

Canada and the Second World War  
**Valour Remembered**  
1939-1945

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## **Canada and the Second World War 1939-1945**

### **Introduction**

The Second World War lasted six terrible years and left a legacy of death and destruction. It was truly a world war encircling the globe from the Atlantic to the Pacific and touching the far reaches of the Arctic. Nor was it confined to soldiers and battlefields, for new weapons of destruction made war possible on the land, in the air, and beneath the seas, and brought death and suffering indiscriminately to the young and the old, to their homes and their hearts.

A few pages are not sufficient for a full account of that war - its causes, its events, its heroism and its treachery. The aim here is simply to tell something of the story of the Canadians who went overseas, to give some idea of where they fought and died, and what they were able to achieve.

For a young nation it was a remarkable achievement. Serving in the Canadian Army, the Royal Canadian Navy, the Royal Canadian Air Force and with other Allied Forces, thousands of young Canadians fought from 1939 to 1945 on the battlefronts of the world. They were there to defend the United Kingdom when it appeared that Nazi invasion was imminent. They fought valiantly in the unsuccessful attempt to defend Hong Kong against the Japanese. At Dieppe they bore the brunt of a daring, but fateful raid against the enemy-controlled coast of France. Above all they played their part in two great campaigns: they fought for twenty months in Italy, and were in the front lines when the Allies returned to Continental Europe on D-Day in 1944.

They brought honour and a new respect to their country. Most of all they helped to win the struggle against the tyranny and oppression which threatened to engulf the world. It was for our freedom that these young Canadians fought, and it was for that freedom that many of them died.

More than one million Canadians and Newfoundlanders served in the Second World War. Of these more than 45,000 gave their lives, and another 55,000 were wounded. Countless others shared the suffering and hardship of war.

These few words are dedicated to those who fought so that we might live in freedom. It is their valour that we must remember.

# Canada and the Second World War 1939-1945

## The War Begins

The Second World War began at dawn on September 1, 1939, as the German Armies swept into Poland. With the full fury of the *blitzkrieg* - the lightning war - the German armoured (Panzer) divisions destroyed Polish defences in the west. The Soviet troops, as previously agreed with Germany, crossed the eastern frontier. Trapped between two advancing armies Polish resistance ended. Poland surrendered.

Britain and France, honouring their pledge to Poland, declared war on Germany on September 3. Although not automatically committed by Britain's declaration of war, as in 1914, there was little doubt that Canada would quickly follow. On September 7 Parliament met in special session; on September 9 it approved support to Britain and France; on September 10 King George VI announced that Canada had declared war.

Canadian coastal defences were quickly manned, militia regiments, mobilized even before the outbreak of war, intensified preparations, and volunteers flocked to the colours. In September alone, 58,337 men and women enlisted. In December units of the 1st Canadian Infantry Division sailed for Britain, the first of thousands that were to serve overseas during the war.

Following the collapse of Poland a strange lull set in on the western front. This period of apparent inactivity from October 1939 to April 1940 became known as the "Phony War" or the "sitzkrieg." Both sides utilized the lull. Britain built up her defences, prepared her air forces, and dispatched an expeditionary force to the Continent. French troops took up positions on the Maginot Line - the fortified defence line on their eastern border. The Germans, too, manned their great Rhineland fortifications, known as the West Wall or the Siegfried Line - and they engaged in intense preparation for attack.

In Canada recruiting was stepped up to bolster the armed forces. The 2nd Canadian Infantry Division began arriving in England in the summer of 1940, and together with the 1st Division, the 1st Canadian Corps, under Lieut.-General A.G.L. McNaughton, was formed.

The Phony War came to a sudden end when, in April 1940, German troops without warning seized Denmark and launched an invasion of Norway. Allied troops were dispatched in a vain attempt to aid the small Norwegian forces. In the far north near the port of Narvik the British navy won two engagements, but these isolated victories were not enough; the Allied troops, which included some Canadian Army engineers, were forced to withdraw. In less than two months the Germans had conquered Denmark and Norway and isolated Sweden. From the deep Norwegian fjords German submarines and warships could destroy British shipping along the route to Murmansk.

On May 10, the same day Winston Churchill became Prime Minister of Great Britain, Germany launched her *blitzkrieg* against Holland, Luxembourg, Belgium and France.

The German Army worked with clock-like precision. Within four days most of Holland was overrun and in just ten days the German forces had struck through the Ardennes forest, skirted the northern end of the Maginot Line, and reached the Channel ports. On May 27 Belgium surrendered.

With German troops pressing from all sides the Allied troops were forced to the Channel with the sea as the only hope of escape. Then came the "miracle of Dunkirk." Between May 27 and June 4 almost 350,000 men, mainly of the British Expeditionary Force, were evacuated across the Channel to England in every kind of vessel that would float from freighters to fishing boats. One final attempt by Canadian and British troops to maintain a "toe-hold" in France by forming a fortress area in the peninsula of Brittany also had to be abandoned. While the forced withdrawal at Dunkirk and the loss of weapons and equipment was undoubtedly a disaster, the heroic rescue of so many raised the morale of the now threatened British people.

Meanwhile, German Armies were marching toward Paris. France, stunned by the speed of the German advance, was on the verge of collapse when Italy, under Mussolini, attacked on the Mediterranean front. The situation was considered hopeless. France surrendered on June 22, 1940.

## **The Battle of Britain**

Having lost its principal ally, Britain with its Dominions stood alone and awaited a German invasion. Churchill, in eloquent speeches, rallied his people and expressed the determination of Britain to meet "the whole fury and might of the enemy." It was a formidable enemy. From the north cape of Norway to the Pyrenees stretched a vast arc of coastline from which enemy submarines, surface ships and aircraft threatened Britain's maritime lifelines; in the air the German Air Force outnumbered the British three to one. However, Hitler hesitated and delayed Operation *Sea Lion* - the invasion of Britain - to mid-September.

It was fortunate that an invasion did not come, for the forces in Britain were not yet prepared to meet such a powerful foe. While the troops had been rescued from Dunkirk, they had been compelled to leave behind most of their equipment. Further, many of them had not yet received adequate training. The 1st Canadian Division, which still possessed the bulk of its equipment, therefore assumed a position of vital importance. In July the Canadians became part of the 7th British Army Corps. This new formation, comprising British, Canadian and New Zealand troops, came under the command of General McNaughton. It engaged in intense preparation for a role of counter-attack against the expected German assault.

However, before a Channel crossing could be attempted, the Royal Air Force would have to be knocked from the skies. On August 12, 1940 the German Air Force, the *Luftwaffe*,

struck at Britain attacking the radar stations, bombing the airfields, and engaging British fighters in an attempt to gain air supremacy. Had the policy been continued the *Luftwaffe* might have been victorious, but the Germans switched to mass daylight raids on London giving the Fighter Command the needed respite, and they were able to inflict staggering losses on the *Luftwaffe*. Unable to control the air, Hitler indefinitely postponed Operation *Sea Lion*. The Battle of Britain was over.

Many Canadians served in the squadrons of Spitfires and Hurricanes which repulsed the *Luftwaffe* in the summer of 1940. No. 1 Fighter Squadron, RCAF, equipped with modern eight-gun fighters, became the first Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) unit to engage enemy planes in battle when it met a formation of German bombers over southern England on August 26, 1940. It shot down three of them and damaged four others with the loss of one pilot and one plane. Its next meeting with the enemy was not as fortunate as it was attacked out of the sun by Messerschmitts and lost three planes. By mid-October the squadron had accounted for 31 enemy aircraft destroyed and probably 43 more destroyed or damaged. It lost 16 Hurricanes; three pilots had been killed.

Other Canadians flew with the Royal Air Force during that difficult period. No 242 (Canadian) Squadron RAF, which had been formed in 1939 from some of the many Canadians who flew directly with the Royal Air Force, was not reinforced with Veterans from the French campaign and joined in the battle. On August 30, nine of its planes met a hundred enemy aircraft over Essex. Attacking from above, the squadron claimed 12 victories and escaped unscathed.

Canadians also shared in repulsing the *Luftwaffe's* last major daylight attack. On September 27, 303 Squadron RAF and 1 Squadron RCAF attacked the first wave of enemy bombers. Seven, possibly eight enemy planes were destroyed, and another seven damaged. The Royal Canadian Air Force thus received its baptism of fire.

Their invasion plans wrecked, the Germans turned to night bombing to destroy Britain's will to fight. For nine months, the British people suffered an aerial bombardment of their major cities that was then without precedent. It only strengthened the determination of the people. The attacks became less frequent. Great Britain survived the blitz.

## **The Battle of the Atlantic**

From the very outset of hostilities, Britain faced a second threat to her survival. This menace came from the sea as Germany was determined to starve the British people into submission by destroying their sea communications and cutting them off from overseas supplies. Gaining control of the entire coast of Europe from Narvik to the Pyrenees, the

Germans set out from every harbour and airfield in western Europe to cut the lifelines to Britain.

For six long years the Canadian Navy was one of the principal contenders in what was to be known as the Battle of the Atlantic. Beginning the war with a mere 13 vessels and 3,000 men, the Royal Canadian Navy ended it with 373 fighting ships and over 90,000 men. In the crisis of 1940, when German armies were marching into France, four destroyers of the RCN, were sent to the English Channel where they provided aid in the evacuation of forces, landed military troops, and carried out demolitions. After the fall of France the Canadian destroyers joined the Royal Navy in the struggle to protect the southwestern approaches to Britain where German submarines vigorously pressed their attacks. By July 1940 all ocean shipping had to be re-routed around the north of Ireland and through the Irish Sea.

Even this route was seriously threatened and the Canadian ships in British waters strove to fend off submarine attacks while rescuing survivors of torpedoed merchant ships. At the end of 1940, in an agreement between Great Britain and the United States, 50 old American destroyers were transferred to the Royal Navy. Canada acquired six of them. This made it possible to augment the Canadian contribution in British waters and, by February 1941, there were ten RCN destroyers working with the Home Fleet.

Although the Royal Navy was able to assert its superiority over the German surface fleet, the menace from German U-boats (*Unterseebooten*) mounted. More and more German submarines joined the packs hunting at sea. By the spring of 1941, they were sinking merchant ships faster than they could be replaced.

Bridging the Atlantic was the key to strategic supply. To transport as much as possible - goods and men - it was necessary to organize and control ship movements and protect ships from enemy attack. Therefore, convoys were formed to regulate ship movements and more effectively provide escorts both by sea and air.

It was in maintaining the Atlantic lifeline through convoy protection that Canadian seamen and airmen played an increasingly vital role. The first convoy sailed from Halifax on September 16, 1939, escorted by the Canadian destroyers *St. Laurent* and *Saguenay* until well out in the open Atlantic where they relinquished the convoy to British cruisers. For many months - until new ships were launched - escort was the task. It was onerous and dangerous work and Canadians shared in the worst hardships experienced in the war at sea. Navigation in the North Atlantic was hazardous in the extreme, and men died not only from enemy attack, but from exposure and accidents in the fog and winter gales.

Nor was protection sufficient to prevent heavy losses. There were too few naval vessels and maritime patrol aircraft available, and a severe lack of technical modernization, and training.

German submarines concentrated at weak points in the naval defences of the Allies, and began attacking merchant ships much farther west with new long-range submarines and

from new bases in the Bay of Biscay. Ships were lost because their escorts had reached the limits of their endurance and had to turn back. As spring 1941 approached, the enemy stepped up the scale of attack and shipping losses reached grave proportions. In June alone, over 500,000 tons of shipping were lost to U-boats.

