



Partners for Victory

Canada and the United Kingdom in World War II



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Cover page:

Top: Typhoons from a RCAF fighter squadron getting ready to take off, Netherlands, April 2, 1945. National Defence Image Library, PL 42816.

Second from top: Canadian soldiers during battle drill, England, 1942. Library and Archives Canada, PA-132456.

Second from bottom: Town class destroyers and Flower class corvettes of Royal Navy and Royal Canadian Navy alongside Jetty No. 4, HMC Dockyard, Halifax, Nova Scotia, October 16, 1942. Photo: Jackson George Kempster, Library and Archives Canada, PA-106063.

Bottom: Liberation, Netherlands, 1945.
Photo: Grant, Library and Archives Canada, PA-136176.

Opposite: Toronto Scottish Regiment marching through the streets of London on their way to guard duty at Buckingham Palace, April 20, 1940. Imperial War Museum, London, IWM FX 4503.



Canada and the United Kingdom have a long and distinguished history of military co-operation. Their armed forces have fought shoulder to shoulder in battlefields as diverse as Belgium, Korea and South Africa, and the two countries have made enormous sacrifices to bring peace and stability to many areas of the world.

But in the history of relations between Canada and the United Kingdom, no conflict exacted more hardship or forged deeper bonds than the long, bitter struggle in Europe between 1939 and 1945. For those who lived through that war – both in Canada and the UK – the Allied victory on May 8, 1945, was unquestionably their ‘finest hour’.



Canadian recruitment poster, circa 1940.
Artist: Surrey, Imperial War Museum, London,
IWM PST 8242.

Canada declares war on Germany

World War II began with the United Kingdom and France declaring war on Germany on September 3, 1939. From the beginning, Canada was at Britain's side: four days after the British declaration, Canada's Parliament met in special session to debate the situation in Europe. On September 9, it announced its support for Britain and France, and a day later declared war on Germany. Only 21 years after the end of the World War I, Canada had once again come to the aid of Britain and was committed to a long, hard struggle in Europe.

The country was ill-prepared for conflict, however. At the outbreak of war, Canada's army numbered fewer than 4,200 regulars, augmented by 51,000 partly trained reservists, in units lacking everything from proper uniforms to advanced weapons. The story at the other two services was not much different. The Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) counted reserve and regular personnel totalling just over 4,000 – only 235 of whom were pilots. In addition, the RCAF was initially forced to rely on civilian airports for transportation and training – while it built up its own bases – and the fleet was a mix of aircraft that was only partly modernised. The Royal Canadian Navy, with 1,674 ratings and 145 officers, commanded 15 ships, including six destroyers, five small minesweepers and two training ships. Although its ships were modern, this force was a far cry from what it would be at the end of the war, when Canada's navy stood as the fourth largest



in the world, with 373 fighting ships and 113,000 enlisted personnel.

Although just beginning to crank up its military machine, Canada moved quickly to provide more than just moral support to its ally. On December 10, 1939, the First Canadian Infantry Division sailed for the United Kingdom, to be followed in the summer of 1940 by the Second Canadian Infantry Division. Together they formed the First Canadian Corps, under Major-General Andrew McNaughton. Canada also helped create the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, a programme that would earn Canada the nickname 'The Aerodrome of Democracy'; and it began to marshal its impressive industrial and agricultural resources to help sustain Britain through six long years of hardship and peril.



Battle of the Atlantic

Canada's first major battle of the war was the Battle of the Atlantic, which lasted almost six years. For Winston Churchill this was the most important front of the entire war. Without the military, industrial and agricultural supplies provided by Canada and the United States, Britain would have succumbed to the Nazis. Indeed, victory in the war was predicated on victory in the Atlantic.

Even before the declaration of war, the British Admiralty and the Royal Canadian Navy organised merchant navy convoys to protect shipping lanes in the Atlantic. However, the outbreak of hostilities spurred

Top: Canadian troops boarding a train, Vancouver, British Columbia, June 11, 1939. Photo: unknown, Imperial War Museum, London, IWM HN 92552.

