

D-Day Plus 60: Remembering Canada's Second World War

Article by Darren R. Préfontaine

As I watched the march past by our dwindling old warriors during the 60th anniversary of the D-Day invasion¹, I felt a great pride in the sacrifice, which our nation made to freedom so long ago. Veterans², their generation, and historians know that as a nation our war efforts in 1939-45 (and previously in 1914-18) were profound. 60 years ago, Canada was a major player in the victory against fascism. The Dominion took Juno Beach – one of five D-Day invasion beaches and, along with our Polish allies, did the hardest, dirtiest fighting in Western Europe as we smashed through the seemingly impenetrable hedgerows of Normandy into the Falaise Gap, waded through booby-trapped, chest-high water in the Scheldt Estuary and then proceeded into the flooded polders of the Netherlands. With silent confidence and sheer determination, the Canadians made short work of the world's most formidable army. Little wonder that the Germans would learn to first respect and then fear our tough citizen army made up of farmers, ranchers, lumberjacks, trappers, miners, fisherman and factory workers; respect that the Wehrmacht granted to only one other army, the Red Army.³

By war's end, Canada had raised the largest volunteer military in a total war situation and had the third largest navy in the world and the fourth largest air force. 1.1 million, the vast majority of them volunteers, served Canada in the 1939-45 war, over 42,000 of them died for our freedom.⁴ 50,000 Canadian women served in auxiliary non-combat roles such as nursing or transporting supplies and materiel.⁵ Our country hosted and trained thousands of Commonwealth and allied airmen through the Commonwealth Air Training Program. The Royal Canadian Navy and Canadian Merchant Marine convoys also shouldered much of the responsibility for transporting troops, foodstuffs and war matériel across the North Atlantic. It was a staggering achievement for a country of fewer than 11 million people. Average enlistment ratios for men, 18-45, were 42-50%.⁶ That's an incredible statistic. Think about it: if contemporary Canada matched these enlistment numbers that would mean a military of 3.6 million!

On the home front our war industries churned out, thanks to thousands of women factory workers or "Rosie Riveters", vast amounts of matériel: Sherman Tanks, Lee-Enfield Rifles, Lancaster Bombers, Sten Guns, and trucks and ships of every imaginable size. Our farms produced valuable foodstuffs such as wheat, cheese and beef, which fed the allied armies. By war's end, Canada's industrial output grew exponentially to the point where, on a per capita basis, we out-produced the US. The war would also bring the beginnings of the welfare state and Keynesian economic policy when "Baby Bonuses" were issued in 1944.

After the war, Canada was in a position to provide a starving Britain with a 1 billion dollar gift, which in today's money would be the equivalent of 7 or 8 billion.⁷

These paragraphs represent Canada's collective memory – one that is steadily faltering. Canadians seem little interested in our military past⁸ – especially since we seem bent on seeing ourselves as a nation of peacekeepers rather than citizen-warriors.⁹ Our collective ignorance of history, politics and international relations, the basis for understanding our society and the world, is alarming. It's on the community and individual level where memories of war and sacrifice are better remembered.

As communities and individuals we remember the Second World War in a different fashion. These memories, focusing on individuals or small communities, are more tangible than the larger macro-picture, which focuses on collective achievement and sacrifice. As a small national community within Canada, the Métis played a large role in this war effort. Unfortunately, we don't have exact enlistment ratios for the Métis, like we do for Status First Nations or Euro-Canadians, but we can deduce that their enlistments in proportion were as high, if not higher, than the average for English Canadians at 40-50%. The only thing holding back Métis enlistment would have been poor health: many had suffered from tuberculosis or had been malnourished while living on road allowances. For instance, men with missing teeth were turned away. Nevertheless, units such as the Royal Winnipeg Rifles, the Regina Rifles (later the "Royal"), the Loyal Edmonton Regiment and the South Saskatchewan Regiment had scores of Métis soldiers. Cumberland House, Lebret, Duck Lake and many other Métis communities sent hundreds of young men into combat. While their men went to war, many Métis women manned trap lines to support their families. The fact that the Métis enlisted and fought for a country that had, through implicit and explicit government policy, marginalized and often oppressed them speaks to their fundamental generosity of character.

Every Métis family and community has its own war stories. The Gabriel Dumont Institute chronicled Métis war stories in *Remembrances: Interviews with Métis Veterans*. Here's a very important war story from that book: Joseph McGillivray, a Métis trapper from Cumberland House, claimed to have captured SS Obersturmbannführer Kurt Meyer, the man responsible for the murder of more than 150 Canadian servicemen. However, history credits the capture to partisans¹⁰ or to whom McGillivray thought, the Americans. There's a story related to this one, which is not in the book, but one that nevertheless touched one Métis family. The teenage fanatics of the 12th Armoured SS, Hitler Jugend, which was led by the very same Kurt Meyer, murdered Rifleman Napoleon Morin, the grandfather of former Gabriel Dumont Institute Publishing Coordinator Leah Dorion. Napoleon and his son Louis Dorion never got to know one another.