To counteract this menace new types of vessels were constructed and scientists worked desperately to design new methods of locating and destroying the submarine. Canada's fleet was augmented by several new types of vessels of which the corvette was perhaps the most famous. Designed on the pattern of a whaler, it could be produced quickly and cheaply and had the ability to outmanoeuvre a submarine as well as long endurance. However, corvettes were known as "wet ships." As the seas broke over them, salty water seeped through seams, hatches and ventilators. They were intolerably crowded and living conditions on board for a crew of some 60 men were terrible. Nevertheless, these small ships, the first 14 of which were completed by the end of 1940, were invaluable in the anti-U-boat war.

As enemy U-boats began to probe farther west, the British countered by establishing new bases for ships and aircraft in Iceland and Newfoundland. The Newfoundland bases were made a Canadian responsibility. On May 31, 1941, Commodore L. W. Murray, RCN, was appointed commander of the Newfoundland Escort Force, later the Mid-Ocean Escort Force, reporting to the British Commander-in-Chief, Western Approaches. A few days later the first Canadian corvettes joined his command. In June Canadian destroyers in British home waters returned to serve with the Newfoundland force. By July the Newfoundland Escort Force totalled 12 groups, and was escorting convoys as far as 35 degrees west.

The RCAF, meanwhile, had been flying patrols from Newfoundland since 1939 and the first maritime patrol squadron had been stationed at Gander since 1940. It now provided air support to the Newfoundland Escort Force. In the eastern Atlantic the convoys were guarded by the RAF Coastal Command which included RCAF squadrons. Thus flying from both sides of the Atlantic and from Iceland, aircraft patrolled the entire route except for a gap of about 300 miles in mid-ocean.

The sea battle raged on. New construction could not keep pace with shipping losses, escorts were nearly always outnumbered by the wolf-pack concentrations of U-boats and it became evident that the war could well be lost at sea.

Meanwhile, although officially neutral, the United States had become increasingly involved in the war at sea. In September 1941 Canadian naval forces came under American co-ordinating supervision. This arrangement replaced control by the British Commander-in-Chief, based in England, with an American commander who would be much closer to the situation. However, when the United States officially entered the war in December 1941 following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, many of the American ships were withdrawn to the Pacific to meet the new threat. This, unfortunately, weakened the Atlantic anti-submarine defences.

Early in 1942 the battle of the Atlantic shifted to the North American seaboard. The enemy destroyed coastal shipping from the Caribbean to Halifax, and even penetrated the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The German attacks were devastatingly successful and more than 200 ships, mostly tankers, were sunk within ten miles of the Canadian or American coastlines. The benefits of convoys were acknowledged by U.S. naval authorities and Canada's small and already over-burdened fleet was called upon to protect southward-bound shipping. The Canadian naval service, with 188 warships and 16,000 men serving at sea, now provided nearly half the surface escorts for convoys from North America to Britain. The RCAF, with eight maritime patrol squadrons and 78 aircraft on the Atlantic seaboard, carried out increased air surveillance of the Northwest Atlantic.

Support for convoys remained insufficient for the task. The winter of 1942-43 was desperate. Free to operate from bases in the Bay of Biscay, German submarine strength grew and attacks increased. While Canadian ships were able to register four victories in the summer of 1942, nothing that winter could curb the staggering loss of convoy tonnage.

Canadians were acutely aware of serious problems in their operations. Their ships and equipment were inadequate to meet the challenge. Aircraft had proven very valuable in combatting submarines, but the RCAF squadrons in Eastern Air Command had no long-range aircraft. The result was that U-boats could attack in relative freedom in the gap in mid-Atlantic known as the Black Pit. Further, although there were very few American ships in the Atlantic the Newfoundland Escort Force remained under American command.

The grim state of the Atlantic war led to an Atlantic Convoy Conference in March 1943 with British, American and Canadian participation. It was agreed that Britain and Canada would share responsibility for the North Atlantic. Rear Admiral Murray was given direct command of that sector of the Atlantic bounded by a line running eastward from New York and southward from Greenland along the meridian of 47 degrees west. The appointment of a Canadian to this key post of Commander-in-Chief, Canadian Northwest Atlantic, illustrated dramatically the increased role and stature of the RCN. In a world divided into operational sectors, Murray became the sole Canadian to bear such responsibilities.

Training, air cover and better equipment turned the tide of the convoy war in 1943. In May the RCAF acquired from Britain some of the long-range Liberator bombers it needed to cover the mid-ocean gap and new escort vessels with modernized equipment allowed the formation of powerful support groups. This, plus improved training, enabled the Allies to take the lead in the Atlantic.

The Atlantic battle continued until the end of the war. At times, notably in the fall of 1943 and of 1944, it turned dangerous again. U-boats with new equipment such as the acoustic torpedo and the *schnorkel*, which allowed air to be drawn into a submarine under the water and exhaust fumes to be expelled, swung the balance back to the submarines for

a time. By March 1945, the German navy had 463 U-boats on patrol, compared to 27 in 1939.

Yet, between them, the RCAF and the RCN had turned the tide in their sector of the Atlantic. More and more Canadian seamen were crossing the Atlantic to engage in battle closer to the enemy. As they returned to British waters, men of both the Canadian services showed the benefits of training and hard experience.

## **The March of Conquest**

The year 1941 was to see the war encircle the globe, and see the creation of the Grand Alliance of Great Britain, Russia and the United States against the Axis powers, Germany, Italy and Japan.

In the autumn of 1940, while the Battle of Britain was still raging, Mussolini, the Italian dictator, perceived an opportunity for conquest. On September 13, 1940, he invaded Egypt to gain control of the Suez Canal; and a month later carried the war to the Balkan peninsula with an unprovoked attack on Greece. The Italian Armies were held back and their victories forestalled until, in March 1941, the German High Command came to the aid of its Axis partner. Crack German troops marched on the Balkans. Yugoslavia was overrun in a few weeks and the Greeks, although aided by a small Commonwealth force, were soon defeated. The *Afrika Korps*, under Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, was sent to Libya and the Germans drove the British back into Egypt with heavy losses.

Then, on June 22, 1941, Germany invaded Russia. On that day Hitler's armies turned on the Soviet Union with a massive and brutal assault. Altogether, Hitler sent in almost three million troops supported by thousands of tanks and airplanes to destroy his former ally. The German Army scored spectacular victories in an offensive which took them to within sight of Moscow. However, the Russians fought hard, and they were aided by the vastness of their country and the bitter cold and blizzards of winter. Despite the initial successes, the German Army were halted in December 1941.

On the other side of the globe, war clouds were also gathering as Japan, too, embarked on a path of conquest. On December 7, 1941, the Japanese, without warning, attacked the American fleet in Pearl Harbor in the Hawaiian Islands. The United States declared war on Japan and Germany and the might of the United States was now added to the Allied cause.



## **The Defence of Hong Kong**

It was against Japan in the defence of Hong Kong that Canadian soldiers were first committed to battle during the Second World War.

As tension in the Pacific grew, the vulnerability of the outpost of Hong Kong became more and more apparent. It was recognized that in the event of a war with Japan, it could neither be held nor relieved. Hong Kong would be considered an outpost to be held as long as possible, but without further reinforcement. This decision was reversed late in 1941 when it was argued that reinforcement would serve as a deterrent to hostile action by Japan, and also have an important moral effect throughout the Far East. Accordingly, Canada was asked to provide one or two battalions for the purpose.

The Royal Rifles of Canada and The Winnipeg Grenadiers, under the command of Brigadier J.K. Lawson, sailed from Vancouver on October 27, 1941. These Canadian units had not received training as front-line troops, but war with Japan was not considered imminent and it was believed that they were going to Hong Kong for garrison duty. Tragically, only a few weeks later, they were to become the first Canadian units to fight in the Second World War, when in almost simultaneous attacks on Pearl Harbor, Northern Malaya, the Phillipines, Guam, Wake Island and Hong Kong, Japan brought war to the Pacific.

The Crown Colony of Hong Kong consisted of Hong Kong Island and the adjacent mainland areas of Kowloon and the New Territories. In 1941 the Japanese were in control of much of the area north of the New Territories-China border.

For the defence of the colony Major-General G.M. Maltby, commander of Hong Kong, had only a total force of some 14,000 which included naval and air force personnel and many non-combatants. His military force was made up of British, Canadian and Indian regiments as well as the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps. Further, the defence of Hong Kong would have to be carried out without any significant air or naval defence. The Kai Tak Royal Air Force base on Hong Kong had only five airplanes, flown and serviced by seven officers and 108 airmen. The nearest fully-operational RAF base was in Malaya, nearly 1,400 miles away. Nor could Hong Kong offer much in the way of naval defence. All major naval vessels had been withdrawn, and only one destroyer, several gunboats and a flotilla of motor torpedo boats remained.

The Japanese attack, however, did not take the garrison by surprise, for in spite of the optimism nothing was left to chance. The defence forces were made ready. Three battalions would man a ten-mile line (the Gin Drinkers' Line) stretching across rugged hill country and pocked by trenches and pillboxes. This position would protect Kowloon, the harbour and the northern part of Hong Kong Island from artillery fire from the land, unless the enemy mounted a major offensive. In that event, the mainland positions would provide time to complete demolitions, clear vital supplies, and sink shipping in the harbour. The remaining forces were to be concentrated on the island and prepared to defend against any Japanese attack from the sea.

## **The Invasion**

On the morning of December 7, the entire garrison was ordered to war stations. At 8 a.m., December 8, Japanese aircraft reached their first Hong Kong target, the Kai Tak airport, and either destroyed or damaged all the RAF aircraft.

From first light the Japanese ground forces moved across the frontier of the New Territories where they met the forward forces of the Mainland Brigade. In the face of strong enemy pressure these advance units, while inflicting casualties and carrying out demolitions, fell back to the Gin Drinkers' Line. On the night of December 9-10, the Japanese captured the key position of Shing Mun Redoubt. In the darkness, D Company of The Winnipeg Grenadiers was dispatched to the mainland to strengthen this sector. This company saw some action on the 11th, becoming the first sub-unit of the Canadian Army to fight in the Second World War. Further Japanese attacks made the Gin Drinkers' Line untenable and the troops were ordered to withdraw to their defence positions on the island.

On December 13, a Japanese demand for the surrender of Hong Kong was brusquely rejected.

## **Canada and the Second World War 1939-1945**

### **Defence of the Island**

On the island the defending forces were reorganized into a West Brigade, commanded by Brigadier J.K. Lawson, and including The Winnipeg Grenadiers; and an East Brigade, under Brigadier C. Wallis, including The Royal Rifles of Canada. The Canadian battalions were thus separated and one was removed from Lawson's command. Both Canadian units were deployed to defend the southern beaches where General Maltby feared a seaborne attack.

To reduce the defenders' resistance, the enemy directed heavy artillery fire at the island, mounted destructive air raids, and systematically shelled the pillboxes along the north shore. Then, on December 17, the Japanese repeated their demand for surrender. Once again it was summarily refused, but the fall of the Colony was now only a matter of time. With the sinking of two British capital ships off Malaya, and the crippling of the United States' fleet at Pearl Harbor, there was no hope of relief. The defenders awaited the assault in complete isolation.