Bottom: Sailors aboard Canadian destroyer Assiniboine fighting a fire onboard after ramming and sinking a German U-Boat, 1942, Photo: AP, Imperial War Museum, London, IWM 13155C.



Top: Depth charge explosions astern of HMCS Saguenay, ca. 1940. Photo: unknown, Library and Archives Canada, PA-116840.

Bottom: Canadian ships bring Canadian supplies for Britain, Canadian Merchant Navy, April 1942. Photo: unknown, Imperial War Museum, London, IWM CP 4551C.

the Canadian government to greater action: it ordered the construction of 90 corvettes and minesweepers from Canadian shipyards, bought destroyers and merchant ships from Great Britain, and built new airfields in Nova Scotia to meet the menace of the German U-boats.

With the collapse of France in June 1940, the U-boat threat escalated dramatically. The German navy gained access to French ports, and Britain was forced to redeploy many of its ships to protect its own coast. This double blow to the Allies led to a vast increase in the shipping tonnage sunk by Germany, and in response Canada and Britain stepped up their efforts to master the Atlantic. In 1942, the British Admiralty asked the Canadian navy to provide convoy protection for the whole western half of the North Atlantic. By this point, the United States of America had also joined the war, and together the three Allies waged an increasingly effective struggle to eliminate the German navy from the North Atlantic. In May 1943, Canadian, British and American ships sank no less than 33 U-boats, and by the summer of that year the monthly tonnage of merchant shipping lost in the Atlantic dropped to under 100,000. While U-boat attacks would continue until the last days of the war, it was clear that the worst was over. The Allies had effectively won the Battle of the Atlantic and, in doing so, had ensured Britain's survival.

Lessons learned at Dieppe

While Britain remained on the defensive until the victory of El Alamein in November



Aftermath of Dieppe Raid, France, 1942.
Photo: unknown, Library and Archives Canada,
C-014160.

1942, the Allies had long planned for the day when they would take the offensive. The desperate situation of the Soviet Union on the eastern front demanded that they open up a second theatre in the west as soon as possible. It was clear that northern Europe would be the location of this new battleground, but it was equally clear that the challenge of landing a massive invasion force across open water and establishing a bridgehead in occupied Europe would be unprecedented. The first test of Allied capabilities came at Dieppe.

The raid on Dieppe is one of the best-known episodes in Canadian military history. On August 19, 1942, 4,963 men from the Second Canadian Division spearheaded an assault on this northern French town. Together with 1,005 British commandos, the Canadians mounted what was to be a purely exploratory raid. It was meant to be over in a matter of hours, with the force withdrawing once it had successfully landed and destroyed a number of Nazi installations. In reality, the raid was a complete failure that resulted in several thousand casualties and prisoners of war.

The plan was to have the attacking force launch a full frontal assault against a heavily fortified position, on a beach dominated by steep cliffs. However, it had been decided not to bomb the area by air during the night before, in order to preserve the element of surprise. The result was a massacre for the Canadians. Bad luck, poor planning and strong German defences conspired to wreak havoc on the whole enterprise. Landing craft drifted to the wrong disembarkation points,



Burial Service, Italy, 1943, Photo: Whitcombe. Library and Archives Canada, PA-167913.

entire platoons were wiped out as soon as they touched ground, and tanks plunged into the water or got bogged down on the beach. At 11am the order was given to evacuate, and by 1pm it was impossible for the ships to reach any of the men still left on the beach. Out of some 6,000 men participating in the raid, 3,367 were left behind – dead or soon to be prisoner. This number included 2,752 Canadians.

In retrospect, the raid on Dieppe looked foolhardy in the extreme. Yet, at the time, success appeared possible, and the failure of the raid forced the Allies to completely rethink their approach to an overseas invasion. Allied planners needed to know how the newly designed landing craft would perform in amphibious operations; how communications would be affected by the complex combination of sea, air and land forces involved in a landing; and how troops and commanding officers would respond to rapidly changing battle conditions.

