



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

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CONCLUSION

In the Service of Their Country

Any assessment of The KOCR has to distinguish between two distinct periods—the world wars and two extended intervals of peace. The 50th Battalion fought for twenty-seven months. Despite the BEF's improved infantry tactics and ever greater firepower superiority, the attritional nature of the conflict along with their opponent's fighting skill ensured heavy casualties right to the end. In the initial wave of enlistment the great numbers of men possessing some pre-war military training—including many with the 103rd Regiment—undoubtedly aided the battalion in becoming proficient enough to quickly enter combat and perform to an acceptable standard. The first few battles changed things completely as casualties mounted and few of the reinforcements had any pre-war experience of part-time soldiering. With officers the situation was different, as the pre-war military training which virtually all possessed was a major asset to the battalion and remained so.

In the 1930s the militia was a considerably reduced force from its pre-1914 predecessor, and their training far less thorough. A sizable proportion—though still a minority—of the officers and men who left Canada in 1941 with the 14th Canadian Armoured had a militia background, but this steadily declined thereafter. As during World War I, the strongest militia imprint was found among the officers—Stoney Richardson being a stellar example of a talented militia officer who excelled in the wartime army. Nevertheless, the Cinderella view of the militia—that during World War II it was an indispensable source of officer and NCO material for the overseas force—is exaggerated. After all, only a portion of the regiment's officers and NCOs were accepted for active service in 1941, with age, fitness and the lack of necessary qualifications for the armoured corps being the principal shortcomings. That said, a significant number of officers and NCOs had already resigned from the regiment to enlist in other Alberta militia units as these were mobilized.

When it came to actual time in combat, the armoured version of the regiment fought much less than its infantry counterpart had a quarter century earlier. The 50th missed the worst of Passchendaele, but otherwise basically

slugged it out with the rest of the Corps and accumulated the butcher's bill to prove it. In contrast, many who served in the 14th Armoured returned home in 1945 because their fate had been to fight in Italy rather than face the merciless tank battles that played out in Normandy. The fighting in Italy produced its own savagery—one only need ponder Motta and San Leonardo/Vino Ridge—but as the campaign dragged on the obstacles tanks faced were more an unforgiving combination of topography and climate than the German Army. After May 1944 the men hardly saw an enemy tank and there was little in the way of mobile warfare, with the regiment reverting almost exclusively to the unglamorous but vital role of infantry support. Finally, the armoured troops had better prospects for survival than the infantry—in either war. A large proportion of the men in an armoured regiment did not serve at the sharp end—those who did, namely the tank crews, certainly put their lives on the line but were still much safer than the infantrymen on the other side of the armoured plate. They had learned that lesson at Dieppe.

The 50th also fought on the decisive front of its war, participating during The Hundred Days in battles that number among the most crucial ever fought by Canadian soldiers. In contrast, the 14th served in a secondary theatre, for the European war was going to be decided in North West Europe and on the Eastern Front. Understandably, that realization eventually took a toll on morale. Of course, armoured regiments and infantry battalions received their marching orders, they didn't write them. The 14th Armoured didn't pick Italy or Dieppe just as their predecessors didn't pick Lens or Amiens.

Despite these differences, both incarnations of the regiment were assembled from waves of volunteers, and ultimately learned their craft the hardest way, by doing and dying. Each unit was assembled from scratch in wartime, a process which the 14th effectively had to go through a second time. Once overseas, the latter was exposed to more and certainly better training. But when they entered action, both the 50th and 14th had shown their inexperience. From the commanding officers on down, there were the errors of rashness and inexperience—Aloof Trench and Motta come to mind. But there were splendid achievements, the products of solid execution and daring—one thinks of the Marquion Line and San Leonardo. And there were far more of the latter than the former. As ever in the chaos of war, sometimes success merely crowned good luck, but there were also times—as at the forcing of the Gari River—when sheer bad luck, not bad planning or flawed execution, exacted its blood price. And there were a few occasions—fortunately precious few—when officers and men were sacrificed in doomed operations—with Dieppe not the only, but certainly the worst, example. Lastly, in both wars they were blessed with excellent commanding officers who were personally brave, identified and trained

able subordinates, prepared their men thoroughly, and earned their soldiers' respect. Here Page, Neroutsos and Richardson stand at the head, but Andrews would surely have joined them if he had not been killed at Dieppe. Junior officers and senior NCOs—most of them unknown today—also deserve respect for their roles in training, steadying and leading their men in action. Most tank crews were led by NCOs, as were most infantry platoons, given the heavy attrition of junior officers once the battle was underway.

While focusing on the experiences and accomplishments of a single regiment, this account has shown that in major operations the 50th and 14th never fought in isolation. Whether it was the three other infantry battalions in the 10th Brigade or the two sister regiments of the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade, not to mention artillery, infantry, signals and engineering resources, Canadian, British and Indian, there was always a larger fighting team involved, one benefiting from a cast of able senior commanders and staff officers at brigade, divisional, and corps headquarters.

Throughout its first fifty years, the regiment viewed itself primarily as a fighting unit. This is understandable. Yet for most of that time Canada was at peace, and the regiment's responsibilities were confined to part-time soldiering. As we have seen, particularly post-1945, The King's Own Calgary Regiment, like the rest of the reserves, was an organization in search of a role. Their task was made more difficult by the public's embrace of the citizen soldier concept, which had been reinforced by the country's Second World War experience, and which seriously questioned the utility of part-time soldiering. Furthermore, the public's (and army's) embrace of the army-in-being paradigm rendered the relevance of the reserves all the more problematic. During the long years of peace, it was easy to find flaws in the overall institution as well as its constituent parts like The KOCR. But an unattainable standard of professionalism was applied to find them wanting, when it was the essence of such a force that it could not be professional.

The peacetime leadership of the Calgary Regiment could only respond to directives from higher authority, and certainly from 1919 onward they rarely (if ever) contributed to the formulation of directives set by (and for the benefit of) others. It was the responsibility of the army and the federal government to solve the problems of the militia/reserve forces, and this they consistently failed to do. In the end, the regiment's leadership attempted to function as best they could within the framework they were given.

Any fair judgment passed on The King's Own Calgary Regiment during its first fifty years must be a positive one. Though ill-prepared, in both world wars it served the cause of Canada and its allies with distinction. The regiment's ties with Calgary and the surrounding communities of central and southern

Alberta were much closer during wartime than the longer periods of peace, but even then it contributed to keeping alive the positive aspects of military culture and heritage in the larger civilian community. Furthermore, it managed to ensure there was a nucleus of military skill in being which could be (and was) drawn upon to meet the Canada's military and civil needs. In all respects, these were tasks well done.