The invasion of the island came with the darkness on December 18. The enemy began crossing the strait at its narrowest part, Lye Mun Passage, in assault boats, landing craft and small boats towed by ferry steamers. They came ashore in large numbers on a front

of about two miles in the face of machine-gun fire from the defenders who manned the pillboxes. From the shore the Japanese forces fanned out to the east and west and advanced up the valleys leading to high ground. Here, the Royal Rifles came into action against the invasion force. The strength of that force was overwhelming, and by morning of the 19th the Japanese had reached as far as the Wong Nei Chong and Tai Tam Gaps.

The battle-toughened Japanese were backed by a heavy arsenal of artillery, total control of the air, and the assurance of knowing that reinforcements were readily available. In contrast, the defending Allies, with only non-combatant garrison experience, were exhausted from the continual bombardment, many days of continuous action and were without hope of relief. That it took the Japanese until Christmas Day to force surrender is a testimony to brave resistance.

With the enemy well established on the high ground, the East Brigade was ordered to withdraw southward toward Stanley Peninsula where, it was hoped, a concentrated defence could be made. By nightfall on the 19th, a new line was established, but unfortunately, some of the critically needed pieces of mobile artillery were destroyed during the withdrawal. Still worse, the East and West Brigades were separated when the Japanese penetrated the defence and reached the sea at Repulse bay.

The East Brigade was now seriously reduced in numbers for the Indian Rajput Battalion had been decimated in their courageous defence against the landing invasion. The Royal Rifles were in exhausted condition. Yet, during the next three days, these men valiantly strove to drive northward over rugged, mountainous terrain to link up with the West Brigade, and to clear the Japanese from the high peaks.

The attempts to drive northward had to be abandoned, and on December 23 the depleted and battle-weary troops were ordered to withdraw to Stanley Peninsula. Here, as the Japanese mounted increasing pressure, the Royal Rifles, on Christmas Day, delivered a final counter-attack. The attack broke down with heavy casualties.

Meanwhile, The Winnipeg Grenadiers had also been thrust swiftly into action with the West Brigade. As the enemy landed on the evening of December 18, two platoons of the battalion were deployed to seize the hills known as Jardine's Lookout and Mount Butler where they engaged in intense fighting. Heavily outnumbered, they were cut to pieces and both platoon commanders were killed. Further attempts to clear the hill positions also failed. On December 19 Brigadier Lawson lost his life as he was valiantly determined to fight it out when the enemy surrounded his West Brigade headquarters.

One company of the Grenadiers, meanwhile, held on firmly to its position near Wong Nei Chong Gap, and thus denied the Japanese the use of the one main north-south road across the island. The Grenadiers inflicted severe casualties on the enemy and delayed the Japanese advance for three days. The Canadians held out until the morning of December 22 when ammunition, food and water were exhausted and the Japanese had blown in the steel shutters of the company shelters. Only then did they surrender.

The final phase of the fighting on the western part of the island consisted of a valiant attempt to maintain a continuous line from Victoria Harbour to the south shore. It was to no avail. The Allied positions were overrun and the defenders were forced to surrender.

At 3:15 p.m. Christmas Day, General Maltby advised the Governor that further resistance was futile. After seventeen and a half days of fighting the defence of Hong Kong was over.

## **Aftermath**

The fighting in Hong Kong brought a tragic toll to Canada: 290 killed, and 493 wounded. Death did not end with surrender. The Canadians were imprisoned in Hong Kong and Japan in the foulest of conditions and had to endure brutal treatment and near-starvation. Many did not survive. In all, more than 550 of the 1,975 Canadians who sailed from Vancouver in October 1941 never returned.

## **The First Canadian Army**

The Canadian forces in England had grown steadily since the troops of the 1st Canadian Infantry Division landed in December 1939. The 2nd Canadian Infantry Division arrived in the summer and autumn of 1940, and the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division was sent overseas in 1941. These first units were primarily infantry, but were followed by two armoured divisions and two armoured brigades. These additional forces necessitated changes in organization. Thus, early in 1942, the First Canadian Army with two corps was formed under the command of the native-born Canadian, General McNaughton. He would later, in 1943, be succeeded by another Canadian, General H.D.G. Crerar.

The role of the First Canadian Army changed as well. After the first few months of intense preparation for an expected imminent invasion which fortunately did not come, the troops were forced to settle down to a long period of waiting. They waited and trained for the time when they could spearhead an Allied attack to regain the Continent. There were only occasional breaks in the weary routine. A small Canadian-British expedition was sent to Spitzbergen beyond the Arctic Circle; and Canadian tunnellers went to Gibraltar to strengthen defences there. In April 1942 a small, unsuccessful raid was attempted near Boulogne, France.

The first major contact with the enemy had come on the other side of the world in Hong Kong and had ended in disaster. The next major contact was also to have disastrous results as the Canadians formed the main assault force for the raid on Dieppe.

## The Raid on Dieppe

The Allied situation in the spring of 1942 was grim. The Germans had penetrated deep into Russia, the British Eighth Army in North Africa had been forced back into Egypt, and in Western Europe the Allied Forces faced the Germans across the English Channel.

Since the time was not yet ripe for mounting Operation *Overlord*, the full-scale invasion of Western Europe, it was decided to mount a major raid on the French port of Dieppe. Designed to foster German fears of an attack in the west and compel them to strengthen their Channel defences at the expense of other areas of operation, the raid would also provide the opportunity to test new techniques and equipment, and be the means to gain the experience and knowledge necessary for planning the great amphibious assault.

Accordingly, plans were drawn up for a large-scale raid to take place in July 1942. Canadians would provide the main assault force, and by May 20 troops of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division were on the Isle of Wight to begin intensive training in amphibious operations. When unfavourable weather in July prevented the raid from being launched, it was urged that it should be abandoned. However, over the next few weeks the operation was revived and given the code name *Jubilee*. The port of Dieppe on the French coast remained the objective.

The attack upon Dieppe took place on August 19, 1942. The troops involved totalled 6,000 of whom 5,000 were Canadians, the remainder being British Commandos and 50 American Rangers. The raid was supported by four destroyers of the Royal Navy and 74 Allied air squadrons (eight belonging to the RCAF). Major-General J.H. Roberts, the Commander of the 2nd Canadian Division, was appointed Military Force Commander with Captain J. Hughes-Hallett, R.N., as Naval Force Commander and Air Vice-Marshal T.L. Leigh-Mallory as Air Force Commander.

The plan called for attacks at five different points on a front of roughly ten miles. Four simultaneous flank attacks were to go in at dawn, followed half an hour later by the main attack on the town of Dieppe itself. Canadians would form the force for the frontal attack on Dieppe and would also go in at gaps in the cliffs at Puits two-and-one-half miles to the west, and at Pourville to the east. British commandos were assigned to destroy the coastal batteries at Berneval on the eastern flank, and at Varengeville in the west.

As the assault force approached the coast of France in the early hours of August 19, the landing craft of the eastern sector unexpectedly encountered a small German convoy. The noise of the sharp violent sea fight which followed alerted coastal defences, particularly at Berneval and Puits, leaving little chance of success in the eastern sector. The craft carrying the No. 3 Commando were scattered and most of the unit never reached shore. Those that did were quickly overwhelmed. One small party of 20 commandos managed to get within 200 yards of the battery and by accurate sniping prevented the guns from

firing on the assault ships for two-and-one-half vital hours before they were safely evacuated.

At Puys the Royal Regiment of Canada shared in this ill-fortune. The beach here was extremely narrow and was commanded by lofty cliffs where German soldiers were strategically placed. Success depended on surprise and darkness, neither of which prevailed. The naval landing was delayed, and as the Royals leapt ashore in the growing light they met violent machine-gun fire from the fully-alerted German soldiers. Only a few men were able to get over the heavily wired sea-wall at the head of the beach; those that did were unable to get back. The rest of the troops together with three platoons of reinforcements from the Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) of Canada were pinned on the beach by mortar and machine-gun fire, where they were later forced to surrender. Evacuation was impossible in the face of German fire, Of those that landed 200 were killed and 20 later died of their wounds; the rest were taken prisoner - the heaviest toll suffered by a Canadian battalion in a single day throughout the entire war. Failure to clear the eastern headland enabled the Germans to enfilade the Dieppe beaches and nullify the main frontal attack.

In the western sector, meanwhile, some degree of surprise was achieved. In contrast to the misfortune encountered by No. 3 on the east flank, the No. 4 Commando operation was completely successful. According to plan, the Commando went in, successfully destroyed the guns in the battery near Varengeville, and then withdrew safely.

At Pourville, the Canadians were fortunate enough to achieve some degree of surprise and initial opposition was light as the South Saskatchewan Regiment and Cameron Highlanders of Canada assaulted the beaches. Resistance stiffened as they crossed the River Scie and pushed towards Dieppe proper. Heavy fighting then developed and the Saskatchewans, and the Camerons who supported them, were stopped well short of the town. The main force of the Camerons, meanwhile, pushed on towards their objective, an inland airfield, and advanced some two miles before they too were forced to halt.

The Canadians lost heavily during the withdrawal. The enemy was able to bring fierce fire to bear upon the beach from dominating positions east of Pourville, and also from the high ground to the west. However, the landing craft came in through the storm of fire with self-sacrificing gallantry and, supported by a courageous rearguard, the greater part of both units successfully re-embarked though many of the men were wounded. The rearguard itself could not be brought off and, when ammunition ran out and further evacuation was impossible, surrendered.

The main attack was to be made across the shingle beach in front of Dieppe and timed to take place a half-hour later than on the flanks. German soldiers, concealed in cliff-top positions and in buildings overlooking the promenade, waited. As the men of the Essex Scottish Regiment assaulted the open eastern section, the enemy swept the beach with machine-gun fire. All attempts to breach the sea-wall were beaten back with grievous loss. When one small party managed to infiltrate the town, a misleading message was received aboard the headquarters ship which suggested that the Essex Scottish were

making headway. Thus, the reserve battalion *Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal* were sent in. They, like their comrades who had landed earlier, found themselves pinned down on the beach and exposed to intense enemy fire.

The Royal Hamilton Light Infantry landed at the west end of the promenade opposite a large isolated casino. They were able to clear this strongly-held building and the nearby pillboxes and some men of the battalion got across the bullet-swept boulevard and into the town, where they were engaged in vicious street fighting.

Misfortune also attended the landing of the tanks of the Calgary Regiment. Timed to follow an air and naval bombardment they were put ashore ten to fifteen minutes late, thus leaving the infantry without support during the first critical minutes of the attack. Then as the tanks came ashore, they met an inferno of fire and were brought to a halt - stopped not only by enemy guns, but also immobilized by the shingle banks and sea-wall. Those that negotiated the sea-wall found their way blocked by concrete obstacles which sealed off the narrow streets. Nevertheless, the immobilized tanks continued to fight, supporting the infantry and contributing greatly to the withdrawal of many of them; the tank crews became prisoners or died in battle.

The last troops to land were part of the Royal Marine "A" Commando, who shared the terrible fate of other Canadians. They suffered heavy losses without being able to accomplish their mission.

The raid also produced a tremendous air battle. While the Allied air forces were able to provide protection from the *Luftwaffe* for the ships off Dieppe, the cost was high. The Royal Air Force lost 106 aircraft - more than in any other day of the war. The RCAF loss was 13 aircraft.

