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Where Was Canada?: The Canadian Military Contribution to the British Commonwealth Second World War Campaign in North Africa

With the final battle of El Alamein drawing to a close on 15 November 1942 a radio broadcast by the journalist L.S.B. Shapiro, heard nationally on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation network, drew its listeners' attention to North Africa and the offensive that had just been fought. Having highlighted that it had been a largely Commonwealth military coalition operating in that theatre, the broadcast noted that Canadians were not part of it and asked "What reason lies behind the extraordinary fact that the first of all overseas armies to reach the European theatre – remains the last to go into action?"¹ This was not the first time this question had been asked. For more than two years the British Empire's principal military effort had been watched keenly by many Canadians who could not understand why their own military forces were not involved. The failure to join the battles fought in the Western Desert and the Middle East was a result of the policy pursued by prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King supported, from mid-1940 onwards, by his two senior military commanders Harry Crerar and Andrew McNaughton. Whilst the political leader was concerned about the potential domestic implications of committing troops overseas, the officers were equally content to approve the opportunity offered to them by their British counterparts not to take part in the Mediterranean campaign. Canadian troops would instead garrison the United Kingdom in the face of a potential German invasion and this allowed the opportunity to use the time and space provided by an increasingly spurious threat to train and develop the huge military organisation that would eventually play a leading role in the invasion of Europe. With all of the principals in agreement, this mutually beneficial understanding, unpalatable as it was to some parts of domestic public opinion, meant that the victory in the North Africa would be won by a British-led coalition that was almost entirely lacking any Canadian involvement.²

As one of Canada's most distinguished recent historians noted more than forty years ago, in September 1939 there 'was no enthusiasm' for what he termed as 'a war of limited liability'.³ Indeed, this analysis has been universally accepted since the first wartime examination of Canadian military policy by Colonel Charles Stacey, later to become "Canada's foremost military

¹ "SHAPIRO broadcast for 15 Nov 1942," Extract, Publicity – General, PA 3-7, A.G.L. McNaughton Papers, MG 30, E133, Series III, Vol.144, Library and Archives Canada (hereafter 'LAC').

² John Nelson Rickard, *The Politics of Command: Lieutenant-General A.G.L. McNaughton and the Canadian Army, 1939-1943* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 46-53.

³ J.L. Granatstein, *Canada's War: The Politics of the Mackenzie King Government 1939-1945* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975), 19, 420.

historian”, and then expanded upon in the subsequent substantial body of work he produced.⁴ Yet at the time there was plenty of evidence to support the view that a great deal was in fact being done. A report in the journal of the London-based *Royal United Services Institution*, published before the outbreak of the Second World War, concluded that Canada’s re-armament plans seemed broad and “directed in part towards objects other than those of purely local defence”.⁵ It noted that its resources, both in terms of manpower and industrial capacity, were far greater than those of any of the other Dominions and in a prolonged struggle these could prove “a decisive factor in achieving victory”. From the earliest days of the war there was also the evidence offered by the Empire Air Training Plan, an agreement to use the safety of Canadian skies to prepare airmen who would then be able to launch the bombing campaign over occupied Europe which was prominently reported on by the media throughout the British Empire.⁶

This apparent dichotomy was recognised by those British diplomats tasked with managing relations between London and Ottawa. The privately circulated views of Lord Tweedsmuir, the British Governor-General, described Canada’s war effort as “half-detached and half-embroiled”.⁷ Sir Gerald Campbell, Britain’s High Commissioner, wrote back to London in December 1939 that the “official attitude to the war is lukewarm; it is a fact which we ourselves know only too well, it is a fact which is clear to the people of the United States. I think the latter will again regard Canada as a warrior nation when they see Canadian forces in the front line: but not if they consist of only one Division and the remnants of a watered down air training scheme: and that I feel bound to conclude, is all that they will see, so long as Mr Mackenzie King's Government remains in power ... Whilst it is true that no one but [him] could have brought Canada into this war with such unanimity on all sides, it is equally true that we shall never get anywhere with the present Prime Minister in this war”.⁸ At this stage responsibility for this apparent contradiction

⁴ ‘Biography - Colonel Charles Perry Stacey, O.C., O.B.E., C.D., B.A., A.M., Ph.D., LL.D, D.Litt., D.Sc. Mil, F.R.S.C., 1906-1989’, National Defence and the Canadian Forces, Directorate of History and Heritage, <http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/adh-sdh/bio/index-eng.asp> [accessed, 25 April 2016]. See C.P. Stacey, *The Military Problems of Canada: A Survey of Defence Policies and Strategic Conditions Past and Present* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1940); Colonel C.P. Stacey, *Six Years of War – Volume 1, The Army in Canada, Britain and the Pacific* (Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War) (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer and Controller of Stationery, 1957); C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939-1945* (Ottawa: The Queen’s Printer, 1970).

⁵ “Re-Armament in the Dominions,” *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* 84, 534 (1939): 262.

⁶ Andrew Stewart, “The British Government and the 1939 Negotiations for the Empire Air Training Plan,” *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 93, 377 (Oct. 2004): 739-754; Kent Fedorowich, “Sir Gerald Campbell and the British High Commission in Wartime Ottawa, 1938-1940,” *War in History* 18, 3 (July 2011): 357-385.

⁷ John Buchan, *Memory Hold-the-Door* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1945), 289.

⁸ Minute by Cavendish Bentinck (Foreign Office), 12 January 1940, FO371/25224, The National Archives, London (hereafter ‘TNA’).

came down to Mackenzie King who, from well before the war's outbreak, had argued for a restricted level of engagement based upon an appreciation that was "wrapped up in that theory of limited liability which [the British military thinker Basil] Liddell Hart was shortly to prescribe".⁹ This called for a reliance on blockade, economic warfare and only a token expeditionary force.¹⁰ When he stepped down from his post at the end of 1940, grateful for the opportunity to move back to a diplomatic role in Washington, Campbell had wrote once again to colleagues in Whitehall but in an unofficial guise; now free of restrictions, he warned that the Dominion's prime minister was "not a war, or a warlike, leader, and I sometimes feel Canada's effort is too flabby".¹¹ As he concluded, "the people are keen, or as keen as anyone can be at a distance of 3000 miles, and they want to produce men and munitions, but politics enters into the picture far too much".

