

ONWARD: THE KING'S OWN CALGARY REGIMENT IN PEACE AND WAR, 1910-1960

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ISBN 978-1-77385-602-5

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INTRODUCTION

Fifty Years of Peace and War

This book recounts the first fifty years of the history of what is now The King's Own Calgary Regiment—the period 1910 through 1960. The regiment was established during the last years of collective innocence before the outbreak of the Great War, a period characterized throughout British Canada by the imperialist euphoria and the culture of manliness and militarism that pervaded the British World during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For the Anglo-Celtic Canadian majority, the Great War demanded an unprecedented sacrifice of blood and treasure. The 50th Overseas Battalion, raised and subsequently reinforced from Calgary and the surrounding area, was a tangible manifestation of this sacrifice. Over 4,000 men volunteered (and by 1918, were conscripted) into its ranks. The 50th reached the trenches in mid-1916 as part of the 4th Canadian Division, and served through most of the remaining twenty-six months as part of the Canadian Corps. Although Canadian units had been engaged since April 1915, the 50th Battalion still arrived in time to participate in virtually all of the savage attritional battles whose names would later be inscribed on cenotaphs across the country, starting with the Battle of the Somme and continuing through Vimy Ridge, Hill 70/Lens, Passchendaele, Amiens, the Drocourt-Quéant Line, the Canal du Nord and Valenciennes. By the time the fighting ended on 11 November 1918, just over 650 of its men had been killed in action and hundreds more wounded, many maimed for life in body or mind. As this study will show in considerable detail, the soldiers of the 50th quickly mastered their twin tasks of surviving and killing and performed every bit as well in battle as their sister units. It was a remarkable achievement since only a minority of those serving had pre-war experience part-time soldiering. Courage and grim determination were possessed in abundance, as any glance at the honour roll confirms—one VC, six DSOs (with two bars, that is second awards to the same individual), 32 MCs (with four bars), 22 DCMs and 215 MMs (with 22 bars).¹

The war ended with a victory to which the 50th had contributed its fair share. There was pride in the young Dominion's military achievement, but

aching grief at the human cost. Homecoming and a speedy return to a civilian life many hardly recognized followed. Neither veteran nor civilian seemed to doubt the necessity of the war, but both wanted to move on. Few thought of the Great War as something that ever would (or should) be repeated.

The immediate post-war years saw the militia re-established in Calgary. The whole concept of part-time military service struck most, for the reasons just outlined, as an abstraction (many would have said absurdity). Moreover, most Canadians noted that the vast majority who'd served in the Canadian Corps had no pre-war military training at all, adding another reason to question the need for an organized militia. Having a credible purpose would have helped justify the militia's role (and modest cost), but during all but the last few interwar years Canadians happily (and understandably) believed they lived in the proverbial fire-proof house, far from flammable materials.²

The 1920s saw the Calgary Regiment split into separate organizations, both of which remain in place today, the Calgary Highlanders and the second incarnation of the Calgary Regiment from which The King's Own Calgary Regiment can trace its lineage. The 1920s also saw the emergence of a pattern which would repeat itself after the Second War—a difficult relationship with Canada's modest professional army and the lack of basic resources with which to train. The problems worsened during the Great Depression, which plunged much of Canada, and certainly Alberta, into desperate poverty. Starved of modern equipment and even parade pay, the Calgary Regiment barely managed to survive. Only when war clouds gathered over Europe did Canadian attitudes toward military matters start becoming more realistic.

In September 1939, Canada was again staring over the precipice, committed, after some understandable questioning, to a second major expeditionary force to fight our own and the British Empire's battles. Only a few years earlier, as part of a series of paper reforms of the military, the regiment had chosen to convert to the armoured role, a serendipitous decision as it turned out. But despite the efforts of all ranks to turn themselves into tankers during the few years they had, it proved challenging without actual tanks. Canada having managed the almost impossible feat of being more poorly prepared militarily than in 1914, it is no exaggeration to say that in September 1939 the men's most modern piece of equipment was their black armoured corps berets. Fortunately, the war would unfold in such a way that Canada did not need much of an army for several years—since it took that long to assemble, train and equip a proper force, there was really no choice. When parliament officially declared war on 10 September 1939, the Calgary Regiment, which after a flurry of name changes would emerge mid-war as the 14th Canadian Armoured Regiment, existed only in the minds of optimists, which fortunately included its own officers and