Conflicting assessments of the value of the raid continue to be presented. Some claim that it was a useless slaughter; others maintain that it was necessary to the successful invasion of the continent two years later on D-Day. The Dieppe raid was closely studied by those responsible for planning future operations against the enemy-held coast of France. Out of it came improvements in technique, fire support and tactics that reduced D-Day casualties to an unexpected minimum. The men who perished at Dieppe were instrumental in saving countless lives on the 6th of June, 1944. While there can be no doubt that valuable lessons were learned, a frightful price was paid in those morning hours of August 19, 1942. Of the 4,963 Canadians who embarked for the operation, only 2,210 returned to England, and many of these were wounded. There were 3,367 casualties, including 1,946 prisoners of war; 907 Canadians lost their lives.

## Conquest of Sicily

By the spring of 1943, Canadian sailors and airmen had gained a considerable amount of battle experience, but the Canadian Army, stationed in Great Britain, had not been involved in any large-scale land operations. The need for battle experience and the growing public demand for action led to the decision to include the 1st Canadian Infantry Division and the 1st Canadian Army Tank Brigade in the assault on Sicily. This was to be the prelude to the invasion of mainland Europe.

The invasion was to be carried out by the Seventh U.S. Army under Lieut.-General George S. Patton, and the Eighth British Army under General Sir Bernard L. Montgomery. The Canadians were to be part of the British Army.

Under the command of Major-General G.G. Simonds, the Canadian troops sailed from Great Britain in late June. En route, 58 Canadians were drowned when three ships of the assault convoy were sunk by enemy submarines, and 500 vehicles and a number of guns were lost. Late on the night of July 9, the Canadians joined the invasion armada of nearly 3,000 Allied ships and landing craft.

Just after dawn on July 10, the assault (preceded by airborne landings) went in. The Canadians, forming the left flank of the five British landings that spread over 40 miles of shoreline, went ashore near Pachino close to the southern tip of the island. The Americans, meanwhile, established three more beachheads over another 40 miles of coast. In taking Sicily the Allies aimed, as well, to trap the German and Italian armies and prevent their retreat across the Strait of Messina.

From the Pachino beaches, where resistance from Italian coastal troops was light, the Canadians pushed forward through choking dust, over tortuous mine-filled roads. At first all went well, but resistance stiffened as the Canadians were engaged increasingly by determined German troops who fought tough delaying actions from the advantage of towering villages and almost impregnable hill positions. On July 15, just outside the village of Grammichele, they came under fire from Germans of the Hermann Goering Division. The village was taken by the men of the 1st Infantry Brigade and tanks of the Three Rivers Regiment.

Piazza Armenia and Valguarnera fell on successive days, after which the Canadians were directed against the hill towns of Leonforte and Assoro. The defensive advantages of the mountainous country led to bitter fighting, but both places fell to the Canadian assault. Even stiffer fighting was required as the Germans made a determined stand on the route to Agira. Three successive attacks were beaten back before a fresh brigade, with overwhelming artillery and air support, succeeded in dislodging the enemy. On July 28, after five days of hard fighting at heavy cost, Agira was taken.



Meanwhile, the Americans were clearing the western part of the island and the British were pressing up the east coast toward Catania. These operations pushed the Germans into a small area around the base of Mount Etna where Catenanuova and Regalbuto were captured by the Canadians.

The final Canadian task was to break through the main enemy position and capture Adrano. Here again, the Canadians faced not only human enemies, but physical barriers as well. The rugged, almost trackless country meant that mule trains were required to bring forward mortars, guns, ammunition and other supplies. Nevertheless, literally fighting from mountain rock to mountain rock, the Canadians advanced steadily against the enemy positions. With the approaches to Adrano cleared, the way was prepared for the closing of the Sicilian campaign. The Canadians, withdrawn into reserve on August 7, did not take part in this final phase. Eleven days later, British and American troops entered Messina. Sicily had been conquered in 38 days.

The Sicilian campaign was a success. Although many enemy troops had managed to retreat across the strait into Italy, the operation had secured a necessary air base from which to support the liberation of mainland Italy. It also freed the Mediterranean sea lanes and contributed to the downfall of Mussolini, thus allowing a war-wearied Italy to sue for peace.

The Canadians had acquitted themselves well in their first campaign. They had fought through 150 miles of mountainous country - farther than any other formation in the Eighth Army - and during their final two weeks had borne a large share of the fighting on the Army front. Canadian casualties totalled 562 killed, 664 wounded and 84 prisoners of war.

The next great operation was to be the invasion of the Italian mainland.

## **Canadians in Italy**

One result of the Allied invasion of Sicily was the overthrow of the Italian dictator, Mussolini. However, although the new Italian Government surrendered on September 3, 1943, the Germans seized control and it was German troops that the Allies faced in their advance up the Italian peninsula.

The fighting in Italy, as in Sicily, was to be bitter. Taking advantage of the mountain peaks and swift rivers, the Germans made every Allied advance difficult and costly. Total Canadian casualties in the 20-month Mediterranean (Sicily and Italy) numbered 25,264 of which more than 5,900 were fatal.

The Eighth British Army (including the 1st Canadian Division, the 5th British Division and the 1st Canadian Army Tank Brigade) would lead the way across the Strait of

Messina to the toe of Italy, and then advance towards Naples. The Fifth U.S. Army (with two British and two U.S. divisions) would make a seaborne landing in the Gulf of Salerno, seize Naples and advance on Rome. The 1st British Airborne Division would land by sea in the Taranto area and seize the heel of the peninsula.

The assault across the Strait of Messina began on September 3, 1943. The Canadians, directed on Reggio Calabria, met little resistance since the Germans had withdrawn to establish their line of defence across the narrow, mountainous central part of the peninsula. The Canadians captured Reggio, and advanced across the Aspromonte Mountains and along the Gulf of Taranto to Catanzaro. In spite of rain, poor mountain roads, and German rearguard actions, they were 75 miles inland from Reggio by September 10.

The Fifth Army meanwhile met stiff German resistance as it assaulted the beaches of Salerno. It was therefore vital for the Eighth Army to advance toward the rear of the German defence and assist in the U.S. breakout from the bridgehead. With this in view, a Canadian brigade was diverted from the main Canadian line of advance to seize Potenza, an important road centre east of Salerno. Potenza was taken on September 20. The breakout was accomplished, and on October 1, the Fifth Army entered Naples. In the meantime, the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade proceeded eastward, joined the Airborne Division in the Taranto region, and then pushed boldly inland to the north and northwest. The 5th British Corps seized the Foggia airfield.

By the end of September, the German hold on northern and central Italy was still unshaken, but the Allies had overrun a vast and valuable tract of southern Italy, and their armies stood on a line running across Italy from sea to sea. The next objective was Rome.

As the Allies drove north from Naples and Foggia, the Canadians found themselves pushing into the central mountain range. Now the enemy resisted with full force. On October 1 at Motta, the Canadians fought their first battle with Germans in Italy, and there followed a series of brief, but bloody actions. On October 14 the Canadians took Campobasso, the next day they took Vinchiaturro, and the advance continued across the Biferno River. During the same period, one unit of the Canadian Army Tank Brigade played a distinguished role on the Adriatic coast, where they supported a British assault at Termoli and its advance to the Sangro River.

In the 63 days since landing, the Eighth Army had covered 450 miles. However, the "pursuit from Reggio" was now over. The Germans, their strength now almost equal to that of the Allies and having the advantage of defence, meant to make a stand from the coast south of Cassino on the Naples-Rome highway, to Ortona on the Adriatic shore. The battle for Rome would not be easy.

Meanwhile, the decision had been taken to strengthen the Canadian forces in the Mediterranean. On November 5, the Headquarters of the 1st Canadian Corps under Lieut.-General H.D.G. Crerar; and the 5th Canadian Armoured Division arrived. General G.G. Simonds took over command of this division and was replaced in the 1st Division

by Major-General C. Vokes. General McNaughton, who had objected to the division of the Canadian Army retired soon afterward.

As the first snow of winter began to fall, the Eighth Army struck hard at the German line along the Sangro River on the Adriatic Coast. The aim was to break the stalemate that had developed and to relieve the pressure on the Fifth Army in the drive to take Rome. The task was not easy for the Adriatic shoreline was cut by a series of deep river valleys. As the British and Canadians succeeded in driving the Germans from the Sangro, they were faced with the same task a few miles further north. Here, along the line of the Moro River, occurred some of the bitterest fighting of the war. The Germans counter-attacked repeatedly and often the fighting was hand-to-hand as the Canadians edged forward to Ortona on the coast.

The medieval town of Ortona, with its castle and stone buildings, was situated on a ledge over looking the Adriatic. Its steep, rubble-filled streets limited the use of tanks and artillery and thus made this an infantryman's struggle. During several days of vicious street fighting the Canadians smashed their way through walls and buildings—a tactic which became known as "mouseholing." This was Christmas 1943. Meanwhile, a subsidiary attack had been launched to the northwest and the Germans, in danger of being cut off, withdrew from Ortona. The city officially fell on December 28.

Further offensives ground to a halt during the atrocious winter weather. During the lull, Simonds left for England and Major-General E.L.M. Burns succeeded him. In March Burns took over the 1st Canadian Corps from Lieut.-General Crerar, who returned to command the First Canadian Army in England. The 5th Canadian Armoured Division was taken over by Maj.-General B.M. Hoffmeister.

By now the Canadian Army in Italy had reached its peak theatre strength of nearly 76,000. Total casualties in the Corps had climbed to 9,934 all ranks, of which 2,119 had been fatal.

## **The Battle in the Liri Valley**

In the spring of 1944 the Germans still held the line of defence north of Ortona, as well as the mighty bastion of Monte Cassino which blocked the Liri corridor to the Italian capital. Determined to maintain their hold on Rome, the Germans constructed two formidable lines of fortifications, the Gustav Line, and nine miles behind it the Adolf Hitler Line.

During April and May 1944, the Eighth Army, including the 1st Canadian Corps, was secretly moved across Italy to join the Fifth U.S. Army in the struggle for Rome. Here under the dominating peak of Cassino, the Allied armies hurled themselves against the enemy position. Tanks of the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade (formerly 1st Canadian Army Tank Brigade) supported the Allied attack. After four days of hard fighting, the German defenses were broken from Cassino to the Tyrrhenian Sea and the enemy moved

back to his second line of defence. On May 18 Polish troops took the Cassino position and the battered monastery at the summit.

On May 16 the 1st Canadian Corps received orders to advance on the Hitler Line six miles farther up the valley. Early on May 23 the attack on the Hitler Line went in. Under heavy enemy mortar and machine-gun fire, the Canadians breached the defences and the tanks of the 5th Armoured Division poured through toward the next obstacle, the Melfa River. Desperate fighting took place in the forming of a bridgehead across the Melfa. However, once the Canadians were over the river, the major fighting for the Liri valley was over. The operation developed into a pursuit as the Germans moved back quickly to avoid being trapped in the valley by the American thrust farther west. The 5th Armoured Division carried the Canadian pursuit to Ceprano where the 1st Infantry Division took over the task. On May 31, the Canadians occupied Frosinone and their campaign in this area came to an end as they went into reserve. Rome fell to the Americans on June 4. Less than 48 hours later the long awaited D-Day invasion of Northwest Europe began on the Normandy beaches. It remained essential, therefore, for the Allied forces in Italy to continue to pin down German troops.

The Canadians were now withdrawn for well-earned rest and re-organization, except for the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade which accompanied the British in the Allied action as the Germans moved northward to their final line of defence.

