

Crerar's Lieutenants
Inventing the Canadian Junior Army Officer,
1939–45

Geoffrey Hayes



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Introduction

Bing Coughlin's cartoon character Herbie was a popular feature in the wartime Canadian Army newspaper the *Maple Leaf*. The short, stooped soldier with the long nose lived in a world where few commissioned officers dared tread. The few officers whom Herbie did see were of two types, some of which drew heavily from the Colonel Blimp stereotype created by David Low.¹ In one Herbie cartoon, three rotund, thickly moustached senior officers engage in heated debate; a map of Italy behind them reveals how far they are from the front. One of them pounds the table and exclaims, "It's impossible, – my batman told me so." A substantial body of work on Canadian generalship shows that the sketch had little in common with reality.²

Coughlin's portrayal of the junior commissioned ranks was even more curious, for he hid them. His officers (whom an enlisted soldier addressed as "Sir") always have their back turned to the viewer as they listen to Herbie's explanation for the latest screw-up. In one cartoon, the officer, clipboard in hand, braces as Herbie corrects him about the lorry truck that sits destroyed behind them: "No, not a total wreck, Sir. The horn still works." The anonymity of officers extended into battle. Coughlin again obscures the face of an officer who stares down at a map in an Italian slit trench. The soldier beside him asks warily, "How many more slit trenches to Berlin, sir?" Only when officers were absent from the frame could Coughlin poke gentle fun at the commissioned ranks. As Herbie and another enlisted man sweep the bottles from an officers' mess after a very successful party, they comment, "All I can say about this officers' mess is, – it most certainly is."³

Like those in Herbie's cartoons, the army's junior officers, its lieutenants and captains, did not easily fit into a wartime narrative.⁴ The army's official wartime history had little to say about them. It acknowledged that 42,613 men earned the King's Commission between September 1939 and June 1946. The official historian, Colonel C.P. Stacey, noted cryptically that "much could be written on the problem of finding the very large number of new officers by the Canadian Army ... and few topics are more important." Stacey was making a broad hint, but he devoted just eight pages to the selection and training of officers. He made much of the fact that nearly half of them had earned their commissions after



"How many more slit trenches to Berlin, sir?"

Cartoons from "Herbie Wuz Here." | Reprinted with permission from Algrove Publishing Limited



"All I can say about this officers' mess is, — it most certainly is!"

having first served in the enlisted ranks. In this, he echoed a long-held government position.⁵ As we shall see, the “through the ranks” policy formed part of an often complex conversation about the army’s commissioned leadership that was deeply rooted in Canadian society.

This book sets out to find these junior officers by asking two questions: How did the growth of the wartime Canadian Army prompt a discussion about the kind of man an officer was supposed to be? And how did the army’s junior officers negotiate their experience against that often shifting ideal? It explores these questions through a structural as well as a cultural study of the officer corps and argues that army officials worked to invent an ideal officer, drawing upon the immediate demands of wartime but also on pervasive, little discussed notions of social class and masculinity. In this, the image of the officer evolved dramatically. The book then examines how the army’s junior commissioned officers negotiated their wartime experience against these ideals. Many practised a kind of temperate heroism that distinguished them not only from the idealized, heroic vision of officership in the First World War, but also from British and even German representations of wartime leadership.

Creating the officer corps was not easy. In June 1943, General H.D.G. “Harry” Crerar, the main architect of First Canadian Army and then the commander of I Canadian Corps, was leading tens of thousands of Canadian soldiers massing in Scotland, preparing to take their place in the invasion of Sicily. Still, he found time to write a long memorandum that began, “Much confused thinking is prevalent at the present time in respect to who is, and what constitutes, an ‘Officer.’” Crerar then set to work defining an officer – whether non-commissioned, warrant, or commissioned – as a “person holding authority.” Authority was the “right to enforce obedience,” which arose from “being appointed to a position of responsibility and possessing the ability to fulfill its obligations.” However able an administrator Harry Crerar may have been, his didactic style inspired few.