The Dieppe raid answered many of these technical and strategic questions. Much of the uncertainty that had loomed over the heads of Allied planners was now lifted – and, more significantly, the raid shifted the focus away from fortified seaports and toward flat beaches as the desired landing ground. Thus the Canadian sacrifice was not in vain. Armed with the knowledge gained from failure, the Allies were now better equipped than ever to achieve success in the coming invasion of Europe.

The Italian Campaign

Canadian troops were eager to avenge the fiasco of Dieppe, and they were soon to be given their chance. At the Quebec Conference in August 1943, Allied strategists hammered out the final details of the invasion of Italy. This campaign was a logical extension of the victory in North Africa and the conquest of Sicily, and its goal was to hold down German forces that would otherwise be deployed on the Soviet front and the anticipated battleground of northwestern Europe.

The Allied invasion began on September 3, 1943. The Italian government surrendered less than a week later, and in response German troops took over the country. It soon became clear that the Germans were prepared for a massive battle, as they poured reinforcements into southern Italy and strengthened defences around Rome.

Troops of the First Canadian Division joined American, British and other Allied forces for the campaign. The initial fighting went well, and by September 21 the Allies had established an uninterrupted front across the entire Italian peninsula in the south. Further advances were made in October, but German resistance then began to stiffen. Progress was slow in the subsequent months, as the Allies struggled through rough terrain and heavy winter rains. By the middle of December, the Canadians had reached the town of Ortona, which was to be the scene of some of the bitterest fighting encountered by Canada. After eight days of urban warfare, the Canadians pushed the



Personnel of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles and Regina Rifles as well as tanks of the 1st Hussars. Courseulles-sur-Mer, June 6, 1944. Photo: Ken Bell, Library and Archives Canada, PA-132468.

Germans out and continued on their slow march north.

In early 1944, new Canadian units reached Italy, and together with the existing troops they formed the First Canadian Corps, as part of General Montgomery's Eighth Army. Over the next year, Canadian troops took part in many of the great battles of the Italian campaign, attacking the Gustav and the Adolf Hitler lines, freeing Florence and breaking through the Gothic Line into the industrial heartland of northern Italy. The entire campaign proved to be long and difficult, and it would drag on into the spring of 1945. The Canadians suffered almost 25,000 casualties, and a further 1,000 were taken prisoner. But those who survived to fight another day had gained valuable combat experience: Canadian troops transferred to northern Europe for the final strike against Nazism proved themselves to be hardened fighters.

D-Day: Canadians reach furthest inland

The beginning of the end for the Third Reich came on June 6, 1944. On that day – forever after known as D-Day – the Allied forces launched the biggest armada in history. Some 6,000 ships, supported by massive fleets of bombers and fighters, crossed the English Channel by night and appeared at daybreak on the coast of northern France. Surprise was of the essence – and it was achieved through elaborate deception measures that successfully masked the Allied intent. Following midnight landings by British, Canadian and American parachute battalions, and supported by



Troops of the Nova Scotia Highlanders and the Highland Light Infantry of Canada landing at Bernières-sur-Mer. Disembarking from LCI of the Canadian Landing Craft Infantry (Large) Flotilla, of either 260th, 262nd, or 264th, Bernières-sur-mer, June 6, 1944. Photo: Gilbert Alexander Milne, Library and Archives Canada, PA-116533.



Liberation, Netherlands, 1945. Photo: Grant, Library and Archives Canada, PA-136176.

devastating bombardments from the air and sea, the first seaborne troops began to disembark on the beaches of Normandy at about 6:30 a.m. Freedom was returning to Europe.

The landing beaches had been divided into five sectors, code-named Omaha, Utah, Gold, Sword and Juno. The first two were the objective of the United States First Army, while the latter three were the landing ground for the British Second Army. Juno beach had been assigned to the Canadian landing force, which comprised the Third Canadian Infantry Division and the Second Armoured Brigade. Their task was to establish an eight-kilometre-long bridgehead flanked by the Third British Infantry Division on one side and the 50th British Division on the other.