men. Eager to see their regiment mobilized for overseas service, they put heart and soul into such training as they could conjure up from a still threadbare arsenal. In early 1941, the Calgary Regiment was at last mobilized, at any rate those members who met the age, physical and technical standards of the armoured corps. In short order they were despatched to Camp Borden for the few months of limited instruction available there, which included seeing their first actual tanks, and then shipped out for the United Kingdom.

It was in England, beginning in July 1941, where one could say the regiment's officers and men finally had a chance to begin proper training. This was none too soon for thirteen months later they would see action at Dieppe, where most of the men landed to support two brigades of infantry were taken prisoner, and every tank put ashore was lost. Effectively about half of the regiment's fighting strength had to be replaced. And while a nucleus remained and the replacements were forthcoming quickly enough, a collective identity had to be rebuilt almost from scratch. In a little over a year that had been accomplished. Despatched to the Mediterranean Theatre, the regiment spent almost all of its fighting war in Italy with the rest of the "D-Day Dodgers," mostly in the infantry support role, serving as self-propelled artillery. Though far from glamorous, it was essential work, and they became very good at it. During the majority of their time in Italy, they found themselves attached to British and Indian divisions. They thus suffered a double historical blow—ignored both for serving in a secondary theatre and, after 1943, for not fighting alongside the rest of their countrymen. The Italian enterprise ended miserably, stuck in the frozen Apennines north of Florence and basically sentenced by weather, geography and logistics to serve an increasingly limited military role. Their extraction and transfer to the North West Europe Campaign occurred too late for the regiment to play more than a modest role in the liberation of the Netherlands. As in 1918, they had the reward of freeing conquered (and grateful) people, which took some of the sting out of the loss of comrades. At least as an armoured unit those losses, while bad enough, were much lower than their infantry forebears had suffered a generation earlier—just under 100 killed in action or dying of wounds, with several more succumbing in accidents.³ As had been the case with the 50th Battalion, heroism and sacrifice had been on regular display, and their skill at making war matched anything achieved by their peers.⁴

The soldiers came home in 1945, among them nearly 160 *kriegies* who had suffered much deprivation and mistreatment during their thirty-two months of captivity, and passed back into civilian life, raising families, building careers, and coping with what they had seen and done in the private way of veterans. By all accounts most of them did so successfully. Although few put on a uniform again, as was the case in 1919, the option of part-time soldiering was

re-established in the reserves. The KOCR promptly reverted to this role. But circumstances had changed fundamentally. In a nuclear war only armies-in-being would matter—there would be no need for large expeditionary forces because there would be no time to train them. But in that case, what meaningful role could part-time units play? The failure of both Ottawa and the army to answer that question boded ill for the reserves' future.

While conditions from 1945 to the early 1960s were fundamentally different than during the interwar decades, the result was remarkably similar—atrophy of the part-time military. During both periods, a mix of veterans and newcomers, motivated by a desire to serve their country and maintain proud military traditions, had managed to keep such soldiering alive in Canada, though it was a constant struggle. Certainly the efforts of The KOCR post-1945, and of the Calgary Regiment post-1919, illustrate what could be accomplished by tireless dedication in the face of a broadly unsupportive public and regular military. In both instances, mere survival as a functioning institution constituted success.

Objectives, Parameters, Constraints

Portraying the history of a Canadian regiment during the first half of the 20th century raises an obvious difficulty. How does one integrate the experiences of the war years, when the regiment operated as a highly trained combat formation, with those of the extended periods of peace when the regiment struggled to survive as a part-time force? One could make the case that the crucial periods were the two wars, and they should be recounted at the expense of downplaying the interwar and post-World War II periods when little of importance happened. This book explores the war years in depth, but the peacetime story of Canada's part-time army during the first half of the 20th century has been little covered by military historians, and certainly not from the perspective of the militia/reserve forces. This deserved to be addressed.