Like this book, Crerar’s memorandum focuses on those officers whose authority came from a commission bestowed by King George VI. Crerar stressed that a commissioned officer was responsible for “the continuous and thorough training of all under his command” as well as “the efficient administration of that command, and the inculcation in it of high discipline and morale.” In this, Crerar observed that an army officer was a species apart from his Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) counterpart, whose commission came largely from his ability to fly or navigate an aircraft.⁶ Ultimately, an army officer’s highest responsibility was “to lead and to command his men in battle.” General Crerar’s attempts to define an officer revealed a great deal more than he realized.⁷

The structural component of this study traces how army officials under Harry Crerar tried to fit officers who had not yet been tested in battle into an army of the right size and balance. We know a good deal about the conscription crisis, when infantry shortages forced William Lyon Mackenzie King's government to dispatch conscripts overseas in the fall of 1944. Several prominent Canadian historians have tried to explain how this crisis could have arisen.⁸ Stephen Harris's careful study of Canadian Army professionalism ends in 1939, but that did not stop him from concluding that the army failed because of the misplaced assumption that the war was to be "a technological conflict in which victory would go to the side whose officers had received the soundest scientific education."⁹ Harris's assumption that the army failed drew partly from C.P. Stacey's official judgment of the Normandy campaign: "The Allies owed their victory in great part to numerical and material superiority." Luckily, the Allies had more air power and artillery, for a "proportion" of regimental officers "were not fully competent for their appointments, and whose inadequacy appeared in action and sometimes had serious consequences."¹⁰

It took decades before historians questioned Stacey's orthodoxy. Terry Copp's detailed studies of First Canadian Army conclude that it was generally well led and trained, and that it outfought its German opponents in Northwest Europe. Marc Milner's impressive work on the Canadians in the early stages of the Normandy campaign suggests much the same thing.¹¹ Such studies complement work by British historians David French, Jeremy Crang, and John Buckley, who also challenge the view that the Allies were no match for the Germans.¹² These works further remind us that the Allied armies were complex organizations, driven by deeply held societal expectations, unforeseen shortages and surpluses, and a battlefield that was far deadlier than anyone had anticipated. Not by sheer weight of numbers did the Allied armies defeat their opponents. Leadership mattered.

A third generation of historians has begun to explore the dynamics of the Canadian Army's junior leadership. Yves Tremblay's impressive (but possibly overly critical) assessment of the army's tactical and operational doctrine from 1919 to 1944 explores issues considered here, including the training of junior officers.¹³ But the present work is not a tactical study. Robert Engen's detailed analysis of questionnaires answered by hundreds of Canadian Army officers in 1944 and 1945 has shed light not only on their tactical performance, but also on how they maintained the army's morale and motivation. Engen's most recent work explains how formations could rebuild against casualties that undermined the social foundations of the regimental system. As he notes, the concept of "swift trust" meant that "strangers in arms" could quickly form cohesive fighting formations through shared training and experience.¹⁴ The pages that follow will detail

how young men were selected and trained to gain their men's swift trust. We will also see that the battlefield often gave young officers little chance to practise that trust before they were wounded, sent out, or killed. Here, we will catch glimpses of junior officers who died before their men even knew their names.

The rapid and unexpected growth of First Canadian Army forced officials to invent a wartime officer. They borrowed heavily from the British Army, but they also realized (or hoped) that often unspoken social and gendered expectations were different in Canada. These discussions were important enough to draw the attention of General Crerar, who tried to reconcile the army's need that officers come through the ranks with a desire that they be educated. Crerar's forced logic betrayed his background as the wealthy son of a Hamilton, Ontario, lawyer. Social class mattered in the wartime army, just as it did in the rest of Canadian society. The invention of the officer was partly an attempt to reconcile the army's demands with the pervasive expectations of the Canadian middle class.

The ideal officer was also highly gendered. It may seem obvious that soldiers, especially the officers commissioned to lead them, embody a form of what R.W. Connell once called "hegemonic masculinity." Perhaps that is why otherwise important studies of masculinity tend to overlook war and why important studies of military institutions and war similarly overlook any gendered analysis.¹⁵ But as John Tosh argues more broadly, forms of masculinity are so pervasive and so comprehensive "in the historical record it is as though masculinity is everywhere but nowhere."¹⁶ Perhaps here is another reason why junior officers, the embodiment of masculine ideals, were largely invisible in the Herbie cartoons. Yet in the pages that follow, we will find an army deeply concerned about defining a certain kind of masculine leader.

Of course, the image of the officer as a masculine warrior is not fixed.¹⁷ Masculinities evolve, or as Catharine Wilson has recently suggested, they are "performed and practised."¹⁸ This is a useful phrase, for masculine performance and practice were important in an army that was filled with civilians. Selecting and training these men uncovers masculine performance taught and learned, practised and evaluated. Paul Jackson rightly notes that the wartime Canadian Army was a highly gendered institution that had trouble negotiating the presence of homosexuals within its ranks.¹⁹ We will see here how masculine ideas about the army officer were a response not only to the short-term demands of the war, but to Canada's place in the British Empire, a contested memory of the First World War, the uncertainties of the 1920s and 1930s, and highly contrived masculine images of the German soldier.