## **The Road to Rimini**

Autumn and winter 1944 saw the Canadians back on the Adriatic Coast. Their objective, the Gothic Line, was the last major German defence line separating the Allies from the Po Valley and the great plain of Lombardy. Since northern Italy contained many factories producing vital supplies, the Germans would fight hard to prevent a break-through. They made the line formidable. Running roughly between Pisa and Pesaro, the defence line was composed of machine-gun posts, anti-tank guns, mortar-and assault-gun positions, tank turrets set in concrete, plus mines, wire obstacles and anti-tank ditches.

The Allied plan called for a surprise attack upon the east flank, followed by a swing toward Bologna. As part of the plan to deceive the Germans into believing the attack would come in the west, the 1st Canadian Division was concentrated near Florence, then secretly moved northward to the Atlantic.

In the last week of August 1944, the entire Canadian Corps began its attack on the Gothic Line with the objective of capturing Rimini. Six rivers lay across the path of the advance. On August 25, the Canadians crossed the Metauro River but the next, the Foglia was more formidable. Here the Germans had concentrated their defences, and it required days of bitter fighting and softening of the line by Allied air forces to reach it. On August 30, two Canadian brigades crossed the Foglia River and fought their way through the Gothic Line. On September 2 General Burns reported that "the Gothic Line is completely broken in the Adriatic Sector and the 1st Canadian Corps is advancing to the River Conca."

The announcement was premature for the enemy recovered quickly, reinforced the Adriatic defence by moving divisions from other lines and thus, slowed the advance to Rimini to bitter, step-by-step progress. Three miles south of the Conca the forward troops came under fire from the German 1st Parachute Division, while to the west heavy fighting was developing on the Coriano Ridge. By hard fighting the Canadians captured the ridge and it appeared that the Gothic Line was finally about to collapse, but this was not to be. For three more weeks the Canadians battled to take the hill position of San Fortunato which blocked the approach to the Po Valley. On September 21, the Allies entered a deserted Rimini. That same day the 1st Division was relieved by the New Zealand Division to sweep across the plains of Lombardy to Bologna and the Po. But the rains came. Streams turned into raging torrents, mud replaced the powdery dust and the tanks bogged down in the swamp lands of the Romagna. The Germans still resisted.

September 1944 waned and with it the hopes of quickly advancing into the valley of the Po. On October 11 the 1st Canadian Infantry Division returned to the line and the 5th Division went into corps reserve. For three weeks the Canadians fought in the water-logged Romagna. The formidable defences of the Savio River were breached, but the Germans counter-attacked to try to throw the Canadians back. Meanwhile, the Americans were making progress to Bologna, and to halt their advance the Germans took two crack divisions from the Adriatic front. This allowed the Canadians to move up to the banks of the Ronco, some six miles farther on.

The Canadian Corps was now withdrawn into Army reserve where they could recuperate from the ten weeks of continuous fighting and train for the battles which lay ahead. The 1st Armoured Brigade, meanwhile, continued to operate with the Americans and British in the area north of Florence. They would end their campaign in Italy in the snow-covered peaks in February 1945.

Changes in command occurred before the Corps returned to the line. On November 5, Lieut.-General Charles Foulkes succeeded Lieut.-General Burns as commander of the 1st Canadian Corps, and Major-General Vokes left for Holland to exchange appointments with Major-General H. W. Foster.

The Canadians returned to battle on December 1 as the Eighth Army made one last attempt to break through into the Lombardy Plain. In a bloody month of river crossings which resulted in extremely heavy casualties, they fought through to the Senio River. Here the Germans, desperate in their resistance, drew reinforcements from their western flank and, aided by the weather and topography, stopped the Eighth Army. In January 1945 the Senio became stabilized as the winter line, and in appalling weather both sides employed minimum troops as they observed each other from concealed positions.

The Italian campaign continued into the spring of 1945, but the Canadians did not participate in the final victory. In February 1945 the 1st Canadian Corps began the move the Northwest Europe to be re-united with the First Canadian Army. There they would join in the drive into Germany and Holland and see the war in Europe to its conclusion.

## **The Landings in Normandy**

On June 6, 1944, now known to history as D-Day, Operation *Overlord*, the long-awaited invasion of Northwest Europe, began with Allied landings on the coast of Normandy. The task was formidable for the Germans had turned the coastline into a continuous fortress with guns, pillboxes, wire, mines and beach obstacles - and on it depended the outcome of the war.

In preparation for the invasion, Americans, British and Canadians underwent months of special training: supplies were amassed in southern England; engineers planned an underwater pipeline to France; and prefabricated harbours were assembled. Ground, sea and air forces rehearsed endlessly to ensure perfect timing and co-operation.

Following an all-night bombardment of the assault areas, the Allies attacked "Fortress Europe" on a five-division front, and troops from three airborne divisions descended by parachute and glider on the flanks of the invasion area. All three Canadian services shared in the assault. One of the seaborne formations was the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, supported by the 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade and troops attached from other arms and services of the Canadian Army. Forming part of the British 6th Airborne Division, which dropped on the eastern flank of the bridgehead was the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion. The crossing of the English Channel was made through lanes that minesweepers of the Royal Canadian Navy helped to clear; Canadian naval guns joined in hammering the enemy's beach defences; and some of the 3rd Division's units were carried in Canadian landing ships and put ashore by Canadian assault landing craft. In the skies the Royal Canadian Air Force made its important contribution as bombers attacked German batteries, and Canadian fighter squadrons assailed targets further inland.

Two armies carried out the operation. On the right, or western half, extending from the base of the Cotentin Peninsula to a point northwest of Bayeux, the First United States Army attacked on the beaches "Utah" and "Omaha." On the left, in a sector reaching eastward to the mouth of the River Orne, the Second British Army assaulted the beaches of "Gold", "Juno" and "Sword."

The Canadians, under Major-General R.F.L. Keller, were responsible for Juno in the centre of the British front. Their task was to establish a beachhead along the five miles between Courseulles and St-Aubin-sur-Mer, then push through the gap between Bayeux and Caen, and penetrate to Carpiquet airfield some eleven miles inland. It was hoped that by nightfall the two British divisions to their left and right would have taken Caen and Bayeux and the Canadians would be astride the road and railway linking the two towns.

Delayed by bad weather and rough seas the men of the 7th Brigade stormed ashore in the face of fierce opposition from enemy strongholds which had survived the bombardment, and from mined beach obstacles hidden by the rising tide. Casualties were high and the

fighting intense as they captured Courseulles-sur-Mer and the inland villages of Ste-Croix-sur-Mer and Banville. By evening the brigade was consolidated on its intermediate objective near Creully.

On the 8th Brigade front, the assault engineers arrived in good time and were able to engage the enemy strongpoints. The beachhead objective was taken, and the Canadians moved inland to seize Bernières. Beyond Bernières progress was slower and Bény-sur-Mer on the main road to Caen was not taken until later.

The 9th Brigade units landed shortly before noon, and moved from Bernières through Bény to the vicinity of Villons-les-Buissons, less than four miles from Caen. Here machine-gun fire held up the advance and they halted just short of Carpiquet airfield, the final divisional objective.

By the end of the day the 3rd Canadian Division was well established on its intermediate objectives, though short of the planned final D-day objectives. On either flank, Allied progress had been similar. The 3rd British Division was within three miles of Caen, and on the right the 50th Division was only two miles from Bayeux. The 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion had dropped with the 6th Airborne Division on the left flank of the bridgehead. Although badly scattered and suffering severe losses, the Canadian red berets destroyed their assigned targets and caused havoc behind the lines. In the American zone, the assault forces at Omaha beach had met fierce resistance, but here, too, beachheads had been established.

It was a magnificent accomplishment, the strong Atlantic Wall had been breached, and supplies and men were pouring ashore to resume the advance on D-Day-plus-one. The Allies were back in Europe.

Approximately 14,000 Canadians landed in Normandy on D-Day. Inevitably the cost was considerable, but not nearly as high as had been feared. The Canadian assault force suffered 1,074 casualties, of which 359 were fatal.

Ahead lay more fighting - very bitter fighting in which Canadian forces would play their full part. The day of Victory in Europe was still 11 months away.

## **From Normandy to the Netherlands**

The savage fighting in Normandy continued throughout June and July of 1944. While the Americans fought to clear the enemy from the Cotentin peninsula and capture Cherbourg, the British and Canadians experienced some of the hardest fighting imaginable against the powerful Panzer divisions in the struggle to capture the city of Caen. In the face of fierce resistance and consequent heavy losses, progress was slower than expected. More

than a month elapsed before Carpiquet airfield was captured as a preliminary to the seizure of Caen. Caen was taken on July 10.

At this time the Headquarters of the 2nd Canadian Corps arrived, and in the fighting south of Caen the troops of all Canadian formations in France took part. The first task given to the Corps was to break out of Caen across the Orne River with the double objective of enlarging the bridgehead and holding down German troops to assist the American breakout in the west. The fighting, especially in the vicinity of Verrières Ridge, was tough and bloody, resulting in heavy losses for only slight territorial advances. However, the strategic gains were great. With some of Germany's best armoured formations thus engaged on the Anglo-Canadian front, the Americans were able to break out of Cherbourg and begin the encircling movement around the German forces. In the final phase of the holding strategy, the Canadians on July 25, attacked on either side of the Caen-Falaise Road. The casualties were heavy as the powerful German forces held their ground. However, on the same day the First United States Army broke through the enemy positions near St. Lô, and the Germans began to move their armour away from the Caen sector to meet this American threat.

Meanwhile, on July 23, the Headquarters of the First Canadian Army became operational. Under the command of General Crerar, this First Canadian Army would become international in character. In addition to its Canadian divisions (the 2nd and 3rd Infantry and the 4th Armoured divisions), it had a Polish division, British corps and at various times American, Belgian and Dutch troops.

As the Americans swept round from the south enveloping the German troops in a huge pocket, General Crerar's First Canadian Army was ordered to Falaise along the line of the pocket's opening. Lieut.-General G.G. Simonds, in command of the 2nd Canadian Corps, planned the operation to take place at night using armoured personnel carriers to transport the infantry, and tanks to both spearhead and follow the assault. The attack began just before midnight August 7, preceded by heavy air bombardment, directed by red and green flares fired by the artillery. The attack achieved initial success, as the first defensive lines were overrun including the ridge at Verrières where Canadians had died in the July campaign. Then, in the face of stiff German resistance and errors in Allied bombing which inflicted casualties on their own troops, the momentum could not be maintained.

It was vital that Falaise be captured without delay to unite with the American forces moving up from the south. General Simonds ordered a second assault. Similar tactics were employed except that this time the attack took place in daylight with smoke screens replacing the cover darkness had given in the earlier phase. There was again an error in Allied bombing, but this time the assault succeeded. Falaise was taken on August 16.

Large German forces were not caught in the steadily shrinking pocket from which the only exit was the narrow gap between Falaise and Argentan. The task of closing the gap fell, in particular, to the First Canadian Army.



Fighting desperately to get out of the trap, the Germans provided Allied aircraft with easy daylight targets. Many were killed. By August 19 the gap was loosely closed, but the encircled Germans continued to counter-attack. While their losses were heavy, substantial numbers did manage to escape before the pocket was firmly sealed.

After the Allied victory in Normandy, Germany could no longer hold France. On August 25, Paris was liberated by French and American troops. The German armies weakened, but not destroyed, had retreated to their own frontiers. Behind their West Wall defences, they prepared for a last desperate stand.

