, France.

**Above:** Officers of 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, Greven, Germany, 4 April 1945. (l. to r.): Lt. W.A. Jenkins, Capt. P.G. Costigan, Lts. G.A. Menn, G.J. Fisher, A.O. Tucker.

specialized troops who were perceived as lacking a credible role. General McNaughton, who left a previous impression, from the meeting in December 1940, that he was actually inclined to support airborne forces, now surprised many. In response to the latest submission he declared, "I do not advocate the establishment of any separate parachute troops in the Canadian Forces."<sup>34</sup> In McNaughton's view there was only two reasons which justified the creation of a special airborne force. The first was the probability of early and continued employment in a special role, and the second was the need for specialized training on lines greatly different from regular units.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the perfunctory rejection by the Canadian Overseas Commander, the renewed airborne effort lingered. Amazingly, the reason for the continued interest was not driven by the Army, but rather the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). In October 1941, the RCAF began to query National Headquarters in Ottawa in regard to the policy being considered in respect to the establishment of parachute troops. Furthermore, the Air Force staff officers relayed an offer from the Royal Air Force to provide instructors and equipment to assist the Army in the event they wished to proceed with training airborne forces.<sup>36</sup>



As no definitive answer was forthcoming, the RCAF continued to forward a stream of messages requesting an update on the Army's "airborne" policy. In January 1942, Major-General Maurice Pope, the Vice Chief of the General Staff (VCGS), directed that the effort be indefinitely deferred because the home army provided no scope for the employment of parachute troops.<sup>37</sup> An Appreciation on Air Landing Troops conducted the same month reinforced Pope's assertion. It declared that "parachute troops will not be considered except in passing. Our operations at home are largely static (coast defence), and, as a consequence, do not provide scope for the employment of parachute troops."<sup>38</sup> This belief became institutionally entrenched. The annual Army Programmes, for the period 1940 to 1944, included no mention of airborne troops. More important, in the discussion of forces for the defence of Canada, absolutely no reference was ever made to the employment of, or the requirement for, paratroopers.<sup>39</sup>

Remarkably, despite the repetitive assertions that parachute troops were of limited relevance to the Canadian Army, a letter from Canadian Military Headquarters (CMHQ) in mid-February 1942 stated that, "the policy to be adopted by the Canadian Army with regard to paratroop training is [still] under consideration by NDHQ at the moment. According to our latest information no decision was to be given until this matter had been thoroughly discussed with Lt.-General McNaughton."<sup>40</sup> Apparently, the continued efforts of the Royal Canadian Air Force kept the issue of airborne troops alive. It was not lost on the Air Force that paratroopers required aircraft. And more aircraft meant an expanded RCAF organization and role.

Although the issue continued to simmer, little evident headway was made. In fact, the continuing resistance to establishing a distinct Canadian airborne capability was reinforced by none other than the Minister of National Defence (MND) in the spring of 1942. The Honourable J.L. Ralston explained in the House of Commons that "the formation of an actual paratroop unit is not being gone ahead with at the present moment, but rather the training of men so that they can be used as paratroops when the time comes, with additional training to be done with aircraft."<sup>41</sup> The policy seemed consistent. So too was the

continuing non-action in regard to the "training of men" for paratroop employment.

However, two months later the dyke broke. In early June, Lieutenant-Colonel R.H. Keebler, from the Directorate of Military Training, NDHQ, was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, to report on the state of parachute training in the United States. Coincident with the submission of his final report, were discussions with Air Vice Marshal Steadman of the RCAF, who had just returned from a visit with the 6th (UK) Airborne Division. As a result, Major-General Murchie, reversed his earlier position and forwarded a proposal to the Minister of National Defence for nothing less than the organization of a parachute battalion.<sup>42</sup>

Approval was not long in coming. The War Cabinet Committee gave its blessing on Canada Day 1942. Astoundingly, the purpose of the unit was conferred as home defence, specifically, "to provide a means of recapture of aerodromes or re-enforcements of remote localities by air-borne troops."<sup>43</sup> The apparent inconsistency seemed to go unnoticed. For years the rationale given for the rejection of a distinct Canadian airborne capability was based on its lack of relevance in regard to the Home Army. Suddenly, at the same time as the general strategic situation was beginning to improve for the Allies, it was professed that "the Army has a definite requirement to train one battalion of 600 paratroops by 1st January 1943."<sup>44</sup> A mere month later, an assessment on the Army requirement for gliders stated that a demand did exist for paratroopers, but only one company in strength.<sup>45</sup> Astoundingly, by early December 1942, the demand changed again. Now the Directorate of Military Operations and Plans (DMO & P) envisioned the need of approximately 1,000 personnel for airborne operations in Canada, exclusive of the newly designated 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Parachute Battalion.<sup>46</sup>

The coherence of military thought is questionable. During the dark days of the war, when Britain was at its weakest, when the Commonwealth stood alone against the Axis juggernaut, and when Canada had little in the way of defensive forces, the mobility and rapid reaction capability of airborne troops was dismissed as irrelevant for use in Canada. A few

*Lieutenant-Colonel Fraser Eadie inspecting "C" Company, 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, Kolkhagen, 24 April 1945.*

years later, when the tide of the war shifted in favour of the Allies, a decision was taken to develop airborne forces, incredibly for a home defence role.