Canadian scholars have made important links between masculinity and war before 1939. Mike O'Brien and Mark Moss, and more recently Mary Chaktsiris,

offer useful discussions of how a Canadian imperial man emerged before the First World War.²⁰ Still, James Wood and Tim Cook rarely mention masculinity in their recent analyses of the Canadian military before and during the Great War.²¹ Scholars more widely have paid much attention to how the First World War affected masculinity, even if there is no consensus on what its impact was.²² Still, an idealized, heroic masculinity echoed loudly when Great War veteran Victor Odlum spoke to officer cadets in 1941: "All you need is to be a man yourself. If you are not a man at heart, your men will soon know, and once they know they are lost to you forever."²³

We cannot know if Odlum's audience understood what he meant. As we explore in the first chapter, the foundations of the wartime army were firmly set within the confines of the pre-war militia and a tiny Permanent Force. But officials would soon have to look to what Cynthia Comacchio calls Canada's first "modern" generation. These men were born in the shadow of the First World War. Some pored over school primers that lauded the imperial soldier hero.²⁴ But they also saw the impact of the war and its aftermath on their fathers' generation. Many grew up with their fathers out of work; they also likely felt the sting of pension officials who refused their fathers' claims of psychological impairment by questioning their masculinity.²⁵ No wonder that this generation would draw from their newly defined adolescence and a growing mass culture to understand a more temperate view of war, and their own manliness. It was tough to figure out what kind of officers these young men would turn out to be.

There was no lack of trying. The second chapter explores the army's search for officers from its mobilization in the fall of 1939 to the summer of 1942. In that time, the army transformed its officer selection and training. Its officials also sought to define masculine ideals as never before. They produced materials to explain the rules and unspoken codes for men who had never been officers. Senior officers printed commentaries on how to behave in that all-male institution, the officers' mess. Personnel records kept careful note of an officer's size and health but also his religion, marital status, hobbies, pastimes, and demeanour. All of these formed markers to help choose the right kind of officer.

Chapter 3 examines the challenge of officer selection, especially after the army projected a substantial shortage in the summer of 1942. It too was a highly gendered exercise. Monthly training memoranda offered tips on masculine appearance and behaviour, explaining that a platoon commander should be a father figure for his men. Social scientists compiled lists of traits that harried personnel selection officers used in measuring an officer cadet's character. But

even as the army drew on the fledgling field of social science to find more officers, its officials still articulated middle-class masculine ideals as a benchmark for commissioned rank.

Chapter 4 traces how these ideals took form at officer training centres (OTCs) in Canada and Officer Cadet Training Units (OCTUs) in England. At these long forgotten facilities, tens of thousands of young cadets were given ninety days to practise what one contemporary called the “officer quality” – the balance between technical competence and the “moral equipment to inspire.”²⁶ In 1942, Milton Gregg took over the largest OTC, in Brockville, Ontario. In the military spectacles he organized, the boyish pranks he tolerated, Gregg wanted his officers to “be themselves.”²⁷ Gregg’s team worked to invent a new kind of officer drawn from the enlisted ranks.

A recipient of the Victoria Cross, Gregg was an important masculine role model. There were others. Pierre Berton was enthralled by David Niven, who portrayed a cool, young British officer in *The Way Ahead* in 1944.²⁸ A young Canadian soldier named Pete Coventry was no David Niven, but he was featured in three short docudramas produced by the National Film Board in 1943. His story, that of a lowly store clerk who rose through the ranks to train at OTC Brockville, is corny but curiously familiar. After taking Colonel Gregg’s salute on the parade square at Brockville and putting up the pips of a second lieutenant on his shoulders, Coventry sets out to win the respect of his tough platoon.²⁹ These films have received little attention,³⁰ but they depict with remarkable depth idealized forms of Canadian masculine practice at mid-century.