The Allies quickly overcame German defences on all the beaches save Omaha, where the Americans faced stiff resistance and difficult terrain. By afternoon, however, even Omaha had been penetrated, and the landing troops pressed on to their assigned targets inland. For the Canadians, this was the airfield at Carpiquet, 18 kilometres from the sea.

None of the Allied forces reached their targets that day, and the initial bridgehead was thinner than intended and in some places incomplete. Nonetheless, the operation was a success. The Allies had established a foothold in northern Europe from which they would never be dislodged. Canadians took special pride in the fact that their soldiers penetrated further inland than those of any of their Allies, a signal achievement that



Wireless operator Private MacKeays relays news of end of hostilities to Bren carrier driver Private Hugh McErlain and group of Seaforth Highlanders of Canadian D Company, Netherlands, May 5, 1945. Photo: Michael M. Dean, Library and Archives Canada, PA-134450.

erased the humiliation of Dieppe some two years earlier. They formed part of a spearhead of 150,000 troops who would push the Germans further inland and allow reinforcements to land safely on the beaches in preparation for the final drive for Berlin.

Northern Europe: Allies fight side by side

With troops and supplies pouring into Normandy by the hour, the Allies steadily strengthened their positions over the subsequent weeks. Canadian and British troops fought side by side in the area around Caen, absorbing heavy German counterattacks. Their strategic role was to hold down as many German divisions as possible in anticipation of an American breakout further west.

The breakout finally came toward the end of July 1944. The Americans quickly penetrated German lines and began the push toward Paris. Rather than adopting a defensive retreat, the Germans launched an ill-conceived attack that left them badly exposed. By the second week of August, almost 100,000 German troops were concentrated in a narrow pocket that became known as the Falaise Gap. The Canadian First Army rushed to close the gap – linking up with their American allies – and engaged in some of the fiercest fighting of the war. They achieved their goal on August 19, in the process capturing some 40,000 prisoners and dealing a significant blow to the enemy.

With Falaise marking the end of the Normandy campaign, Canadian and British



Canadians homeward bound on the Ile de France leaving from Southampton, England. Photo: unknown, Imperial War Museum, London, HN 92551.

forces marched toward the Netherlands. Here their target was the Scheldt River, control of which was critical in permitting supplies to reach the Allies at Antwerp as they moved further away from the recently liberated ports of France. In a month-long campaign, the Canadian First Army wrested control of the Scheldt from the Germans, and on November 28, 1944, Antwerp received its first supply shipment. Appropriately, the ship that headed the arriving convoy was Canadian, the Fort Cataract.

The next few months were quiet ones for Canadian troops, but in early February the Canadian First Army was called into action for the Battle of the Rhineland and the liberation of the Netherlands. At this point, opposition was steadily weakening, and by early April most of Holland had been freed. Canadian and British troops then moved into northern Germany. With the Wehrmacht crumbling rapidly, the Allies knew that victory was just weeks away. On the evening of May 4, they heard the announcement they had all been waiting for: Germany had surrendered.

VE Day: Canada remembers

Final victory in Europe was declared on May 8, 1945. Canada took great pride in the role it had played in bringing this day about: over a million Canadians had served in the military, the country had levied five army divisions and built a formidable navy and air force, and from sea to sea Canadians had sacrificed for victory.

More than 45,000 Canadian service men and women died during the conflict.

Today, Canada remembers and honours those who fought to ensure the rebirth of democracy in Europe. It also treasures the strong links forged with the United Kingdom in its time of greatest crisis. These links continue to bind the two countries together, and serve to remind their citizens of the common values and aspirations that make their alliance such an enduring one in the modern world.



Demobilized army personnel awaiting interviews with rehabilitation counsellors, Toronto, Ontario, 1944. From left: Privates E. Robinson, D. Owens, Trooper J. A. Lenartowicz, Sergeant E.J. O'Keefe 1944. Photo: Ronny Jacques, Library and Archives Canada, C-049434.



Henderson, Keith (Date of birth - Date of death if applicable), Bomber Officer from Nova Scotia, circa 1940, oil on canvas, size, Canadian War Museum