The key to understanding the paradoxical approach taken to the concept of a Canadian airborne capability is not found in the "officially" stated role. One must look beyond the rhetoric and words. There was little conviction, either militarily or politically, that Canada faced a serious threat to its security. The home defence role for the parachute force was used merely to provide an acceptable rationale to convince dubious military and political decision makers. Fraser Eadie, who became the last Commanding Officer (CO) of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, affirmed that there was consistent opposition to the idea of a Canadian airborne element. He asserted that the Minister of National Defence finally agreed to the concept on the basis that the force was designated for home defence.<sup>47</sup>

Despite the clear sales pitch, the definitive "raison d'être" was far from transparent. There was never any question that the type of soldier required for parachute training was the aggressive individual who was anxious to serve overseas. In fact, the acceptance of National Resources Mobilization Act (NRMA) volunteers, for the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, became contingent on the respective individuals first joining the 'Active Force.'<sup>48</sup> This cleared the "potential obstacle" of overseas service.

Further evidence of the turbid state of affairs was given in early December in a note to the CGS. In this correspondence his Deputy insisted, "I do not consider that it is feasible at present to decide the ultimate role of the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion."<sup>49</sup> Instead, he suggested that the unit continue its training, which was not expected to be completed prior to the end of March 1943, at the earliest. Not surprisingly, even before the newly formed parachute unit was deemed fit for active service, overtures were made to the War Office (UK) for its inclusion in a British airborne formation. Fraser Eadie, the former paratroop commander, recalled a telephone conversation during this period with Major Jeff Nicklin, the



Photo by C.H. Richer. NAC PAI 14745

Battalion's Deputy Commanding Officer. Nicklin confided that neither the Canadian government, nor the Field Commanders in England, had any idea what to do with the paratroopers and as a result, they were being offered up to the British.<sup>50</sup> On 18 March 1943, General Paget welcomed the offer and stated the battalion could be included in the establishment of a second British airborne division which was forming.<sup>51</sup>

It became apparent that the issue of national control was a rather "hit and miss" notion in regard to a Canadian parachute unit. The latest turn in events also underscored another theme. Namely, in Canada, the ultimate aim was never to develop the airborne capability for use in the country's defence. That was merely a sop to placate the nay-sayers. The advocates wanted to use it in the active theatres of Europe. Indeed, airborne forces had become a symbol of modern warfare. Moreover, they represented the cutting-edge of offensive action. The British, as a result of their study of German Fallschirmjäger, viewed parachute troops as "a highly mobile force of shock troops which can be projected at short notice into an enemy area which might otherwise consider itself immune from attack." They saw the airborne weapon solely in terms of the offense.<sup>52</sup>

The emphasis on the "offensive" seemingly struck a chord with the Canadians. Colonel Burns' original argument was finally accepted. It is not coincidental that the decision to adopt a

paratroop unit came at the same time that both the Americans and British were overwhelmingly committed to the large scale offensive use of airborne forces. The British authorized the establishment of an Airborne Division in November 1941. The Americans converted the 82nd Motorized Infantry Division to the airborne role on 26 June 1942.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the airborne arm took on a public image of herculean proportion. The change in thinking was clearly reflected in the U.S. War Department's 1942 Strategy Book which stated:

The Use of Parachutists...Nowadays one cannot possibly hope to succeed in landing operations unless one can be assured of the cooperation of parachutists on a scale hitherto undreamed of. In fact, only the parachutist will be able to take enemy territory from the rear, thus preventing destruction of the attacking forces by artillery fire and enabling them to get a foothold on the coast...25,000 men set down in advance at every important point of attack should be able to do the work, especially if it proves possible to get them assembled. They must obviously be regarded as the pivot of success of the entire operation.<sup>54</sup>

An element of the Canadian military wanted to ensure they were part of the neophyte club. An eloquent War Diary entry belies the undercurrent of motive present. It elucidated, "We members of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, are well aware of our unique position as a newly born unit in a new phase of warfare. We are therefore, confident of our success and trust that we will be given the opportunity to prove our value."<sup>55</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel G.F.P. Bradbrooke, the first Commanding Officer of the unit, clearly explained his understanding of his battalion's purpose. He declared, "The paratroopers are the tip of the spear. They must expect to go in first, to penetrate behind enemy lines and to fight in isolated positions."<sup>56</sup> To the military community, being a modern offensive minded army meant, rightly or wrongly, the possession of paratroops. Canada was now in the game.