Chapters 5 to 8 explore the officer’s experience through 1943, the summer of 1944 in Normandy, the fall of 1944, and then the first five months of 1945. Becoming an officer was an exercise in negotiated manliness but of a particular kind. Not every officer was a handsome, brave man, leading a heroic “band of brothers.”³¹ In our post–Cold War, post–9/11 world, hero worship has become all too common. The reality of the 1940s was more subtle. Sonya Rose’s notion of the British civilian in wartime as a “temperate hero” offers a useful way to understand the Canadian Army officer. Rose maintains that British civilians drew from an “anti-heroic” masculinity after 1918 as well as from highly prized notions of British citizenship to comprehend the war. She traces a range of acceptable masculine behaviour “constructed in opposition both to a hyper-masculine Nazi-like image, and to images of emasculated or effeminate men personified by old men and cowardly pacifists.”³² The young Canadians who became army officers after 1939 understood a form of this temperate heroism. It was a way to differentiate themselves from their British comrades and their German opponents. Indeed, in the public memory, the carefully constructed

image of the manly German officer eclipsed that of his Allied opponents well after 1945.

In exploring how junior officers negotiated their experience on the battlefield, these chapters employ various sources. Terry Copp argues convincingly that days of heavy fatal casualties can help us see more clearly the intensity of operations. Casualty figures are not neutral; they do not distinguish between the incompetent, the unlucky, and the heroic. But they can shed light on an officer's experience. General Crerar kept a careful record of fatalities to ensure that officers were "taking the rap" – their share of casualties. He had his reasons for compiling this information, but for the officers themselves, the fatalities imposed a grim set of realities, and they reveal a wealth of intriguing patterns. During the Second World War, forty-six officers in the South Saskatchewan Regiment (SSR) were killed. No other infantry battalion in First Canadian Army lost nearly as many officers killed. As we shall see, the SSR was a most unlucky battalion, first at Dieppe, but even more so in Normandy. Fatalities forced some survivors to take on roles for which they had little training; for others, they imposed too heavy a burden. Some tried to remove themselves from battle. Above all, the dead speak against the notion that this was a mechanized war, even a scientific war. Just as a generation earlier, the infantry bore the brunt of the fatal casualties. That was especially true for the infantry officer.

Memoirs and letters provide yet another useful source, though they must be handled with some caution. If used to reconstruct a battle narrative, memoirs can be notoriously vague and contradictory, but they can reveal in subtle ways how young officers tried to make sense of their own experience.³³ Their letters remind us that they rehearsed a kind of cheerful bravado for the benefit of their wives, mothers, and children at home. The cynicism that sometimes dripped from their pens scarcely hid just how tired and scared they often were. Sandy Ross, Donald Pearce, and George Blackburn, as well as that most famous of Canadian Army officers Farley Mowat, based their eloquent memoirs on wartime notes. Their work remains tainted by decades of reflection, or in Pearce's case an earnest desire to keep his son from going to Vietnam. Farley Mowat's writings in the 1950s, the 1970s, and then his own edited collection of wartime letters in the 1990s are a study of how he tried to come to terms with his own difficult experience with the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment in Italy. These men wrote for a living, so they were hardly representative of the officer corps as a whole. But when read against the grain, their often banal comments help deconstruct a picture that is too often sketched in heroic outline.

The image of the army officer evolved dramatically as the war progressed. In 1940, the cavalry gave up its horses for tanks, and an officer's appearance evolved

in myriad ways. The six First Canadian Army officers who won the Victoria Cross (VC), the empire's highest award for valour, presented a complex mix of idealized masculine images: wise fathers, understanding husbands, humble yet courageous leaders. In David Currie especially, who won the VC for his actions in August 1944, the press found an attractive set of qualities. The photographs, newsreels, and press stories portray a shy, awkward, but handsome soldier who flew to England in greasy coveralls to receive his VC from King George VI. Currie's image seems dramatically different from that of the nattily dressed cavalry officer back in 1939. But it was no match for the handsome, perfectly tailored depiction of the German officer.

Appearances helped officers cope with the situations in which they found themselves. In battle, they learned to undermine dress regulations to look as much like their men as possible. Harold MacDonald celebrated, even flaunted, his improvised battlefield attire.³⁴ We should also not be surprised that many officers were too immature, old, bored, or simply exhausted to engage with their circumstances. Even so, few were willing to give up their commissions, which were too closely tied to their identity, their social position, and their self-image as men. By the way they wore their uniforms, the songs they sang,³⁵ the women they met, the awards they earned, the promotions they missed, the wounds and deaths they suffered, these young men tread on a difficult path marked by their lack of military training, often competing masculine expectations, and a battlefield where few had any experience. It is time to explore that world.