## **Clearing the Coast**

The First Canadian Army was now assigned the task of clearing the coastal areas and opening the channel ports for vital supplies.

On the left flank of the Allied forces, the Canadians pushed rapidly eastward through France towards Belgium. September began with the 2nd Canadian Division being welcomed to Dieppe. Boulogne, Calais, and Cap Gris Nez followed, and by the end of September the Channel coast, with the exception of Dunkirk, had been cleared and southern England freed of the harassing fire of Hitler's weapons which had been launched from these sites. Farther north, the Second British Army seized the port of Antwerp with its installations virtually intact.

Meanwhile, the British and American troops had pushed forward on a broad front and were engaged in a major struggle in southern Holland. In September, in a bold effort to cut through Holland, the Second British Army mounted an airborne attack to secure their crossings at Grave, Nijmegen and Arnhem. If successful this operation would have given the Allies control between the Rhine and IJsselmeer (Zuiderzee), and would have severed the connection between Holland and Germany. As it fell just short of success, it became apparent that the war would continue through the winter and into the spring of 1945.

## **The Battle of the Scheldt**

Under the circumstances, the opening of the port of Antwerp, already occupied by Allied troops, became absolutely necessary since the main supply lines still ran back to Normandy. The task went to the First Canadian Army which came under the command of Lieut.-General Guy Simonds in place of General Crerar who was ill.

Although Antwerp was already occupied by Allied troops, it was 50 miles from the sea, and the approaches to it, including both banks of the Scheldt River, the South Beveland isthmus and peninsula, as well as the island of Walcheren which commanded the river's mouth, were controlled by the Germans. Until these areas were cleared, no ship could enter.

The plan for opening the estuary involved four main operations. The first was to clear the area north of Antwerp and close the South Beveland isthmus. The second was to clear the

Breskens "pocket" behind the Leopold Canal, and the third was the reduction of the Beveland peninsula. The final phase would be the capture of Walcheren Island.

Accordingly, at the beginning of October 1944, the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division began its advance north of Antwerp to close the eastern end of the South Beveland isthmus. It made good progress to the isthmus itself where enemy paratroopers barred the way. Casualties were heavy as troops of the Canadian Army attacked over open flooded ground, but by October 16, they had seized Woensdrecht at the entrance to South Beveland. At this point, Field-Marshal Montgomery ordered a regrouping of all his forces to concentrate upon the opening of the Scheldt estuary. The British Second Army attacked westwards to clear the Netherlands south of the Maas and seal off the Scheldt region, while General Simonds concentrated on the area north of the Beveland isthmus. The 4th Canadian Armoured Division was moved north of the Scheldt and drove hard for Bergen-op-Zoom. By October 24 the isthmus was sealed off, and by October 31 the peninsula had fallen.

Meanwhile, there was equally fierce fighting along the Scheldt's southern shore. Here the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division encountered tenacious German resistance as they fought to cross the Leopold Canal and clear the Breskens pocket. The attack began on October 6 against fierce opposition and for three days a slender bridgehead was in constant danger of elimination. Then on October 9 an amphibious assault broke the enemy hold on the canal and the bridgehead was deepened. Troops and tanks crossed the canal and the Germans withdrew into concrete emplacements along the coast. More fighting followed, but by November 3 the south shore of the Scheldt was free.

The island of Walcheren remained the one great obstacle to the use of the port of Antwerp. Its defences were extremely strong and the only land approach was the long narrow causeway from South Beveland. To make matters worse, the flats that surrounded this causeway were too saturated for movement on foot while at the same time there was not enough water for an assault in storm boats.

The attack was to be made from three directions across the causeway from the east; across the Scheldt from the south; and from the sea. To hamper German defence the island's dykes were breached by heavy RAF bombing to inundate the central area and thus permit the use of amphibians.

The Canadians attacked the causeway on October 31 and after a grim struggle established a precarious foothold. Then, in conjunction with the waterborne attacks, the 52nd British Division continued the advance. On November 6 Middleburg, the island's capital fell and by November 8 all resistance ended. The channel was cleared of mines and on November 28 the first convoy entered the port of Antwerp.

## The Rhineland Campaign

Following the Battle of the Scheldt, the Canadians were given the responsibility of holding the line along the Maas and the Nijmegen salient. This was a largely static period of three months spent in planning and preparation for the spring offensive, although some sharp clashes took place.

In February 1945, the Allies launched the great offensive which was designed to drive the enemy back over the Rhine and bring about final defeat.

The first phase of the campaign began in the north where Field-Marshal Montgomery had under his command the Ninth U.S. Army as well as his British and Canadian forces. There were to be two formidable thrusts. The First Canadian Army would advance from the Nijmegen salient south-eastward to clear the corridor between the Rhine and the Maas, while the Ninth U.S. Army would drive north-east and converge with the Canadians on the Rhine opposite Wesel.

In this battle the First Canadian Army, again under General Crerar's command, was strengthened by the addition of Allied formations, and became the largest formation a Canadian officer had ever commanded in action. The task called for the clearing of the great Reichswald Forest, the breaking of the Siegfried Line, clearing the Hockwald Forest defences and closing up the Rhine.

Given the code name *Veritable* the offensive was launched on February 8, preceded by a crushing air and artillery attack on the enemy positions. Progress was not easy. Mud and flooded ground hampered the advance and at times troops floundered through water three feet deep. Moreover, the American drive from the south was delayed and the enemy was able to reinforce its positions. Nevertheless, the outer defences of the Siegfried Line fell and, far on the left the "water rats" of the 3rd Division were able to cross flooded land and achieve significant gains. Thereafter, in a foot-by-foot advance through the pine forest of the Reichswald and the water-logged countryside, the British and Canadian soldiers fought their way forward, until on February 21, they had cracked the vaunted Siegfried Line.

The formidable defences about the Hochwald Forest and Balberger heights still barred the way to the Rhine. The assault against these formidable positions was launched on February 26 by the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Infantry Divisions and the 4th Armoured Division. the advance was an agonizing repetition of the Reichswald battle with troops holding slight gains against fierce enemy counter-attacks as tanks, handicapped by mud and rain, struggled forward. It took until March 4 to clear the enemy from both objectives. The Americans were now also making progress from the south. Resistance continued until March 10 when the enemy blew up the bridges of the Wesel and withdrew to the east bank of the Rhine.

During this month of fighting, the First Canadian Army lost 15,634 killed, wounded or missing, including 5,304 Canadians, but they had gained the banks of the Rhine which marked the last major line of German defence.

## **Liberation of the Netherlands**

The way was now clear for the final phase of the campaign in Northwest Europe. On March 23 the Allied forces began the assault across the Rhine. Although the First Canadian Army as such took no part in the crossings, the troops of the 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade, under British Command, participated in the crossing of the Rhine at Rees, and the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, dropped successfully east of the river near Wesel. Several days later the 3rd Division crossed the Rhine and fought its way to Emmerich.

With the Rhine behind them, it was now possible for the Allied forces to exploit their great advantage in numbers and to press forward into Germany. On the eastern front the Russians were approaching Vienna and were ready to advance over the Oder River against Berlin.

The Canadian Army's role in these final days of the war was to open up the supply route to the north through Arnhem, and then to clear the northeastern Netherlands, the coastal belt of Germany eastwards to the Elbe River, and western Holland.

This time the First Canadian Army was far more completely Canadian than ever before as the 1st Canadian Corps which had fought so long in Italy had been transferred to Northwest Europe. Two Canadian Army corps would fight side by side for the first time in history. The 2nd Canadian Corps would clear the northeastern Netherlands and the German coast, and the 1st Canadian Corps would deal with the Germans remaining in the western Netherlands north of the Maas.

## **Northeastern Holland**

The 2nd Canadian Corps' northern drive rapidly gained momentum and as the troops crossed into the Netherlands they were greeted by the enthusiastic demonstrations of the liberated Dutch people.

On the right Major General Vokes' 4th Canadian Armoured Division crossed the Twente Canal and pushed forward to capture Almelo on April 5, before curving eastward to re-enter Germany. In the centre, the 2nd Division crossed the Schipbeek Canal and advanced in a virtually straight line to Groningen in northern Holland which they reached on April 16. The 3rd Division, on the Corps' left flank, was charged with clearing the area

adjoining the Ijssel and after several days of stiff fighting occupied the historic Zutphen on April 6. Then, pushing forward they captured Deventer, Zwolle and Leeuwarden and reached the sea on April 18.

The operations of the 2nd Corps were then extended from eastern Holland into western Germany. The 4th Division crossed the Ems River at Meppen and combined with the 1st Polish Armoured Division in thrusts on Emden, Wilhelmshaven and Oldenburg. The 3rd Division also moved on Emden; while the 2nd Division advanced from Groningen to the area of Oldenburg.

## **Western Holland**

In the western Netherlands the 1st Canadian Corps comprising the 1st Canadian Infantry division and the 5th Canadian Armoured Divisions, under the command of Lieut.-General Charles Foulkes, was responsible for the liberation of the area north of the Maas River. In this region with its large cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague, the people had almost reached the end of their endurance from the misery and starvation which had accompanied the "Hunger Winter." Food supplies in the cities were exhausted, fuel had run out almost entirely and transport was virtually non-existent. Thousands of men, women and children had perished.

The assault on Arnhem began on April 12, and after much house-to-house fighting the town was cleared two days later. The 5th Division then dashed northward to the Ijsselmeer some 30 miles away to cut off the enemy defending against the 1st Division at Apeldoorn. Apeldoorn was occupied by April 17.

By April 28 the Germans in West Holland had been driven back to a line running roughly between Wageningen through Amersfoort to the sea, known as the Grebbe Line. On that day a truce was arranged, fighting ceased in western Holland, and several days later food supplies began to move through for the starving people. No part of western Europe was liberated at a more vital moment than the west of the Netherlands, and the Canadian soldiers who contributed so immensely to that liberation were cheered and greeted with great joy.

On April 25 the American and Russian troops met on the Elbe. A few days later in Berlin, encircled by the Russians, Hitler committed suicide. The war ended a week later. On May 5, in the village of Wageningen, General Foulkes accepted the surrender of the German troops in Holland. General Simonds of the 2nd Corps, in Bad Zwischenahn, did the same on his front. The formal German surrender was signed on May 7 at Rheims in France.

## **The End of the Pacific War**

As millions of people celebrated Victory-in-Europe (V-E) Day, the Allied leaders grimly prepared for the final struggle in the Pacific, where the full weight of the Allied Forces would now be applied against Japan.

Canada, too, prepared for the assault. Nearly 80,000 Canadians volunteered to join the Pacific forces and began concentrating at nine stations across Canada in July 1945. Canadian naval participation was also to have been impressive: 60 ships, manned by 13,500 men. However, the war was over before this help was needed. President Truman of the United States had made the fateful decision to use the atomic bomb.

On August 6, 1945, the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, a city of over 100,000 people. The results were terrifying. A third of the city was obliterated; the rest lay in ruins. Three days later, a second and larger bomb totally destroyed the port of Nagasaki. The Japanese government sued for peace on the following day and, on August 14, 1945, Japan accepted the Allied terms of unconditional surrender. The Second World War was over.

## **The War at Sea**

In the First World War Canada's front line was in France and Belgium. In the Second World War, when distance could be spanned by long-range aircraft and submarines, the front line lapped against Canada's Atlantic shoreline, and on the west coast fear of an invasion by Japan grew intense.