By March of 1943, Canada possessed a battalion of highly motivated and trained paratroopers, officially described as a "corps elite."<sup>57</sup> The spectre of actually employing them now became the issue. However, their official "raison d'être," home defence, as the critics had always maintained, was not a requirement. As a

result, even before the battalion completed its collective training, or was declared operationally ready, it was not only offered up to the British, but was also warned off for overseas duty. Despite the unit's imminent departure, it was still estimated that the paratroopers would need a further two months' training in the United Kingdom before the unit was fit for active service. This sequence of events further underscored the feebleness of the "airborne for home defence" role. But there were not too many who made the connection in wartime.

If the rationale to justify the establishment of a parachute unit was questionable, the end-product certainly was not. During the war the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Parachute Battalion fought valiantly in the Normandy Campaign, the Crossing of the Rhine, and during the pursuit of enemy forces in Northwest Europe. By war's end, the battalion had earned a proud and remarkable reputation whose legacy would challenge Canada's future paratroopers and imbue them with a special pride. The Battalion never failed to complete an assigned mission, nor did it ever lose or surrender an objective once taken. The Canadian paratroopers were among the first Allied soldiers to land in occupied Europe and the only Canadians to have participated in the 'Battle of the Bulge' in 1944-45, in the Ardennes. Additionally, by the end of the war they had advanced deeper into Germany than any other Canadian unit.

The unit's exemplary performance did little to guarantee its future. With the end of hostilities came the requirement for demobilization and the dilemma of deciding on a drastically scaled down peacetime force structure. The fate of the paratroopers was not difficult to predict. Once the paratroops had been 'transferred' to the British, they were for all intensive purposes abandoned by Canada. Lieutenant Ken Arril recollected, "we called ourselves the forgotten battalion."<sup>58</sup> Sergeant Art Stammers noted that the "Canadian Army forgot we existed."<sup>59</sup> The paratroopers at large felt no link with their national army and received no visits from its Commanders. Lieutenant-Colonel Fraser Eadie plaintively stated that "Canada had forsaken us for everything but pay and clothing."<sup>60</sup> The paratroopers were never fully integrated with the national army. In sum, they were orphans.

Once peace broke out, the enigmatic debate over a Canadian airborne capability began anew. The first indication was not promising. Beginning in May 1945 no training was conducted at the parachute training centre since Army Headquarters anticipated no requirement for airborne forces in the post-war army.<sup>61</sup> In the following months it became apparent that the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion was in fact designated for disbandment. Its existence was prolonged only long enough to serve as an administrative tool to process the orderly release of those unit members who did not sign on to serve in the Canadian Army Pacific Force.<sup>62</sup> The unit was officially disbanded 30 September 1945.<sup>63</sup> Most of its members took their release and rejoined the civilian world. For the paratroopers who remained in the Active Force, the question of continuing airborne service was anything but bright.

The argument in regard to the relevance of an airborne capability in Canada had returned to its original position. Namely, there was no direct threat to Canada. Therefore, there was no need for specialized paratroops. A debt conscious government was aware that the war-weary public held little sympathy for continued defence expenditures or large forces. As a result, it was decided to establish an Interim Force for a two year period. This allowed the Department of Defence time to carefully craft the military that the government thought was sufficient to fulfill the nation's new peacetime requirements.

Paratroopers were not part of that vision. The cessation of parachute training at Shilo and the disbandment of the only existing airborne battalion were clear signals. One glimmer of hope lay in the proposed 'Order of Battle' for the Post War Militia (Reserve Army) in June 1945. For planning purposes it included the possibility of a parachute unit being perpetuated in the form of a reserve infantry battalion, although no unit was specifically designated.<sup>64</sup> However, this thread was tenuous. Lieutenant-Colonel Fraser Eadie, now in the capacity of a Reserve Force officer, actively pressed for such a commitment. He took his case to Major-General Church Mann, the VCDS, whom he had known during the war in 7 Brigade Headquarters. Eadie pressed Mann for the conversion to airborne status of his present unit, the Winnipeg Light Infantry. The VCDS' response was brutally frank. He stated

that there was "no use for airborne" and went so far as to suggest that Eadie "was living in the past."<sup>65</sup>

This was not a unique outlook. The post-war army was to be anything but extravagant. Mann's sentiments were also representative of an institution which was averse to the idea of 'elite' or 'special' troops. Furthermore, the military establishment failed to accept the premise that there was a credible and pervasive role which only the paratroopers could fill. This would become the legacy of the nation's airborne forces. Their fortunes would rise and fall like the waters of a turbulent river, dependent on political expediency and the support, or derision, of key personalities. Nonetheless, ultimately it would always become a question of relevance.

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