As C.P. Stacey makes clear, the postwar military had little to learn from these officers. Most who were commissioned after 1939 were neither professional soldiers nor pre-war militiamen. They were products of neither Royal Military College nor the local armoury. Historians who write about military professionalism have long echoed Stacey's conclusions that these hastily trained neophytes did not hold up against their German counterparts. Peter Kasurak's recent work on the postwar army dismisses them as part of "a British imperial force" that was chosen on the basis of "character rather than knowledge and expertise."³⁶ He may be right, but it is time to understand the experience of these men on their own terms.

Mark Humphries recently suggested that the study of Canadian military institutions needs to acknowledge frameworks that go beyond the nationalist and the commemorative.³⁷ Tim Cook's many fine studies of the Canadian Expeditionary Force demonstrate what we can gain by viewing a military institution from social and cultural perspectives.³⁸ Provocative works by Jeffrey Keshen and Paul Jackson suggest that we should apply a similar approach to First Canadian Army.³⁹ *Crerar's Lieutenants* heeds their call by exploring the

junior leadership of the army through new lenses. The army's attempts to define an ideal officer tell us about Canadians' often conflicting attitudes toward social class and masculine practice. This book also explores how young men reconciled these ideals against a harsh wartime experience with a remarkably wide array of masculine behaviour. As a study of military structure and culture, it strives to bring into view the officers who were obscured in both the Herbie cartoons and the popular imagination.

1

Foundations

In October 1939, the Department of National Defence issued the *Defence Forces List*, Part 1. It named the professional and part-time officers who would lead the Canadian Army, Navy, and Air Force during the first months of the Second World War. Its pages offer clues about the structure, but also the culture, of the early wartime officer corps. C.P. Stacey is surely right in noting that the tiny group of officers from the Permanent Force and the Non-Permanent Active Militia formed a foundation for the wartime army: “It produced, to no small extent, the leaders who built and developed that structure. And it gave the Army a group of personnel, officers and men, who continued to play dominant parts in it even when the great majority of the Army’s members had come to be volunteers of no militia experience recruited from civil life.”¹

But Stacey says nothing about the culture of that foundation, its connections to the British Army, the tensions between the Canadian military amateur and professional, the impact of the First World War, and the deep tribal rivalries between various branches and regiments. Nor does he mention that the officer corps embodied the often ambiguous and fluid affectations of the Canadian middle class.

If we are looking for an early image of the Canadian officer, we need go no further than the opening pages of the *Defence Forces List*, in which military outfitters showcased their wares. One advertisement features a tall, lean cavalry officer who sports high leather boots, spurs, and baggy jodhpurs. His bearing suggests masculine authority, which is reinforced by the objects he holds: a cane and leather gloves in his left hand, a cigarette in his right.² His Sam Browne belt gleams over his carefully tailored jacket. His tie has a small knot, and his wide felt cap shades his eyes. Most prominent is a thick, clipped moustache over an unsmiling mouth. The moustache was important. William Lyle recalls that the urgent need to look like a Permanent Force officer led to a shortage of moustache wax in Winnipeg during the opening months of the war.³

This is a neat picture of an ideal officer: immaculate, confident, lean, athletic, aloof, and unsmiling. There was no question that he was a man of means and position. If he was in Toronto, he outfitted himself at Beauchamp & How or at Sainthill-Levine and Company on Wellington Street West. F.V. Johnston and Company was on Front Street West, just opposite the Royal York Hotel. On

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Montreal's Lagauchetiere Street West, J.R. Gaunt and Sons offered quotations for its "Badges, Buttons, Swords, Helmets, Caps, Belts, Gold Lace and Embroidery." William Scully on University Street offered regimental colours, neckties, tobacco pouches, scarves, and military souvenirs in its catalogue. There were more prestigious overseas suppliers: Moore, Taggart and Company of Glasgow stocked the tartans required for membership in Canadian Highland regiments. Hawkes and Company (military tailors since 1771) boasted two English locations, on the High Street in Camberley and at 1 Savile Row, London. Such exclusive addresses served a clientele that was eager to acquire the accoutrements of commissioned rank.⁴