Mackenzie King's strategic outlook was based around the avoidance of significant casualties amongst Canadian troops and reducing the threat of political and social discord amongst the sizeable French-speaking population in Quebec who had no real sympathy with the British Empire. Fully aware of the potential dangers this held, particularly if there were to be any repeat of the First World War's casualty figures, the country's leader remained highly suspicious of Whitehall's motives. Even so, there were sections of domestic public opinion that began to question why Canada was not doing more which made it increasingly difficult to avoid a more visible demonstration of support to Britain and the war. With some reluctance, a division was sent to Europe arriving in Scottish ports in December 1939, and, as the Allied position deteriorated rapidly following the German attack the following May, their commander, Major-General McNaughton, looked to find a role for these troops.¹² He did so in the knowledge that there was now "a considerable body of opinion" back at home that was not satisfied with a war effort which was viewed as not being an acceptable response to the crisis. The criticism was aimed at the government but more particularly the prime minister; it was surely no coincidence that he now confided to his diary that it was right and proper for Canada to stand by the Mother

⁹ Adrian Preston, "Canada and the Higher Direction of the Second World War, 1939-1945," *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* 90, 637 (February 1965): 30, 33.

¹⁰ Brandey Barton, "Public Opinion and National Prestige: The Politics of Canadian Army Participation in the Invasion of Sicily, 1942-1943," *Canadian Military History* 15, 2 (Spring 2006): 23-34; Galen Roger Perras, "No Need to Send an Army Across the Pacific: Mackenzie King and the Pacific Conflict, 1939-1945," in John English, Kenneth McLaughlin and P. Whitney Lackenbauer (eds.), *Mackenzie King: Citizenship and Community* (Toronto: Robin Brass Studios, 2003), 124-150.

¹¹ Campbell to Batterbee, 20 January 1941, Sir Harry Batterbee Papers, Rhodes House Library, Oxford, 6/2

¹² Andrew Stewart, "The Battle for Britain," *History Today* 65, 6 (June 2015): 19-26; Rickard, *The Politics of Command*, 39-45; W.C. Hankinson (British High Commission, Ottawa) to Eric Machtig (DO), 28 May 1940, DO121/112, TNA.

Country in striking what could potentially be “the last blow for the preservation of freedom”.¹³ His determination to pursue a limited liability had been undermined and, according to the United States ambassador Jay Pierrepoint Moffat, Canada had reached “a crossroad” and the recent reverses in Europe had forced changes upon it.¹⁴ Steps were taken to dispatch a second division and mobilise a third (soon to be followed by the main elements of a fourth), authorisation was given for troops to be sent for garrison duties in Iceland and the West Indies, and four destroyers were committed to help support the Royal Navy. Even now the prime minister remained reluctant to see the men who had so enthusiastically volunteered sent to actual war zones. In June parliament approved the National Resources Mobilization Act which conscripted Canadians for home defence whilst at the same time explicitly confirming that they would not serve overseas if they did not want to be sent.

The defeat of France had, however, apparently led to a realisation that this would now be a long war. In July 1940, a significant series of changes had taken place affecting the longer term use of Canadian military forces as the composition of the Cabinet War Committee changed. The successor to the short-lived Emergency Council, this was responsible for the consideration of questions of general policy and the coordination of all operations of the government and, since France’s surrender, with regular, often daily meetings, it had taken effective control of the country’s war effort.¹⁵ Plans badly needed some revision as, according to Stacey, the antipathy shown by the Canadian leader, most specifically towards the Army, had not eased. At the end of July, Mackenzie King and five of his Cabinet colleagues had made statements on the floor of the House of Commons in response to what a watching American observer termed “a growing Parliamentary and popular demand for a concise statement in regard to Canada’s war effort”.¹⁶ Despite this, it was certainly the case that the Chiefs of Staff “faced a constant struggle to retain influence in ministerial circles”.¹⁷ The fact that until June 1942 they continued to be excluded from Cabinet War Committee meetings, and even at this stage an invitation was only extended to

¹³ C.P. Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict, Vol.II: 1921-1948* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 299.

¹⁴ Moffat to Department, June 23, 1940, Canada, US Legation and Embassy Ottawa, General Records - Chancery, Box 60, RG84, National Archives, Maryland (hereafter ‘NARA’).

¹⁵ J.E. Rea, *T.A. Crerar: A Political Life* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), 205-206.

¹⁶ “Memorandum for the Minister, Summarizing statements by six Cabinet Ministers with respect to Canada’s war effort,” August 1, 1940, Canada, US Legation and Embassy Ottawa, General Records - Chancery, Box 60, RG84, NARA.

¹⁷ Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939-1945*, 129.

attend approximately two each month, remains an important consideration.¹⁸ As one historian has noted, this lack of military input restricted the ability to conduct strategic planning and ensured that Mackenzie King remained the dominant force in determining how policies and commitments were developed.¹⁹

Two key appointments influenced events greatly. The first was in June 1940 when Colonel J.L. Ralston became the new Minister of National Defence replacing Norman Rogers, who had been killed tragically in an air accident.²⁰ *Time* magazine described Ralston to its American readers as “one of Canada’s cleverest financial men” who had refused previously to join the cabinet but was now expected “because of his bulldog tenacity and narrow partisanship to become the Government’s strongest man”.²¹ The second important appointment saw the recall of Crerar from England, where he had been Chief of Staff at the Canadian Military Headquarters (CMHQ) London, to become Chief of the General Staff (CGS). This was the key wartime role and he would subsequently be remembered as “unquestionably the most important Canadian soldier in the war”.²² Following his return home, Crerar almost immediately attended a War Committee meeting in Ottawa on 26 July 1940 at which he presented his assessment of the situation in Britain.²³ This involved a review of various possible developments during which he emphasised that “Canada’s chief concern, in existing circumstances, was the British Isles; they were her best defensive line, and it was in her interest to give every possible assistance in maintaining it against Hitler”.²⁴ He repeated an earlier conversation with General John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), in which the senior British military officer had told him that the chances were 60-40 that Germany would try and invade Britain within the next six weeks.²⁵ Crerar’s conclusion was that in the first instance the maximum effort should be made to defend Britain, but, some thought should also be given about what contribution could be made later to defeating Germany. Hence, his recommendation that whilst the focus would be on sending more troops to the British Isles, the future development of suitable armoured formations should also be given a

¹⁸ Paul D. Dickson, “The Politics of Army Expansion: General H.D.G. Crerar and the Creation of the First Canadian Army, 1940-41,” *The Journal of Military History* 60, 2 (April 1996): 276.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ “Obituary – Norman McLeod Rogers, 1894-1940,” *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 6, 3 (August 1940): 476-478.