To most Canadians in the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) was identified with the bitter submarine war in the North Atlantic, but Canadian warships also served in other waters and other endeavours. They were engaged in the Mediterranean, Caribbean and Pacific theatres of war; served with the British fleet off Norway; accompanied convoys to Russia; and participated in coastal operations off northwest Europe. As well, by the end of the war, 4,000 Canadian seamen had served on loan to the Royal Navy in various branches from the Fleet Air Arm to the submarine service.

In 1942 Canadian sailors helped man the landing craft which put troops ashore during the fateful raid on Dieppe. They also aided Allied operations in North Africa by convoying and supporting troops, manning landing craft flotillas and later protecting the supply lines for material and reinforcements. In 1942, although heavily involved in the Atlantic war, the RCN was large enough to contribute substantially to the landings in Sicily and Italy. Four flotillas of landing craft, manned by 400 Canadian seamen, took part in these operations. The subsequent surrender of Italy lessened the need for warships in the Mediterranean and Allied destroyers could then be withdrawn to reinforce the Atlantic forces.

Naval preparations for the Allied invasion of Europe began late in 1943. The RCN shared in attacks on enemy warships and waterborne traffic, undertook anti-shipping patrols and supported mine-laying sorties across the English Channel. From bases in southern England two new Canadian Motor Torpedo Boat (MTB) Flotillas took part in sorties against German inshore convoys.

When the vast Allied armada advanced across the Channel on D-Day 1944, 60 Canadian destroyers, corvettes, frigates and minesweepers were there. They included two flotillas of motor torpedo boats and two of the six escort groups of destroyers, frigates and corvettes. The Canadian destroyers, *Haida*, *Huron*, and *Iroquois* helped guard the flanks of the fleet during the crossing.

The Allied assault on the beaches of Normandy began at dawn. Minesweepers went in first, clearing lanes and dropping lighted buoys to guide the armada to the shore. Six Canadian Bangor class vessels helped sweep mines from the path of the invading fleet in the British sector; ten others swept the way to an American beach. Behind them came the assault ships, including HMCS *Algonquin* and HMCS *Sioux*, to bombard enemy installations and provide cover for the disembarking troops.

The landing ships followed, and in the absence of enemy counter-fire unloaded their landing craft filled with soldiers. Among the infantry landing ships were two converted Canadian merchant cruisers, the *Prince Henry* and *Prince David*, and three landing craft flotillas. Farther west, five Canadian corvettes conveyed blockships to form artificial harbours off the beach.

The navy remained active in the months following D-Day. Until European ports were captured, resupply had to be carried out across the beaches and the minesweepers and landing craft flotillas were thus fully employed. Intense coastal warfare continued as well. Two Canadian MTB flotillas covered the beaches near Le Havre and engaged in search and pursuit operations in the Channel. They destroyed enemy ships in convoy and sank and damaged enemy torpedo boats and gun boats, until they, themselves, fell victim to German mines. Canadian corvettes, meanwhile, carried out escort duty, fending off enemy ships and submarines.

The combined efforts of the naval and ground forces freed the European ports and forced the Germans to abandon their Bay of Biscay submarine bases. However, the German undersea fleet was moved to Norway and to North Sea bases and continued to threaten lines of communication, and to attack Murmansk-bound convoys. In August, the Canadian-commanded escort carrier *Nabob* joined the Home Fleet for naval-air operations against German targets in Norway, where she unfortunately fell victim to a U-boat attack. The Canadian destroyers, *Algonquin* and *Sioux* continued operations with the Home Fleet. During September 1944, they joined the North Russia convoy run, and in the autumn and winter were frequently used to protect carriers on anti-shipping and minelaying sorties.

Canadian ships also aided in the landing of troops in southern France and put a British Commando unit ashore on the Greek island of Kithera. On October 14, 1944 they landed British and Greek soldiers at the Piraeus, the port of Athens.

Even as the war against Germany drew to a close, the battle of the seas went grimly on. The U-boats, with new equipment, could not yet be discounted. In the last five months of the war they sank a half a million tons of Allied shipping. The continuing danger of submarine attack meant that Canadian anti-submarine sea and air forces were still required in European waters. At least 25 per cent of the 426 escort vessels in British home waters in 1945 were Canadian. The RCN thus came to carry a large share of the burden in the struggle for control of Britain's coastal waters. Statistics indicate the effectiveness of that force. Of the 27 U-boat kills credited to the RCN between 1939 and 1945, 20 occurred east of the 35th meridian of longitude and 17 of those took place after November 20, 1943.

For the navy the fighting against the Germans ended on May 8, 1945.

With the defeat of Germany attention could be focused on the Pacific for the final war against Japan. In the early years of the war, when the battle of the Atlantic was critical, Canada had been forced to give the Pacific theatre low priority. Base facilities were expanded and Esquimalt, Vancouver and Prince Rupert were reorganized, but by October 1940 the only naval force of any size on the west coast was the Fisherman's Reserve of 17 vessels and 150 officers and men drawn from British Columbia's fishing community.



In June 1942 the United States requested Canadian assistance when the Japanese seized the Aleutian islands of Attu and Kiska and bombed the nearest United States base at Dutch Harbor. The Canadian ships, *Prince David* and *Prince Robert*, performed convoy escort duty and helped the Americans concentrate their troops for the attack against Attu which they regained in May. The Canadian corvette *Dawson* made a final trip to Alaska in July when she escorted a troop convoy for the assault on Kiska. No Canadian warship was present on August 15, 1942, when a joint American-Canadian force made an amphibious landing on the island only to find that the Japanese had already evacuated it.

Canadian naval participation in the final stage of the Pacific war was to have included 60 ships, manned by 13,500 men. In fact only one ship, the cruiser *Uganda* took an active part; the end came quickly for Japan, and before other Canadian ships could be sent.

Canadian seamen had played a significant role in the sea war against Germany. Beginning the war with only six fairly modern destroyers, five small minesweepers and



two training vessels, the Royal Canadian Navy ended with 373 fighting ships most of which were built in Canada. At the outbreak of hostilities they were barely 1,800 permanent force officers and men and a reserve force of 1,200. When peace came in 1945 this number had swelled to more than 113,000 of which 7,126 were enlisted in the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service. Canadian ships shared in the sinking of 29 German and Italian submarines. And 1,190 Royal Canadian Navy personnel died in the service of their country.

## **The War in the Air**

Canadian achievements in the air during Second World War were remarkable. The smallest of Canada's three services in 1939, with insufficient manpower and inadequate equipment, the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) expanded by 1945 to the fourth largest air force of the Allied powers. RCAF units took part in every major air operation overseas, from the Battle of Britain to the bombing of Germany and, in addition, played an important role in air training and in the protection of shipping and transportation. They flew every kind of aircraft there was from the workhorse Dakota to the Mosquito, Halifax, Liberator, Lancaster and the glamorous Spitfire. In all, more than 232,500 men and 17,000 women served in the RCAF both in home defence and farther afield. They flew into the German industrial heartland, with the Desert Air Force in the Middle East, on coastal patrol from Ceylon, over the Burma Road, the Norwegian fiords, and out over the Atlantic on U-boat patrol. In addition, thousands of Canadians served with the RAF overseas.

Canadian air personnel were involved in three major areas of service during the war: the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan; the theatre of war overseas; and the Home War Establishment.

## **The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan**

One of Canada's most distinctive contributions to the war effort was the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. Under an agreement signed in December 1939, Canada provided training facilities for airmen from all parts of the Commonwealth. Far away from actual fighting, and with excellent flying conditions, Canada was ideally suited to such a program. She also possessed a great deal of the necessary expertise and facilities. A large number of Canadians trained during the First World War were still active airmen and the opening up of the vast northland had created others.

This was a gigantic undertaking. An army of experts had to be assembled, airfields developed, and equipment, including airplanes, procured. Training began in the spring of 1940. By the end of 1943 more than 3,000 students were graduating each month. By the

end of the war the BCATP had produced 131,553 aircrew including pilots, wireless operators, air gunners and navigators. Of these more than 55 per cent were Canadians.

## **Home Defence**

In August 1939, even before Canada's entry into the war, the Eastern and Western Air Commandos of the RCAF were formed and had begun patrols in the northwest Atlantic and northeast Pacific. The commands were established to defend Canada from the air and to protect convoys carrying vital supplies to Europe. As the war continued air force bases were opened all along Canada's eastern and western coasts.

Eastern Air Command provided almost all of the air protection in the northwest Atlantic during the war. When long-range aircraft became available this protection extended for hundreds of miles out over the ocean. Transport squadrons were also formed to provide, for the first time, regular heavy transport and mail services by air across the Atlantic.

The heaviest action came from 1942 to May 1943 when enemy U-boat activity moved to the western Atlantic. The resources of the Command were fully extended in meeting the threat which reached into Canadian waters. Although by the summer of 1943 the worst was over, the danger remained until the last submarine in the area surrendered in May 1945.

The statistics for the Eastern Air Command of six submarines sunk and three heavily damaged do not adequately portray the thousands of hours of flight from isolated air bases, the vast expanses of sea patrolled, often in foggy conditions, or the number of attacks on enemy submarines, all of which aided the supply convoys to travel unmolested.

Western Air Command saw little action until Japan's entry into the war in December 1941. It had, however, been making preparations through intensive training and by modernizing its equipment. From the spring of 1942 until July 1943, two fighter squadrons and one bomber reconnaissance squadron from the Command flew with the Americans on reconnaissance patrols and strafing missions to assist in expelling the Japanese from the Aleutian islands of Kiska and Attu. It was in the northeast Pacific that the only enemy plane destroyed by the Canadian home command, a Japanese Zero, was shot down.

Western Air Command was also responsible for the establishment of an air supply route to Alaska, the Aleutians and Russia. This service expanded to such a degree that the Northwest Air Command was created in June 1944 to administer and maintain its airfields and facilities.

## **Overseas**

In the early months of the war, the heavy commitments to Canadian air defence and to the development of the BCATP meant that only three RCAF squadrons could be spared

for overseas service. This number was steadily increased so that by war's end there were 48 RCAF squadrons serving in the Western European, Mediterranean and Far Eastern theatres.

In addition to those who served in the RCAF, thousands of young Canadians crossed the Atlantic to join the Royal Air Force. In Coastal Command, Bomber command, Fighter Command and other units of the RAF, they took part in all aspects of the air war over Europe. This Canadian contribution was recognized early in the war when the first all-Canadian unit with the RAF, the 242 (Canadian) Squadron, was set up. The squadron was in action from the very beginning conducting patrols across the Channel to protect the evacuation of Dunkirk, and participating in the struggle for the survival of Britain.

RCAF squadrons were engaged extensively in both fighter and bomber operations. As we have seen, No. 1 Fighter Squadron, after only a few weeks of training, had joined the Fighter Command in the Battle of Britain in 1940. Then, as the *Luftwaffe* was repulsed and the German invasion prevented, Fighter Command quickly moved to the offensive. Separately, or in conjunction with Bomber Command, fighters struck into Nazi-occupied France and Belgium to attack enemy troop movements, ammunition factories, airfields and gun positions.

At first the Canadian squadrons flew in formation with the RAF units, but as their numbers increased, all-Canadian wings were formed. By D-Day 1944, there were three RCAF Spitfire wings, a wing flying dive-bombing Typhoons, and a reconnaissance wing of Spitfires and Mustangs. On August 19, 1942, eight of the 74 Allied squadrons which gave aerial support to the raid on Dieppe belonged to the RCAF.