Nothing marks Beauchamp & How's cavalry officer as a Canadian. In 1939, the unit alliances, the commissions bestowed, the training, and the King's Orders and Regulations that guided the Canadian Permanent Force and the Non-Permanent Active Militia were modelled on the British Army. It had long been so. The British territorial militia became the model for a system of county militia regiments outlined in the 1855 Canadian Militia Act. When British regulars were called home soon after Confederation, and Canada reluctantly

assumed the costs of its own defence,⁵ a search began for Canadian professional soldiers. In 1876, the first eighteen men entered Royal Military College (RMC) at Kingston, Ontario. There, they would receive “a complete education in all branches of military tactics, fortification, engineering and general scientific knowledge in subjects connected with and necessary to a thorough knowledge of the military profession, and for qualifying officers for command and for staff appointments.” A new Militia Act in the 1880s authorized a Canadian Permanent Force to administer, train, and if necessary, mobilize the militia.⁶ No wonder that British general Sir Isaac Brock was such a heroic figure in Upper Canada; there was nothing especially heroic about the origins of the Canadian military establishment.

The first class to enter RMC in 1876 was an acknowledgement of the growing pressures to professionalize the Canadian military. These kind of developments marked a shifting masculine landscape that spread from the centre of the British Empire. In 1871, the United Kingdom became the last European power to abolish the practice that allowed wealthy men to purchase an army commission. The idea that a British officer could advance his career by qualification rather than pedigree took time to catch on, especially in the class-bound regiments of the late-nineteenth-century British Army.⁷

Such changes were in partial response to changing images of the late Victorian man. By mid-century, elite British men no longer felt it necessary to defend their honour in a duel.⁸ Increasingly, late Victorian men were measured by their occupation, work ethic, home, and “a restraint on physical aggression.”⁹ Character, a complex amalgam of courage, stoicism, sense of “fair play,” patriotism, and self-restraint, also found a receptive audience in North America.¹⁰ Theodore Roosevelt, who transformed himself from a sickly wealthy easterner into a cowboy, soldier, and president, enjoyed writing about such things.¹¹ Canadians doubtless read Roosevelt’s articles, as well as the works of Matthew Arnold, for they both embraced a growing cult of sport and a muscular Christianity.¹² Whether due to the perceived threat of immigration or the stifling, corrupting atmosphere of city life, Canadian elites eagerly welcomed the notion of manly character. Indeed, character was such a comprehensive concept in the 1940s that army planners would have trouble defining what it actually was.

We should note too that many looked upon Canadian soldiers, whether amateur or professional, with profound indifference in the years before 1914.¹³ As the memory of the Fenian invasions of the 1860s faded, both Liberal and Conservative governments understood the militia and the tiny Permanent Force as institutions rife with patronage.¹⁴ Military inspectors became increasingly critical of the soldiers and their officers in the late nineteenth century. So did some civilians. James Young, a prominent Liberal newspaper publisher from

Galt, Ontario, recalled in 1880 that the yearly militia muster “evoked a great deal of ill-feeling on the part of the people, who paid very little attention to these crude attempts at drill, but a good deal to any movement calculated to harass or turn the laugh upon the officers.” Young took some delight in recounting how one officer galloped into a rowdy football match to restore order. Whether by accident or on purpose, he struck a soldier on the head and quickly “retreated amidst a shower of stones.”¹⁵ Young’s partisan remarks were also a not-so-veiled warning that young Canadian militiamen would not always defer to military or social rank.

Indeed, an egalitarian streak ran through the pre-1914 Canadian militia. From the Canadian West came reports that troops cast ballots to select their officers; at least one artillery officer in British Columbia announced that, if enough of his soldiers so voted, he would resign his commission.¹⁶ These stories are hard to verify, but they reinforce the belief that social divisions between officers and their men were less rigid in rural areas, especially in western Canada, than they were in the towns and cities of central Canada.

No doubt, such stories brought only headaches to the British and Canadian professional officers who sought to improve training and not to be schooled in democracy. The rifts between the Canadian amateurs and the professionals who trained them simply widened through the imperial moment that reached a zenith with the Diamond Jubilee in 1897 and through the Boer War. In that time, Canadian militia officers could be openly resentful of tactless British generals who had little idea of how to treat them, for as one Canadian militia officer complained in 1898, “At reviews, inspections, and when training, militia officers expected to be treated as soldiers – citizen soldiers, and not like mercenaries.”¹⁷