²¹ “All In,” *Time*, 18 September 1940.

²² J.L. Granatstein, *The Generals: The Canadian Army’s Senior Commanders in the Second World War* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993), 83.

²³ Colonel C.P. Stacey, *The Canadian Army, 1939-1945: An Official Historical Summary* (Ottawa: The King’s Printer, 1948), 28; Granatstein, *The Generals*, 93-95.

²⁴ Stacey, *Six Years of War – Volume 1*, 87-91.

²⁵ J.W. Pickersgill, *The Mackenzie King Record; Volume 1, 1939-1944* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), 129.

priority. With Dill having also told him that, if Britain was defeated, the Royal Navy would have to move its headquarters to Canada's Atlantic coast, Crerar also urged that every measure be taken to prepare harbours and coast defences for this potential outcome.²⁶

Writing later to McNaughton, who had been in Britain since the previous December in command of the expanding Canadian military forces based in the country, Crerar confided that he had "found that as a result of a rather panicky outlook, the tendency [in Ottawa] was to look inward and think in terms of strict 'continental' defence".²⁷ He had worked on this "defeatist attitude" and believed that "to a considerable extent both in the War Cabinet and publicly ... during the last month or so the accent has been placed on the 'fortress Island' being our first line of defence rather than the Atlantic sea-board". The clearest evidence of this 'change' could be seen within the two detailed appreciations he produced on consecutive dates in late September 1940, both of which sought to consider how the Canadian Army would develop over the coming years and the role for which it would be used. The first of these outlined how the CGS saw the expansion of the Army taking place.²⁸ According to Stacey his conclusion, based upon the recent experience of observing the French campaign, was that "an army of defensive type was bound to meet defeat". This meant the development of a force based around modern artillery, armour and close-support aircraft and this would require the country's industrial capacity to be turned over to its construction.²⁹ With the assertion that Canada itself was not threatened so long as Britain was not overrun, this document also argued that the new modern Canadian military organisation should therefore be assembled at the Empire's heart although this could only be done once it had been adequately equipped. It would consist of three infantry divisions, to be formed by early-1941 as a corps, with an armoured brigade to join it as soon as possible and another infantry division ready to proceed to Britain if required.³⁰

The second paper, 'What should be the Nature of Canada's Military Effort during the next year?', sought to examine the strategic position of the dominion and the role that should be undertaken by Canadian forces.³¹ Its central position was that all Canadian planning should be an integral

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Crerar to McNaughton, 8 August/9 September 1940, McNaughton Papers, MG30 E133, Series III, Vol.227, LAC.

²⁸ "Canadian Army Programme for 1941," 24 September 1940, Ralston Papers, MG27, Series III, B11, Vol.37, LAC.

²⁹ Stacey, *The Canadian Army, 1939-1945*, 28.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "What should be the Nature of Canada's Military Effort during the next year?," 25 September 1940, Crerar Papers, MG30, E157, Vol.23, LAC.

part of the war effort of the wider Empire and, as such, for the following twelve months, it should be based generally on the views of the British Chiefs of Staff. Prominent reference was therefore given to the conclusion that, for 1941, the strategy was to be one of attrition and recovering those British Imperial territories that had been lost, whilst taking every step to hold on to those that remained; the Empire was to be prepared to go on the offensive in the spring of the following year. In reviewing possible courses of action open to the Axis, it was indicated that attacks could be expected against Egypt. Indeed Crerar assessed that “all things considered” this would “seem to be the most probable course for the enemy to adopt” and the coming winter season would be the most likely time for this to take place.³² The Near East would therefore most likely be the zone of active operations at least until the following spring, when there would be a renewed prospect of an attempted invasion of Britain. The British interest in undertaking “decisive action against Italy herself and invasion of her African colonies” was referenced prominently as was defeating any attack in Libya or across the Mediterranean.³³

The prospect of Canadian forces forming part of Egypt’s defences was also listed as an option, but it was clear that no firm proposal was being made other than the generation of reinforcements and moving them to Britain.³⁴ Indeed, it was also stated that only in the spring of 1942 could British Commonwealth forces begin to even consider anticipating moving to the offensive.³⁵ Crerar’s 1940 correspondence with McNaughton had, however, included a reference to a move elsewhere, “out of the UK and in some other area of operations where the Canadian Corps can better demonstrate its fighting power”; this tantalising reference concluded with a promise of confirmation within “the next few weeks” and this appeared to provide the details of what he was thinking.³⁶ In an anonymous and slightly longer appreciation given to Colonel Ralston and simply entitled ‘Plans’, there was further evidence.³⁷ Within it there was a discussion not merely of likely future manpower requirements and the possible theatres of war but also three clear roles that could be adopted by Canadian forces during the winter 1940-41 period. These were, in order: defence of the United Kingdom; raids on the continent; and “providing land forces to help in defending Egypt or, operating on a new front, if one develops, in North Africa”. The appreciations had appeared very much to place an emphasis on generating additional forces, both

³² Ibid., 2.

³³ “Plans – Appreciations Military Gen. (Secret) 1940-42,” 27 September 1940, pp.1-2, Ralston Papers, MG27 III, B11, Vol.37, LAC.

³⁴ Ibid., 4.

³⁵ Stacey, *Six Years of War*, 88.