Exploring the wartime periods raises another problem—maintaining too narrow a focus and producing what military historians dismiss as “stovepipe” history. The King's Own Calgary Regiment exists uniquely within the broader context of Canada's army, and much of what follows explores its unique experience. But without losing sight of the fact that this is the study of one regiment and its community, that study benefits from being situating squarely within that larger Canadian, and when appropriate, Allied context. After all, in neither war did the regiment fight isolated from its brigade mates, supporting artillery and engineers, and so forth, so that adhering to a narrow perspective obscures how the regiment actually experienced combat.

Historians have to conceptualize the audience for whom they are writing. As a scholarly account, the author anticipates Canadian and other military historians will read it and incorporate it into their own work. It was also the author's goal to provide a more complete story of The KOCR's exploits than has heretofore been available to its past, current and future members. But more than anything, the book was framed to provide the descendants of the men who went to war in the 50th Battalion or 14th Armoured Regiment with a thorough understanding of what their forebears experienced. Thus, to the degree research sources have permitted, the book reveals what soldiering entailed psychologically and emotionally as well as how the soldiers' war affected loved ones back home.

Too many regimental histories focus not only on the war periods but almost exclusively on operations. The men are at the front when the account begins, and when the fighting stops, so does the story. But such an approach fails to tell us where the soldiers came from, and for those fortunate enough to have survived, what they came home to—in other words, how Canada's citizen soldiers were made and unmade? An operational preoccupation also tells us little about what soldiering was like during the soldier's time in uniform. During their respective two-plus years in action, both the 50th Battalion and 14th Armoured Regiment actually fought for only a few weeks. And even the majority of that time was spent preparing for combat, waiting for combat, or recovering from combat. "Hurry-up-and-wait" aptly described their lot, which is why this story flows rather than jumps from battle to battle.

Ensuring this was a scholarly account—one that had been thoroughly researched from the available archival sources and rigorously analyzed and argued to the standards of academic military history—will open scholars' eyes, in and outside of Canada, to the wartime achievements of The KOCR. It is lamentable that the 50th Battalion's and 14th Armoured Regiment's exploits have been far less visible than they should have been within the broader sweep of Canadian military history because no authoritative account existed. Whether for the military historian or interested layperson, the regiment's involvement in World War II shouldn't begin and end with the Dieppe raid. Or in the Great War, with Vimy Ridge. But as the author has absorbed from the work of some of the leading lights of Canadian and World War I military history, high standards of research and rigorous analysis are perfectly compatible with storytelling and human interest.

As much as the author has tried to reveal the perspective of the ordinary soldier, a great deal of the regiment's story is conveyed from the perspective of commanders and other officers. Partly this is a function of the manner in which contemporary sources—war diaries, after-action reports, and so

forth were compiled—and partly it is a recognition that armies are inherently hierarchical institutions with commanders playing a disproportionately important role in preparing, executing, and absorbing lessons from operations. Contemporaneous institutional records, for all their biases and gaps, remain the most solid account of what happened as it was seen at the time, and are indispensable to any reconstruction of those events. In the hope of humanizing the regiment's experience, much effort has been invested in telling the story of the many by teasing out the story of the few. Whenever possible, personal accounts and subsequent recollections were used to balance the perceptions from on high. Like all historical sources, recollections have their weaknesses—nostalgia being one—yet they can be measured against official documentation for factual accuracy and often provide insights into matters otherwise unrecorded. The experience of the Dieppe prisoners of war could not otherwise have been told.

Lastly, one of the weaknesses that has bedevilled too much Canadian military history has been its excessive focus on matters Canadian.⁵ Naturally, Canadians would want to know their own story, but in both wars the Canadian Army operated as part of a much larger British-led coalition, practically speaking a single army. The implications were particularly visible during the assignment of the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade to a British Corps for most of 1944, the period which coincided with the regiment's most important fighting during the Italian Campaign. Focusing too narrowly on Canadian military achievements has tended to distort their overall significance. And the same can be said of embracing Canadian military myths, appealing though they might be. Both weaknesses plague too many regimental histories. For its part, *Onward* makes no attempt to laud The King's Own Calgary Regiment—but rather to ensure it receives proper recognition for its role in Canadian military history.