Canada’s commitment to a role in the Second Anglo-Boer War fuelled a belief that its soldiers differed from those of Britain. The popular press celebrated the Canadian national characteristics that had helped win the decision at Paardeberg, when thousands of Boer troops had quite unexpectedly surrendered to Canadian troops in February 1900. As products of a “northern” country, the Canadians were portrayed as youthful, adventurous, and daring. Whether this image was accurate was less important than how it helped to distinguish the Canadian amateurs from their British professional allies, and also their Boer adversaries. In a world where notions of masculinity and imperialism were closely tied, the Canadian soldier had seemingly come of age on the South African veldt.¹⁸

Contemporary accounts of the Boer conflict did not fail to mention that French Canadians were part of the contingent that first sailed for South Africa. But the public references to imperial unity on their departure had a forced

quality.¹⁹ Civilian rifle clubs became increasingly popular in both English- and French-speaking Canada after the Boer War.²⁰ But the militia remained largely a British institution, which, as Henri Bourassa complained in 1899, was already destined to contribute to imperial conflicts overseas. Such reasoning little encouraged an interest in military affairs in francophone parts of the country. Militia patronage was common throughout Canada by the turn of the century, though as Desmond Morton points out, “French Canada offered few of the pressures for efficiency which came from military enthusiasts in English Canada.” The gulf between English and French units merely widened, given the problems that French-speaking officers encountered at the English-speaking RMC, and after 1911, the insensitivity of Minister of Militia and Defence Sam Hughes. There is little doubt why the “limits of loyalty” of French Canadian officers were so severely tested after 1914.²¹

The officer corps that led the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) is obscured amidst a complex web of storylines and heroic myths. For some commentators, the war highlighted the gap between the Canadian amateur and the professional. That story begins with the enthusiastic but destructive role of Sam Hughes, Robert Borden’s irreplaceable Militia and Defence minister from 1911 to 1916. Hughes built his political career by extolling the Canadian citizen soldier, whom he thought was inherently superior to the British professional. Historians who see Hughes as an obstacle to the Canadian professional have charged him with a multitude of sins. He ignored his professional advisors during the mobilization of the CEF.²² He insisted that Canadians carry the unreliable Ross rifle. Perhaps Hughes’s worst transgression was that he reserved the right to make officer appointments. Stephen Harris quoted J.F.C. Fuller, the British military critic who, after watching the First Contingent land in Devonport in late 1914, quipped that the contingent was satisfactory – only “if the officers could be all shot.”²³ Partisan and personal connections drove at least some of Hughes’s appointments. But in the war’s first years, Hughes could deflect any potential criticism with lofty rhetoric. As he told the Canadian Club of Ottawa in October of that year, all that he required in his “splendid young officers” was a “high spirit of pride.”²⁴

Pride only went so far. Some Hughes appointees performed well in that awful spring of 1915, when Canadian 1 Division lost a third of its strength at the second battle of Ypres.²⁵ The question of who should replace them proved contentious. Hughes resisted calls to commission the growing numbers of soldiers with battle experience, insisting that officer reinforcements should come from those he had selected to organize and lead local units overseas.²⁶ Only when the increasingly erratic minister was absent did Cabinet allow divisional and later corps commander General Edwin Alderson and his brigadiers authority to return

unfit officers to Canada. The triumph of military experience over politics was short-lived. Cabinet reversed itself in early 1916, giving Hughes again the right to intervene in officer appointments and promotion matters.²⁷ Sir Sam may have won a final battle, but his days as head of the portfolio and as de facto commander in chief were numbered, and he left the ministry in late 1916.

His departure may have marked a victory of administrative order over political amateurism. By 1917, an assistant military secretary was in place to administer all overseas appointments and promotions. The Ministry for Overseas Forces reported the following year that “practically no exceptions were made” to the policy that officer reinforcements in the Canadian Corps be “drawn from the rank and file serving in France.”²⁸

A new administrative order coincided with the growing reputation of the Canadian Corps, as the Canadians evidently exchanged the human-centred battlefield (Hughes’s “high spirit of pride”) for a technological one, in which better and more sophisticated weaponry determined success. The corps’ success in the summer and fall of 1918 confirmed in some eyes that technological innovations, most notably in the artillery, could bring victory.²⁹ This storyline is an enduring one, for it heralds the triumph of the professional over the amateur, merit over favour, and a learning curve that stressed the importance of technology over will on the battlefield.