³⁶ Crerar to McNaughton, 8 August/9 September 1940, A.G.L. McNaughton Papers, MG30, E133, Series III, Vol.227, LAC.

³⁷ “Plans,” 27 September 1940, p.4, Ralston Papers, MG27, Series III, B11, Vol.37, LAC.

infantry and armoured, for despatch to the United Kingdom, without offering any actual recommendation as to which specific role they would fill, but nothing was ruled out.

The analysis being produced by Crerar and those around him was entirely accurate. A key appreciation delivered in the first week of September 1940 to the British War Cabinet made prominent reference to the strategic significance attached to the Middle East. Presented by the Chiefs of Staff Committee and issued under the signature of Dudley Pound, John Dill and Richard Peirse, its purpose was to examine “the factors affecting [Britain’s] ability to defeat Germany, and to make recommendations from the military point of view as to the policy which should govern our war effort and the future conduct of the war”.³⁸ At various points in the document, the Middle Eastern threat was highlighted. As Germany needed to secure access to additional oil supplies and these would have to come via ship from Russia or Romania through the Black Sea, it was thought an attack by both of the European Axis partners was “likely” within the next six months. The capture of the port of Alexandria would not only mean the loss of a key base but also prevent British shipping from operating in the Eastern Mediterranean. There was also the added advantage of securing access to Egyptian cotton and establishing a route through the Suez Canal to provide support to Italian forces in Abyssinia. Hence it was considered to be the most likely form of Axis attack along with continuing efforts to attack shipping and ports in order to halt supplies and more general air attacks at British morale. It was also argued that the act of reinforcing the garrisons in the Middle East would be likely to prevent the Italians from achieving any major military success. The conclusion was that holding the position in the Middle East was “of the utmost importance to our strategy” both in terms of safeguarding supplies and preventing Germany and Italy from breaking the economic blockade which, at this stage in the war, was the most potent offensive weapon available to Britain. It was argued that the sending of reinforcements was “a matter of the greatest urgency”.

On the first day of October 1940, the Cabinet War Committee gathered in Ottawa and the main item for discussion was Canada’s contribution to the Allied war effort for the coming year. Mackenzie King’s diaries provide the clearest insight into how the debate developed, at least in his eyes. He remained adamant, despite the earlier comments committing to greater troop numbers, that the Air Force should remain the largest Canadian contribution with the Navy next.³⁹ As he put it “All present were agreed I think to that”. This was not true of Crerar who pressed for an increase for the Army which, he and his supporters believed, could be used more

³⁸ “War Cabinet – Future Strategy,” WP(40)362, 4 September 1940, CAB66/11/42, TNA.

³⁹ Mackenzie King Diary, 1 October 1940, f.902, MG26-J13, LAC.

actively and the Canadian leader made reference to Crerar wanting “to have a Canadian Army serving in the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere”.⁴⁰ This was apparently not what the premier wanted to hear and he remained dismissive of such calls, using as his principal counter arguments the possibilities of the United States’ continuing lack of involvement in the war and developments in the Pacific of a negative nature. This not – particularly - persuasive approach concluded with a reversion to fiscal concerns and the argument that manpower and finance should be “put to the best advantage possible”.

No more seems to have been said on the subject at this meeting, but, by the first week of December 1940, the internal discussion had become much more acute and domestic pressure appeared to have grown considerably. By November 1940 the Canadian media based in London were clamouring for any information about the role being played by the country’s troops. As one historian has commented, the little Canadian army “squatted in England much like an aborigine in a strange wilderness, self-conscious but safe; fulfilment of that promise to be ‘at Britain’s side’”.⁴¹ Even the decision to send a detachment of sappers to Gibraltar saw them approach the Ministry of Information and ask that they be “given an ‘even break’” if any formal announcement was to be made with some advance notice.⁴² Canadians back at home were said to be “peering out from behind the rather unexciting cloak of hemispheric defence” which left them “attracted by the glitter of Wavell’s victories in the Western Desert and the potentially rapid collapse of Italian military power in North Africa”.⁴³ There was also some suggestion in other parts of the British Empire that if Canadian troops joined with the other Dominion forces fighting in this theatre there would be a better case for resurrecting the old Imperial War Cabinet, an idea that was bitterly opposed by Mackenzie King.⁴⁴ He was in “no hurry to undermine his personal position” and could not see any value to reversing the previously agreed policy and “earmarking Canadian forces for operations which would bring no immediate political advantages either at home or abroad”.⁴⁵

Another three hour Cabinet War Committee meeting held at this point was recorded in the premier’s diary as having been “rather difficult and trying”, no doubt because the question was

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Preston, “Canada and the Higher Direction of the Second World War,” 34.

⁴² Canadian Military Headquarters GS Branch War Diary, 28 November 1940, WO 179/1, TNA.

⁴³ Preston, “Canada and the Higher Direction of the Second World War,” 37.

⁴⁴ Andrew Stewart, *Empire Lost; Britain, the Dominions and the Second World War* (London: Continuum, 2008), 51-54.

⁴⁵ Preston, “Canada and the Higher Direction of the Second World War,” 37.

raised once again of Canadian forces being dispatched from England to the Middle East.⁴⁶ At this point, with Operation *Compass* the first major British Commonwealth offensive of the North African campaign about to start, the Western Desert appeared an obvious focus for attention. Mackenzie King's view was that the Defence Department was "engineering" this debate, despite the opposition of the War Council, and such talk could lead to "annexionist (sic) sentiment growing up" although the argument he put forward once again seemed far from convincing. This meeting took place after Ralston had left for England, along with the Minister of Munitions and Supply C.D. Howe, and saw the prime minister once again strongly stating views that appeared almost completely at odds with the advice being issued from his senior Army advisor. He instead chose to highlight that the other Dominions were "all interested in that zone" and, although he did not explicitly say so, it was clear that it was not a theatre in which he had any interest.⁴⁷ There was, however, by now a good deal of support amongst others for just this idea, notably from Charles 'Chubby' Power, the Minister of National Defence for Air, and James Gardiner, Minister for National War Service. They were prepared to back "the army people" arguing that the armed forces stationed overseas were anxious to fight, morale was suffering because of the lack of fighting and they should therefore be sent to where they could at once engage the enemy. With the prime minister clearly believing that the senior military officers had got to his Cabinet colleagues, there was actually some logic in at least part of what he had to say. He was certainly right in claiming that the Australians, New Zealanders and South Africans had a level of interest in the African theatre which Canada did not. For the Antipodean members of the Commonwealth alliance this was a region in which they had fought during the last war and the defence of Suez was of course strategically of vital significance to them in terms of their home security. For Jan Smuts, the South African leader, future developments in Africa were of direct interest as he pondered the continent's post-war future.⁴⁸ For Canada there was no similar rationale to become involved.