In another Métis war story, Frank Tomkins had every male in his extended family from Girouard, Alberta enlist during the Second World War. Frank himself enlisted but was too young for combat; he only turned 18 in 1945. Nevertheless, his family has a very interesting but little-known war story. His brother Charles was attached to the US 8th Air Force Bomber Command and because of his fluency in Cree was one of the first Code Talkers.¹¹ The Americans used the Code Talkers to confuse the enemy by sending orders in an unintelligible language. After briefly using Canadian Métis and Cree as Code Talkers, the US military began using their own Native-American servicemen, largely Navajos, to fill this vital role. Other family members served in the infantry. Nevertheless, despite their service to their country, Frank and his family were unable to receive veterans' benefits¹²; in Girouard, these were given to French-Canadian conscripts who refused to serve overseas!

These are some war stories, which reflect our nation's, communities' and families' remembrances of World War II, the most horrific conflict in human history. As individuals, as communities and as a nation, we should never forget our war stories. They instill in us the horror of war, the necessity of always looking for a peaceful solution to resolve international conflict; however, they also demonstrate that when all we hold dear is under assault sometimes we have no choice but to fight. We should never forget these stories and the role played by our brave soldiers, sailors and airmen who fought in a truly just war. They willingly fought for a country, which, despite its many injustices, remains a favoured place. Hopefully, we can live up to this legacy by properly remembering and honouring their sacrifice, while building a country that is respectful to all our peoples.

¹This past year, historians and non-academic writers have written many tomes dealing with D-Day and the Normandy Campaign. Two of the more notable recent books about Canada's D-Day landings include: Ted Barris. *Juno: Canadians at D-Day, June 6, 1944*. Thomas Allen: 2003 and Mark Zuehlke. *Juno Beach: Canada's D-Day Victory, June 6, 1944*. Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2004. History Television and Global also dedicated extensive coverage to the Juno Beach Landings.

² For a look at war from the viewpoint of its participants, see: Audrey and Paul Gresco. Editors. *The Book of War Letters: 100 Years of Private Canadian Correspondence*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2003.

³ It had been a long-held historical canon that the Canadians were inefficient soldiers in World War II and only learned to be an effective fighting force through their long struggle to liberate Western Europe. However, historians are now starting to see the Canadians as an effective, well-trained and efficient fighting force from the moment they landed in Normandy. See Terry Copp. *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy*. Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 2003.

⁴ David J. Bercuson. *Maple Leaf Against the Axis: Canada's Second World War*. Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1995, pp. 273-75. This book, almost a decade old, is still the best monograph to chronicle Canada's war effort during the 1939-45 War.

⁵ Desmond Morton "Forward" in Patricia Burns. *They Were So Young: Montrealers Remember World War II*. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2002, p. 17.

⁶ English-speaking Canadians had the highest recorded enlistment during the Second World War. French Canadians and Acadians and "ethnic" Canadians had lower enlistment ratios largely because they didn't identify with Britain. Therefore, Québec and Saskatchewan had the lowest enlistments in Canada because they respectively had the largest populations of people of non-British descent. See Serge Bernier, "Participation des Canadiens Français aux combats: évaluation et tentative de quantification", *Association Québécois d'histoire politique*, Vol 3, No3/4 (1994), p.23.

⁷ For a detailed look at Canada's war effort during the Second World War see Jeffrey A. Keshen. *Saints, Sinners and Soldiers: Canada's Second World War*. Vancouver: The University of British Columbia Press, 2004. For a briefer summary of the same topic, see: Desmond Morton. *1945, When Canada Won the War*. Ottawa: The Canadian Historical Association, Historical Booklet No. 54, 1995.

⁸ The Europeans, particularly the Dutch, the British and the French, have remembered Canada's collective sacrifice.

⁹ To see how Canada's military tradition has declined and how the peacekeeping myth has been detrimental to the Canadian Forces and to our international standing see: J.L. Granatstein. *Who Killed the Canadian Military?* Toronto: HarperFlamingo Canada, 2004.

¹⁰ Dave Hutchinson. *Remembrances: Interviews with Métis Veterans*. Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 1997, p. 89. As a postscript, a Canadian War Crimes Tribunal sentenced Meyer to death, but this was commuted to a life sentence and later, after less than a decade in prison, freedom, but not before being made an advisor to the Canadian Forces. See: Patrick Brode. *Casual Slaughters and Accidental Judgments: Canadian War Crimes Prosecutions, 1944-1948*. Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1997 and Howard Margolian. *Conduct Unbecoming: The Story of the Murder of Canadian Prisoners of War in Normandy*. Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1998.

¹¹ "Canada's Windtalkers", *The Globe and Mail*. June 13, 2002.

¹² Many, if not most, Métis veterans, like other veterans such as the Merchant Marines, did not receive any benefits following the war's conclusion. In theory all veterans were supposed to receive benefits; however, in practice, this was not the case. The Department of Veterans' Affairs has been exceedingly arbitrary and obstructionist in its administration of benefits for veterans. To see how the benefits system was supposed to work, consult Peter Neary and J.L. Granatstein. Editors. *The Veterans Charter and Post-World War II Canada*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998 and Douglas Kovatch, "Lack of Justice For Metis Vets", *New Breed Magazine*, Christmas 1999, pp.16-17.