Other storylines stress that Canadian officers were more successful because they enjoyed closer relationships with their men than did their British counterparts. Isabella Losinger maintains, however, that the few Canadian soldiers who ever saw a general gained a more favourable impression of British commanders such as Edwin Alderson and Julian Byng than they did of Canadians such as Arthur Currie. However able, most Canadian generals were not particularly charismatic, A.C. “Batty” Macdonnell being a notable exception.³⁰ Some unit commanding officers, such as Victor Odlum and William Griesbach, cared deeply about the welfare of their men. Soldiers appreciated a junior officer’s thoughtful paternalism, a kind gesture or remark. At least one officer described himself as a surrogate father to his platoon.³¹

However, the relationship between officers and men was not always idyllic. Soldiers could show a real disdain for the officer who lacked expertise, experience, or nerve. Sometimes a cruel trick on a nervous or unpopular officer reached across the military and social divide that separated the commissioned from the non-commissioned ranks. Postwar writers such as Will Bird and Charles Yale Harrison hint that soldiers actually killed, or thought of killing, unpopular officers. Such accounts are notoriously vague and were meant to balance the heroic memory of the war that appears in the many regimental histories written after the conflict.³²

Craig Mantle's preliminary study of officer-man relations in the CEF draws more nuanced conclusions. He argues that leadership styles varied dramatically as officers created a rapport with their men through "paternalism, power and the negotiated order." In this, he echoes the work of Gary Sheffield, who maintains that wartime officer-man relationships in the British Expeditionary Force were remarkably good. Mantle emphasizes an interaction that underscored a soldier's "deference in exchange for the officer's paternalism." An idealized paternalism became a benchmark in the next war, when aging generals urged young officer cadets to learn their men's names and backgrounds. But transplanting the paternalism of the relatively static Western Front onto the battlefields of Italy and Northwest Europe would prove a challenge. Concepts such as power and the negotiated order would be understood differently twenty years on. In 1916, J.J. Creelman noted casually how two of his servants faced Field Punishment No. 1. Both were strapped to a wagon wheel as public penance for breaking some section of military law. The next generation of officers had neither Field Punishment No. 1 nor the death penalty to instill discipline in their war.³³

Certainly, promising and lucky young men were indeed chosen from the ranks to become commissioned officers. One of them was Milton Gregg. A native of Mountain Dale, Kings County, New Brunswick, he was twenty-two and a student at Acadia University when he enlisted in November 1914 and went overseas as a private,³⁴ joining the 13th Battalion, CEF, in England as a medical orderly. At Second Ypres in April 1915, he was shot in the foot, but his actions drew notice. The following spring, Gregg found himself at Trinity College, Cambridge, as part of the University's Officers Training Corps. According to Hew Strachan, these institutions were "to generate something of the peacetime atmosphere of university life. They produced magazines, staged dramatic productions, rowed, played rugby and were numerically the largest body within Cambridge at the time."³⁵ Such efforts made a lasting impression on Milton Gregg, who was commissioned in the British Army in September 1916 but soon transferred back to the CEF, this time with the Royal Canadian Regiment. In June 1917, Lieutenant Gregg was severely wounded in the right buttock but earned the Military Cross for his actions south of Lens in August. The citation noted his "conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty" in leading a group of bombers against a German machine gun crew, "which he outflanked and annihilated." Despite his wounds, he carried a fellow officer to safety.³⁶ He repeated this action a year later by leading a rush on another machine gun position, where "his courage and good leadership saved a critical situation."³⁷ Near Cambrai, in late September 1918, Gregg again took the initiative, finding a hole in the wire that was blocking the brigade advance beyond the Canal du Nord.



Lieutenant Milton Gregg, VC, in a photo taken soon after winning the Victoria Cross in 1917. | Department of National Defence / LAC, Mikan no. 3216329

He then led the attack into an enemy trench. Again wounded, he fetched more bombs, returned to reorganize his men, and “with the greatest determination” cleared the trench, killing or wounding eleven and taking twenty-five prisoners. Two days later, he was wounded again. For these actions, Gregg became one of twenty-one Canadian lieutenants to earn the Victoria Cross, the British Empire’s highest award for valour during the First World War.³⁸ Milton Gregg, VC, was to be a remarkable role model for young officers a generation later

The First World War figured prominently in the *Defence Forces List* of 1939. Scores of tiny crossed swords mark the officers who had participated in the conflict. Ten pages detail how the numbered formations of the CEF (some 260 numbered infantry battalions) were perpetuated two decades later. Great War battle honours for each formation were set in boldface, “**Mount Sorrel**” or “**Somme, 1916**,” and borne on the regimental colours. Such elaborate efforts helped strengthen the impression that the pre-war militia had played its part in the making of the CEF.³⁹