What it appeared to come down to, was Mackenzie King's reluctance for there to be any expansion of Canadian involvement in the war. As he wrote in his diary, he had simply told the meeting that they "owed it to our men to seek to protect their lives", although he did not go on to

⁴⁶ Mackenzie King Diary, 4 December 1940, f.1037, MG26-J13, LAC.

⁴⁷ Pickersgill, *The Mackenzie King Record; Volume 1*, 156; Mackenzie King's lack of enthusiasm for a North African expedition receives only this briefest of references in Pickersgill's epic recounting of the premier's diaries.

⁴⁸ John Agar-Hamilton to Basil Liddell Hart, 14 February 1959, Liddell Hart Papers, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, London, LH 4/39.

say it this was best achieved in his view by not sending them to fight in North Africa's deserts.⁴⁹ At the same time the obvious and logical role was to continue to help defend Britain as had been concluded in the earlier appreciations.⁵⁰ As these noted, if no attempt at invasion was made in 1940, from mid-April of the following year, the threat would once again become imminent.⁵¹ And in this line of his argument he had support from Angus Macdonald, Minister of National Defence for Naval Services, and Ernest Lapointe, the Minister of Justice. The challenge remained, however, that not everybody agreed, as was highlighted by the *Toronto Daily Star* with its front page report that a decision would soon be taken as to whether Canadian troops would be sent to North Africa.⁵² The December 1940 story reported that it had previously been the case that "high Canadian officers" had opposed the idea of their troops being moved from the British home front to the Mediterranean, because it was believed that the war would be won or lost on the basis of the ability to defend Britain and then by re-invading Europe to attack Germany. This view was said to have changed as a result of the successes of the Royal Navy at the battle of Taranto and the skill shown by the Greeks in blunting the Italian invasion. In a typically mischievous piece of newspaper writing it was therefore suggested that the visit of Ralston and Crerar to London, which was then taking place, might result in a decision.

Colonel Ralston and his CGS were indeed in Britain and just before Christmas 1940 they met the Secretary of State for War, Anthony Eden, and other senior British figures for what proved to be a crucial meeting. The outcome of this was a confirmation that Canada's maximum contribution for the first half of the following year would be a fully staffed corps of three divisions along with a tank brigade. And, during the latter half of 1941 and the first quarter of 1942, an armoured division would also be provided.⁵³ In anticipation of this meeting an internal briefing document had been prepared within the War Office in London although it is not clear as to the actual identity of the writer.⁵⁴ Its tone was at times caustic, notably with the conclusion that there was some urgency about using Canadian troops already in Britain as they were "eating their heads

⁴⁹ Mackenzie King Diary, 4 December 1940, f.1037, MG26-J13, LAC.

⁵⁰ General Crerar had sat next to Ambassador Moffat at a dinner held in Ottawa in July 1940 and at this he confirmed to him that as the Canadian Corps was the only fully trained unit not to lose most of its equipment during the withdrawal from France it "was now considered the strongest individual unit in the British Army"; "Memorandum of conversation with General Crerar, the new Canadian Chief of Staff, Ottawa," 25 July 1940, Box 60, NARA.

⁵¹ "Plans," 27 September 1940, 2, Ralston Papers, MG27, Series III, B11, Vol.37, LAC.

⁵² "Canadians May Get Honor of Polishing Off Italy," *Toronto Daily Star*, 2 December 1940.

⁵³ "Notes (by Harry Crerar) on Discussion held at War Office 1700 hrs – 17 Dec 1940," 18 December 1940, War Diary 1940, A.G.L. McNaughton Papers, MG30, E133, Series III, Vol.248, LAC; Stacey, *The Canadian Army, 1939-1945*, 29.

⁵⁴ "Possible Employment for Canadian Formations," Hand of Officer, 25 November 1940, WO106/4872, TNA.

off” hence there was a need to “give them some employment which would serve as an outlet for their energy”. It was also acknowledged that with Australians and New Zealanders serving in the Middle East there was “a certain amount of inter-Dominion feeling” about their static role. The note therefore outlined four possible roles which were broadly similar to those identified previously by Crerar, the principal difference being the potential employment of Canadian troops in ‘irregular operations’. The Middle East was listed as the first possible option, but there were said to be serious objections not least because this would entail splitting the country’s contingent “with little hope of re-constitution at a later date”. Canada had also established base installations and moved its reinforcements to Britain at great expense and an onwards move to the Middle East might “not be well received”. As such it was argued that it made most sense for the country’s troops to be employed on the Atlantic sea-board, specifically in Britain, the Iberian Peninsula or north-west Africa. The unknown writer concluded by noting that such assessments it did not really matter as insufficient shipping meant Canadian forces could not be moved from Britain for a considerable time. This focus on the defence of the United Kingdom and building up sufficient forces to contribute towards longer-term strategic objectives was therefore very much in line with requests coming from the War Office in London.