By the spring of 1944, with the *Luftwaffe* virtually driven from the coastal area, preparations began for the Allied invasion of the continent. The Spitfires became fighter-bombers carrying a 500-pound bomb under each wing and, together with a wing of Typhoons, engaged in bombing bridges, railways, radar posts and coastal defences. The RCAF Reconnaissance Wing, equipped for ground attack as well as for taking photographs, made regular sorties across the Channel.

The RCAF Fighters were also to work in close support of the invading armies when the Allies returned to the Continent. For the invasion of Europe two complete groups of air support organizations were formed. The fighters, fighter-bombers, and reconnaissance squadrons would keep in touch with the front-line troops and help develop ground attack. It was hoped that the RCAF would support the Canadian ground forces when the time came to go into battle. In June 1943 No. 83 Group, to which the RCAF reconnaissance and fighter squadrons were transferred, was assigned to the First Canadian Army. Six home-defence squadrons were also sent overseas to join it. While No. 83 Group was not an all-Canadian formation, 15 of its 29 squadrons and half its ground establishment of 10,000 were Canadian. The expectation that Canadian land and air forces would go into battle together came to a disappointing end when on D-Day the highly experienced No. 83 Group was transferred to support the Second British Army which had been designated to manage the actual landing. The (all RAF) 84 Group was assigned to the Canadians.

The biggest and costliest Canadian air commitment was in bomber Command. In 1940, as hundreds of Nazi bombers ravaged Britain, the RAF had only limited aircraft with which to fight back. The situation was desperate. However during the winter of 1940-41, the RAF bomber force was reinforced with young fliers from the air-training schools of Canada and by new aircraft from British and Canadian factories. These aircraft included the large four-engined bombers - Stirlings, Halifaxes and Lancasters - each capable of carrying from five to seven tons of bombs.

Throughout 1941 and 1942 raids of steadily mounting intensity battered the industrial cities of Germany and struck U-boat bases, docks and railway centres from Norway to France. By the end of 1942 new radar devices enabled "Pathfinder" bombers with fire bombs and brilliant flares to guide the heavy bombers to their targets at night. In 1943 "saturation" bombing reached an appalling new level as German cities were subjected to massive bombing attacks.

Canada's responsibility in bomber operations also expanded dramatically. The first Canadian bomber mission was carried out on the night of June 12, 1941. A year later 68 RCAF aircraft took part in the first 1000-bomber raid, and by the end of the war Canadian squadrons were sending out more than 200 heavy bombers in single raids carrying 900 tons of bombs.

At the beginning of 1943, 11 Canadian bomber squadrons were brought together to form an all-Canadian Bomber Group, No. 6, under the command of Air Vice-Marshal G.E. Brooks, who was succeeded a year later by Air Vice-Marshal C.M. McEwen. In the beginning No. 6 Group suffered a grim casualty rate. Between March 5 and June 24, 1943, the group lost 100 aircraft, seven per cent of its strength. However, by mid-1944 with better equipment and training, more experience, a reprieve from bombing missions into Germany, and fighter protection up to the targets, the situation was reversed. At the end of 1944 No. 6 Group could boast the lowest casualties of any group in Bomber Command.

The value of the Bomber offensive against Germany remains bitterly controversial. The aim was to destroy military and industrial installations and, by destroying the means to war, to force Germany to surrender. However, war production was only minimally reduced in the bombing raids while thousands of civilians died, and great cultural centres were ruined. This was a terrible example of total war. Yet, as democracies were fighting for survival, the mass bombing of civilians, rightly or wrongly, appeared justified.

As well, the death toll in Bomber Command was tragically high. It took a special kind of courage to fly night after night across enemy territory in the face of German defences. Many of the big planes failed to return. Enemy night fighters and dense "flak" (anti-aircraft ground-fire) often inflicted heavy losses. A total of 9,980 Canadians lost their lives in Bomber Command.

When the Allies finally returned to the European Continent on June 6, 1944, the RCAF was there to provide support. Bombers of No. 6 Group dropped over 870 tons of bombs

on gun positions overlooking the beaches of Normandy, and fighter wings dive-bombed enemy strongholds and guarded the Allied landings. During the bitter fighting which followed around Caen, the RCAF gave air support to the Canadian and British forces, and when enemy troops were caught in the Falaise pocket, Spitfires and Typhoons attacked the long columns of vehicles with deadly machine-gun fire. The RCAF then helped cover the advance of the armies across northern France and Belgium, into the Netherlands, and finally across the Rhine and into Germany itself.

Outstanding exploits were performed by RCAF pilots as they drove the German Air Force from the sky and prepared the way for advancing armies. The Reconnaissance Wing carried out photographic and tactical reconnaissance to gather information, first for planning the operation itself and then in aid of the advance. This wing was to end the war deeper in Germany than any other RCAF unit. Canada also supplied a transport squadron for duties in northwestern Europe. Formed in the late summer of 1944, it towed gliders for the airborne landing at Arnhem in September and for the crossing of the Rhine at Wesel in March 1945. Its Dakotas dropped supplies and transported troops, equipment and ammunition, returning loaded with casualties.

## **Elsewhere**

Canadian airmen also took part in other air operations in other parts of the world. At one time or another seven RCAF units served in Coastal Command where they were continuously employed in the campaign against the U-boats, escorting convoys and searching the seas from Iceland to Gibraltar. One squadron stationed in northern Scotland and the Shetland Isles served as a coastal fighter unit. It carried out reconnaissance and escort missions across the North Sea to the coast of Norway. Later it became a strike unit attacking enemy shipping from the coast of Norway to the ports of southern France. Another squadron made daring attacks on enemy shipping off the Frisian Islands and the Dutch coast.

In the Mediterranean theatre Canadians assisted in the vital task of keeping Malta out of enemy hands and preventing the whole Mediterranean from falling under Axis domination. One out of every four Allied pilots who flew in the Battle of Malta was Canadian.

An RCAF squadron flying with the Desert Air Force from Egypt took part in the bombing of northern Italy, protected Alexandria and covered the Allied invasion of Sicily and Italy. Three other RCAF squadrons were sent to the Mediterranean to assist in the invasion of Italy and Sicily in June 1943. Based in Tunisia, they made almost nightly attacks on harbours, freight yards and rail junctions in preparation for the invasion.

A squadron of the RCAF was part of the Southeast Asia Air Command which patrolled the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf from late 1941 until late 1944. It was, in fact, a Canadian aircraft which noticed a Japanese fleet approaching Ceylon and, although shot down, sent a warning message which enabled the island's defences to be manned in time.

Two RCAF transport squadrons were also sent to Southeast Asia in 1944 to drop supplies by parachute into dense jungle and carry freight, casualties and other passengers. These unarmed squadrons encountered intense Japanese ground fire, and were, on one occasion, attacked by enemy fighters.

The air force that had started the war 3,100 strong, ended it with a roll call of 249,624. A total of 17,100 gave their lives in the service of their country.

## **Epilogue**

The Second World War was over. In the six years of conflict Canada had enlisted more than one million men and women in her Armed Forces. Of these, more than 45,000 gave their lives in the cause of peace and freedom.

While Canada's contribution to the victory was naturally smaller than that of her major allies, Great Britain and the United States, the quality of her achievement had been high. In the words of the official historian of the Canadian Army, Canada's record "might command respect even by the standards of the great powers."

It was not only the Canadian Army that emerged with a proud record. The Royal Canadian Air Force took a substantial share in the air offensive against the Nazi forces, and through the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan helped to train large numbers of airmen from other nations of the Commonwealth. The Royal Canadian Navy played a vital role in protecting Allied convoys from Nazi submarines that lurked beneath the Atlantic and was ultimately entrusted with the bulk of the convoy work.

Canada's economic effort too was impressive and her financial contribution generous. A whole new series of industries was created to meet the demands for war supplies from munitions to motor vehicles, aircraft and ships. In the field of diplomacy, Canada played a particularly important liaison role between Great Britain and the United States.

It would be a mistake to over estimate Canada's contribution to the defeat of the Axis powers, but for a country of 11 million people it was remarkable, and was such as to win the respect of other nations. With the third largest navy, the fourth largest air force and an army of six divisions, Canada had become a significant military power.

Canada as a nation matured through the ordeal of war and was now ready to assume new responsibilities as a member of the world community.

Throughout the world, the Commonwealth War Graves Commissions maintains graves and memorials to commemorate members of the Commonwealth Forces who died during the First and Second World Wars. A total of 109,980 Canadians are thus commemorated in 74 countries.

## Victoria Cross Winners

While individual acts of great courage occur frequently during war, only a few are seen and recorded. There are those that stand out as examples for all to admire and respect. During the Second World War, sixteen Canadians were awarded the Victoria Cross, the Commonwealth's highest military decoration for bravery. Their valour sets them apart as Canadians of the highest order.

<u>Company Sergeant Major</u> <u>John Robert Osborn</u>	<i>The Winnipeg Grenadiers</i>	Hong Kong, Dec. 19, 1941
<u>Lieutenant-Colonel</u> <u>Charles Cecil Ingersoll</u> <u>Merritt</u>	<i>The South Saskatchewan Regiment</i>	Dieppe, France, August 19, 1942
<u>Honorary Captain John</u> <u>Foote</u>	Canadian Chaplain Service	Dieppe, France, August 19, 1942
<u>Captain Frederick Thornton</u> <u>Peters</u>	Royal Navy	Oran, North Africa, Nov. 8, 1942
<u>Captain Paul Triquet</u>	<i>Royal 22<sup>e</sup> Régiment</i>	Casa Berardi, Italy, Dec. 14, 1943
<u>Major Charles Ferguson</u> <u>Hoey</u>	1st Battalion, The Lincolnshire Regiment	Maungdaw, Burma, Feb. 16, 1944
<u>Major John Keefer Mahony</u>	<i>The Westminster Regiment</i> (Motor)	Melfa River, Italy, May 24, 1944
<u>Pilot Officer</u> <u>Andrew Charles Mynarksi</u>	Royal Canadian Air Force	France, June 12, 1944
<u>Flight-Lieutenant</u> <u>David Ernest Hornell</u>	Royal Canadian Air Force	Sea Patrol, North Sea, June 25, 1944
<u>Squadron Leader</u> <u>Ian Willoughby Bazalgette</u>	Royal Air Force	Trossy St. Maximin, France, Aug. 4, 1944
<u>Major David Vivian Currie</u>	<i>The South Alberta Regiment</i> (29th Armoured Car Regiment)	Saint-Lambert-sur-Dives, France, August 18-20, 1944
<u>Private Ernest Alvia Smith</u>	<i>The Seaforth Highlanders of</i> <i>Canada</i>	Savio River, Italy, Oct. 21- 22, 1944
<u>Sergeant Aubrey Cosens</u>	<i>The Queen's Own Rifles of</i> <i>Canada</i>	Goch-Calcar, Germany, Feb. 25-26, 1945
<u>Major Frederick Albert</u> <u>Tilston</u>	<i>The Essex Scottish Regiment</i>	Hochwald, Germany, Mar. 1, 1945
<u>Corporal Frederick George</u> <u>Topham</u>	1st Canadian Parachute Battalion	Diersfordt Wood, Germany, Mar. 24, 1945
<u>Lieutenant Robert Hampton</u> <u>Gray</u>	Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve	Onagawa Bay, Honshu, Japan, Aug. 9, 1945