Finally, *Onward* will not recast the major elements of what we know about how either war was fought. Units the size of an infantry battalion or an armoured regiment can have input into but do not depart from the larger tactical consensus established at the higher levels of command. British army practice, which the Canadian Army emulated, aimed for a standardized way of war, so the various fighting components would be interchangeable, and wisely so. Groundbreaking innovation did not come from individual lieutenant colonels and their commands. But if the hope is to tell the soldier's story, then it is the story of a regiment—at times mundane, heroic and tragic—which offers the greatest promise.



1.1 The 103rd Regiment (Calgary Rifles) marching smartly in the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede Parade, 1912. (Glenbow Archives, nc-78-72)



1.2 Adjacent to Calgary, Sarcee Camp, seen here in 1915, was quickly transformed into a major training facility for the thousands of Alberta volunteers flocking to fight for King and Country. (Glenbow Archives, na-989-1)



1.3 A ball held by the 103rd Regiment (Calgary Rifles) in 1912. Established only two years earlier, the militia regiment had quickly become an integral part of the city's life. (Glenbow Archives, na-3232-69)



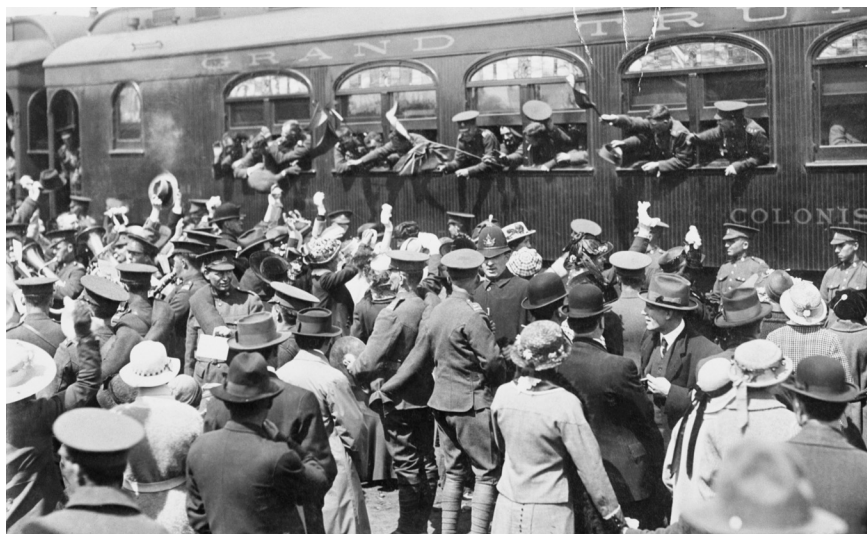
1.4 Soldiers of the 50th and 31st Battalions march through Calgary on a snowy day in early 1915. Serving in the 2nd Division, the men in the 31st would reach the trenches some eleven months earlier than their comrades. (Glenbow Archives, nc-44-39)



1.5 Maj.-Gen. Sam Steele, accompanied by Lt.-Col. Edward Mason, inspects the 50th Battalion in 1915. That a hero of the Klondike Gold Rush and Boer War in his late sixties played a leading role in assembling and training the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the first half of the war spoke volumes about Canada's lack of preparedness. (Glenbow Archives, na-3419-2)



1.6 The 103rd Regiment (Calgary Rifles) depart for Valcartier Camp in late August 1914. As the core of the Canadian Expeditionary Force's 10th Battalion, they first saw action at Ypres in April 1915. Few of them would see Calgary again. (Glenbow Archives, na-4355-38)



1.7 The 137th Battalion departs Calgary on 14 August 1916. Like the bulk of the units reaching England after the spring of 1916, it was broken up for reinforcements. Most of its men, including Pvt. John Pattison VC, would go on to serve in the trenches with the 50th Battalion. (Glenbow Archives, na-1617-5)