Ralston claimed that, during his London visit, he had encountered “no thought or desire to have Canadian troops go to Egypt”.⁵⁵ As he told Mackenzie King, the intention was that Britain would continue to send large numbers of men to fight overseas, and she looked to Canada to help fill their places. So, while additional manpower was greatly needed, it was to be sent no further than the British Isles where it would wait to be used at some later stage.⁵⁶ It was therefore approved that the year’s Army Programme would be shaped specifically around the requirements confirmed by the War Office. At no stage was reference made to any of this being intended for possible use in the Middle East. Indeed, Crerar produced a draft programme that he believed would find favour with his prime minister and those around him who wanted the defence focus to be on industrial development, hence its reference to the extension of the training period for troops as well as the significance it attached to the development of mechanized warfare and the need for more armoured units.⁵⁷ His skilful championing of this revised strategic vision helped secure Mackenzie King’s endorsement which, with Ralston providing enthusiastic assistance, ensured that the proposals would be broadly accepted.⁵⁸ The proposed composition reflected the general’s

⁵⁵ Mackenzie King Diary, 24 January 1941, f.69, MG26-J13, LAC.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Dickson, “The Politics of Army Expansion,” 285.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 286-288.

longer-term aspirations “to increase its [the military’s] influence and the size of its forces” and most likely points to the real reason behind much of his interest in the Middle East campaigns, a negotiating point to achieve his ultimate aspiration. For all those senior figures in the Canadian and British military and government who were involved, their respective goals were well served by the agreements that were reached; any actual involvement in the Middle East would not have been in their respective interests unless this could have resulted in a decisive and rapid victory with little in the way of casualties or loss of equipment.

Throughout the first half of 1941 there was only limited reference to the North African campaign. In a February statement to the Canadian House of Commons, Mackenzie King announced that during the previous three months 30,000 “units of armoured and other automotive equipment” had been delivered to the Middle East.⁵⁹ With the situation worsening following Germany’s military intervention and the arrival of the *Afrika Korps* commanded by General Erwin Rommel, Moffat spoke with Crerar at an April lunch about the same subject.⁶⁰ He already knew from previous conversations that the Canadian general did not favour dispersing those forces which were already overseas but the American ambassador now asked his guest if he thought there might be some pressure from the British authorities to transfer Canadian troops to the Middle East or even Greece. In response Crerar confirmed that there had been no suggestion made by the British authorities, partly because of the time element and partly because there was not enough shipping available to transport large numbers of men to the eastern Mediterranean. Crerar’s estimation was that, with all the equipment of a modern division, it would take 10-15 tons of shipping per man. That same month, Malcolm MacDonald, the new British High Commissioner, gave a Sunday night radio address to the Canadian public in which he tried to explain why Canadian troops were being kept in Britain.⁶¹ As he put it, they had been trained for defensive operations and given the place of honour at “the spearhead of that defence”, a strange mixture of fighting roles if ever there was one.

In reporting these comments, the *Toronto Daily Star* appeared now to recant on its earlier criticism and offered its own analysis about the “unhappy speculation” that had questioned why Canada’s troops remained in Britain when soldiers from the other Dominions were fighting in North Africa and Greece. The view was offered that, “the sense of disappointment has perhaps

⁵⁹ “Memorandum: Isolated Facts concerning Canada’s War Effort,” 13 February 1941 (US Legation and Embassy, Ottawa), Box 71, RG84, NARA.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, “Memorandum of Conversation with General Crerar, Ottawa, 17 April 1941”.

⁶¹ “Why Canadian Troops are in Britain Still,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 30 April 1941.

been natural that it has not been the result of clear thinking. It has not been the result of visualising the war picture as a whole but rather of concentrating upon those theatres in which there has been the greatest action”.⁶² Finally, during a May debate, a Canadian parliamentarian posed the rhetorical question as to why his country’s troops had not been in the Libyan desert.⁶³ Frederick MacKenzie was a Liberal who had seen service in Egypt and at Gallipoli during the First World War. He now put forward two reasons as to why it was that only Anzac forces “were chasing Italians over the sands of North Africa”. Apart from repeating MacDonald’s comments he also suggested that it would not have been prudent to send men used to Canada’s climate to campaign in a place with so different a one. The issue was being contained, but Crerar was conscious that it was beginning to have an adverse effect on public confidence in the army.⁶⁴

A further visit to London by Colonel Ralston in October 1941 saw the Canadian role discussed once again. According to one well researched account, ever since his arrival nearly two years earlier, McNaughton had faced the problem of “finding feasible military operations to participate in with the rapidly expanding British Army” and, during this intervening period, whilst he had been willing to fight he was determined to keep his forces fighting together.⁶⁵ Now he was told by the Assistant CIGS, General Gordon Macready, that there was still no plan to send Canadian forces in the United Kingdom to “a distant theatre of operations”, repeating the discussion that had taken place between Churchill and Mackenzie King during the latter’s August visit to Britain.⁶⁶ This decision was in large part based around the belief that Germany still posed a potent threat to the home islands; the assessment was that Hitler could concentrate his air and land forces more quickly than adequate British Commonwealth forces could be recovered from overseas to deter him. There was also a concern that any despatch of the Canadian Corps would encourage an invasion attempt – the Canadians would therefore stay, in part to provide a significant counter-attack force but also to act as a visible deterrent. It was also clear from discussions amongst the Canadians that there continued to be considerable concerns about the effect of splitting the corps to conduct operations in a theatre such as the Middle East.⁶⁷ Crerar and McNaughton agreed that whilst such a move would be well received by the Canadian public,

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ “The Budget – Mr MacKenzie (Neepawa)”, House of Commons, May 6, 1941, Debates - House of Commons, Volume III, 1941, 2593-2594.

⁶⁴ Dickson, “The Politics of Army Expansion,” 288-290.

⁶⁵ Rickard, *The Politics of Command*, 46-53.

⁶⁶ “Personal War Diary, G.O.C.-in-C. First Canadian Army,” 14 October 1941, A.G.L. McNaughton Papers, MG30, E157, Vol.23, LAC.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 25 October 1941.

it would not resolve the bigger question of how overseas forces could best be used and would inevitably lower the morale of those troops who were retained in Britain.

There was also another consideration, “the extreme suitability” of Canadian forces for commando operations and large-scale raids, something that had first been raised during the visit the previous December. At lunch Major-General John Kennedy, the Director of Military Operations at the War Office, provided McNaughton with details on past and potential future operations and it was clear from their conversation that the Canadians were being considered in this role.⁶⁸ In a later discussion with Ralston and Crerar, some details were offered about British plans for the Dominion’s forces including a possible role assisting in the defence of Spain or Spanish Morocco and “temporary employment” in operations in Norway. In addition to this, and with the exception of minor raids, “no specific operations were under consideration”. The Canadian commander also repeated that there had been no reference to using part of the Corps in a theatre such as the Middle East.⁶⁹ David Margesson, the Secretary of State for War, had already confirmed to Ralston that there still remained a focus on keeping enough forces in Britain to withstand any potential invasion, with the minimum requirement calculated as 25 divisions, six of these being armoured formations.⁷⁰ Supporting this contingency plan remained the Canadian main effort. The Canadian minister in turn reiterated that his government was “fully prepared” to sanction the use of the country’s troops in any military operations that were recommended to them from London and, whilst he was not pressing for their use, there were “no restrictive tendencies on the part of the Canadian Government”.⁷¹ At the same time, it was also once again repeated that “the most helpful addition to the Canadian forces overseas would be in armoured formations”; more than one of the British participants spelled this out as meaning an additional Armoured Division. This followed on from a conversation Ralston had with General Dill, during which he had described the Canadian military role as, firstly “to defend the citadel”, and second to move into North Africa, Italy and Spain, possibly the Middle East and for raids.⁷² In addition there was also the possibility of exploiting “uprisings in occupied territories” although expecting any of these at this stage would be premature.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., Personal War Diary, 20 October 1941.

⁷¹ “Diary – Wednesday, 15th October 1941,” English Trips (Fall 1941), Ralston Papers, MG27, II, BII, Vol.64, LAC.

⁷² Ibid.

Ralston recorded in his diary entry of the meeting with Margesson that he had “referred to the employment of Canadians and said I wanted to repeat what had been said over and over again, namely, that Canadians were for service wherever and whenever they could best be used”.⁷³ Suggesting that they be used “simply to quieten public opinion” was not something he was willing to do but the merits of the situation would dictate; this assessment was readily agreed upon by the British minister. At the following meeting with him the next week he was told that the “chief necessity was the maintenance of strategic reserves and use where needed”, and the Canadians had not been assigned any of the ‘special tasks’ such as the possibility of conducting a raid against the French port of Brest.⁷⁴ They also discussed how the retaining of troops in Britain was being seen both in Canada and elsewhere. Ralston said that some people were attempting to portray this as a ‘restriction’ on their movement; Margesson’s response was to describe this as “an absolute lie” from “evilily disposed persons”. Yet, at the same time, Ralston also met with King George VI who he recorded as being “a little itchy” about the lack of activity, although it was not clear whether this referred specifically to the Canadian forces or if it was a comment about the general progress of the war.⁷⁵

Following a meeting with Churchill on 25 October 1941, Ralston’s short-hand diary note specifically records the British leader as having said “pity to break up Corps – one division to Middle East not desirable” before going on to say that he had “in mind some other possibilities” although he was not so sure about these.⁷⁶ He went on to say in reference to events then taking place at Tobruk that it was not “our [British] fault and not yours [Canadian] – knows boys want to get at him [Hitler] – opportunity will come – They also serve who only stand and wait”.⁷⁷ This view was obviously commonly known as it was reiterated in a conversation between Moffat and MacDonald in October 1941, shortly after the British high commissioner had returned from a visit to London.⁷⁸ In his report back to Washington the American ambassador reported that the British diplomat had urged Churchill “to send at least some Canadian troops into the fighting line”. This recommendation had been put forward for the benefit it would have on the morale of the troops and the Canadian public, but the British leader refused “point blank” saying that he was not planning to disrupt other units or supply lines by “adding a small group of Canadians

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., “Diary - Monday, 20th October, 1941”.

⁷⁵ Ibid., “Diary - Tuesday, 21st October, 1941”.

⁷⁶ Ibid., “Diary (Churchill – 25/10/41)”.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ “Memorandum of Conversation with Mr. Malcolm MacDonald, British High Commissioner to Canada,” Strictly Confidential, Ottawa, October 18, 1942 (Canada, US Legation and Embassy Ottawa, General Records – Chancery), Box 71, RG84, NARA.

here and there”. Only the month before, he had expressed concern that Britain would be seen as “seeming to fight all our battles in the Middle East only with Dominion troops”.⁷⁹ Whilst this was a private reference to the increasingly public dispute the British premier was having with Australia, it may well have influenced his thinking; it was entirely in line with a policy that had existed for nearly a year.⁸⁰ At the same time the plans for Operation *Crusader*, the huge British Commonwealth offensive that was scheduled to commence the following month, certainly did not point to there being any shortages in manpower.

Despite this offensive’s only mixed results, there remained no apparent interest for Canadian forces to be sent out to North Africa. When McNaughton returned to Ottawa in January 1942 for meetings, he brought with him confirmation from the CIGS, General Sir Alan Brooke, that “it was his wish to employ [Canadian Forces] in the defence of [Britain] until such time as operations on the Continent of Europe become possible”.⁸¹ As the Canadian general confided to King George VI during a private meeting in April, it remained the intention that the Canadian military were not being dispersed but instead concentrated in what he thought was “the decisive theatre of war”.⁸² Nonetheless, the problem of how to keep these expanding forces occupied was mounting. With some sections of the British media giving prominence to reports of criminal acts involving Canadian troops, there were also two occasions during that spring when they booed a car carrying Montgomery; with Brooke and General Bernard Paget, Commander-in-Chief Home Forces, the other occupants, McNaughton felt obliged to apologise personally to each of them whilst Crerar began an enquiry.⁸³ There was, however, also some sympathy shown in other publications where it was noted that the role the Canadians continued to play was a necessary one, if not always the most fulfilling. The *News of the World* published a leading article in late January 1942, which highlighted the “thankless, unspectacular job” they had performed helping guard Britain and “forced by circumstances beyond their control to remain in comparative idleness” whilst the rest of the Empire fought.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Winston Churchill, *The Grand Alliance: The Second World War, Volume III* (London: Cassell and Company, 1950), 367.

⁸⁰ Stewart, *Empire Lost*, 66-68.

⁸¹ “Memorandum - Personal War Diary, 16 January 1942,” A.G.L. McNaughton Papers, MG30, E123, Series III, Vol.248, LAC.

⁸² Ibid., “Personal War Diary, 15 April 1942”.

⁸³ Ibid., “Memorandum of a Discussion on 2 Jun 1942 at GHQ Home Forces between C-in-C Home Forces and GOC-in-C First Canadian Army,” 8 June 1942.

⁸⁴ “Fair Play for Canada’s Fighting Men,” *The News of the World*, 25 January 1942.

One possible solution was to send two experienced Canadian officers to North Africa to act as observers, one to report on operations, the other on administrative methods, with the intention that their observations would lead to improvements in organisation and training of the forces back in Britain. The initial two lieutenant-colonels who were selected travelled at the beginning of December 1941 with instructions to send monthly reports of what they witnessed in their role as observers to the Middle East Forces.⁸⁵ Later arrangements would see much larger numbers of Canadian officers and soldiers being attached to Lt-General K.A.N. Anderson's First Army operating in Tunisia where they would gain "invaluable" experience and they reported back to McNaughton in June 1942 after several months spent in theatre.⁸⁶ Following on from the disastrous use of Canadian forces as part of the August 1942 raid on the French port of Dieppe, the decision was taken to send more troops to North Africa and the first of five small groups arrived in Algiers in January 1943 to spend a period of three months attached to units of the First British Army. Most were assigned to the 78th Infantry Division and the 6th Armoured Division; as the official history notes "at one point an infantry unit of the [latter] had a Canadian second-in-command and three Canadian company commanders".⁸⁷ This arrangement continued until the end of the campaign by which point 201 officers and 147 non-commissioned officers had seen service and, aside from the eight men who were killed, the majority returned to Britain and their original units bringing a much greater level of battle experience. Indeed Stacey noted that the value of what they learnt was "beyond question" despite the limitations that were imposed on the numbers involved.⁸⁸ Other than the seventeen Royal Canadian Navy corvettes to support the Operation TORCH invasion fleet and follow-up convoys, this was the extent of the direct military contribution to the war fought in North Africa although much was made post-war that over half of the vehicles used by the Eighth Army having been produced in Canada.⁸⁹

The reality was that the absence of its military forces from the deserts of North Africa was in many respects a welcome outcome both for senior Canadian and British military and political

⁸⁵ Defensor to McNaughton, September 19, 1941, A.G.L. McNaughton Papers, MG 30, E133, Series III, Vol.193, LAC; *ibid.*, Brigadier J.C. Murchie to Lt-Col G.R. Bradbrooke and Lt-Col M.P. Bogert, 2 December 1941.

⁸⁶ C.P. Stacey, "Attachment of Canadian Officers and Soldiers to First British Army in Tunisia, 1942-1943," 18 March 1946, Report No.95, <http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/his/rep-rap/doc/cmhq/cmhq095.pdf>; Stacey, *The Canadian Army, 1939-1945*, 87-88; "Memorandum of a Discussion with Canadian Army Observers on Return from Middle East," 11 June 1942, Personal War Diary, A.G.L. McNaughton Papers, MG30, E123, Series III Vol.248, LAC.

⁸⁷ Stacey, *The Canadian Army 1939-1945*, 90.

⁸⁸ Stacey, *Six Years of War*, 248-9.

⁸⁹ Terry Copp, "The Mediterranean Theatre," *Legion Magazine*, January/February 1997; "A Record of Great Achievement: The Commonwealth and Empire's Contribution to Victory," *The Commonwealth and Empire Review* 79, 513 (June-August 1945): 21-22.

leaders, indeed, whilst never being acknowledged as such, it was an arrangement that was in everybody's interests. At no point did the senior British commanders in theatre indicate that they were short of manpower. Troops from the other Dominions, alongside the Indian Army and assorted other Allied contingents, ultimately proved sufficient to defeat their German and Italian opponents. At the same time there were perhaps also some concerns amongst the planners in London about the potential propaganda value to the Axis of having Canadian troops join the remainder of the Commonwealth coalition that had been assembled in the North African deserts. When Ambassador Moffat had spoken with his British counterpart MacDonald in December 1942 he had been told that it was General McNaughton who bore the responsibility for there being no Canadian troops in the final El Alamein battle "as he insisted that they be maintained as a unit".⁹⁰ No reference was provided as to his source for this conclusion but, by this stage, Crerar and others were already starting to doubt McNaughton's leadership qualities and his reputation began to decline until, in December 1943, his resignation was announced to a surprised Canadian public.⁹¹

Until recently, the accepted post-war view remained that it was McNaughton who had been the driving force in shaping how the dominion's troops in Britain were used.⁹² Yet it could be argued that the ever-expanding Canadian garrison force actually played a considerable role in the eventual victory that was won by the Eighth Army. Churchill remained convinced that the deserts of North Africa and the Middle East offered the British Empire's best opportunity to demonstrate its military capabilities to a global audience. Troops and equipment could not continue to have been diverted away in the quantities that he demanded if they were also needed to guard Britain against a potential German threat and it was the Canadian presence which allowed him to pursue his vision for a grand strategy. There is, however, a question to be asked about what the Canadians could have offered in December 1940 to General Archie Wavell's Western Desert Force and Operation *Compass* which achieved huge initial success but culminated just short of the key objective of the port of Tripoli. Australians and New Zealanders were shipped from Britain between September and December in order to take part in what was seen as a potentially critical attack. The arrival of an additional brigade of determined Dominion troops might have made all the difference in terms of changing the outcome of the entire

⁹⁰ "Memorandum of Conversation with Mr. Malcolm MacDonald, British High Commissioner," Ottawa, December 9, 1942 (Canada, US Legation and Embassy Ottawa, General Records - Chancery, Box 83, RG84, NARA).

⁹¹ Paul D. Dickson, "The Hand that Wields the Dagger: Harry Crerar, First Canadian Army Command and National Autonomy," *War and Society* 13, 2 (October 1995): 123-125.

⁹² Rickard, *The Politics of Command*, 39.

campaign. Mackenzie King could even have been able to claim a decisive military victory at virtually no political cost but this was not to be.