

Newfoundland In Two World Wars A Brief Overview

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Prologue

The First and Second World Wars were international events that greatly shaped the 20th century. Much is written about their effect on Canada's image at home and on the international stage. However, Newfoundland, a British Colony during both World Wars, played rather unique and diverse roles during these two conflicts.

During the Great War, the bulk of the colony's participation was in the form of clearly identified and *separate* manpower contributions and sacrifices. Conversely, during the Second World War, the various roles played by Newfoundlanders were merged with those of other units, primarily from Great Britain and Canada, and therefore their impact is less immediately striking. The Second World War saw a much greater emphasis on Newfoundland as a strategic asset in the Western Atlantic and as a base for Allied forces.

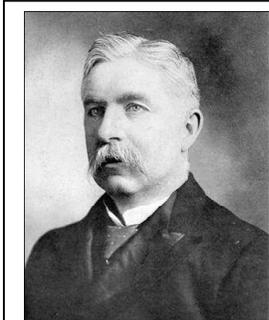
These differences can be attributed in large measure to the political situation in Newfoundland in the periods immediately preceding the two conflicts.

Prior to, and during the First World War, the colony was governed by a system known as "responsible government" in which there was a Governor (hailing from Britain), an appointed Executive Council, and an elected House of Assembly. This allowed the colony a good deal of leeway in the management of its affairs, with only limited interference from the Mother country.

Despite this relative freedom of action, responsible government was seen as an inadequate, contentious system, and collapsed in 1933 when the Legislature took the unusual step of electing itself out of office. A Commission of Government, consisting of seven persons appointed by Britain, replaced it. No elections took place and the Legislature was not convened for fifteen years. It was therefore the Commission that took Newfoundland into the Second World War, obviously with intentions that were driven more from London than from St. John's.

World War I

Introduction



Prime Minister
Edward Morris of
Newfoundland

When war broke out on August 4, 1914, the Newfoundland government faced what was principally a management problem. Across the British Empire, men were needed. However, since Newfoundlanders were chronically under-employed, these men could be relatively easily supplied. A decision to raise 500 soldiers for overseas duty plus a home defence force to furnish reserves was announced within four days of the outbreak of war.

It was not immediately apparent how the government of Prime Minister Edward P. Morris was going to enlist, train and equip these men. The last British soldier had left in 1870 and no local militia had

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emerged in the meantime. The government had no military department, nor experienced civil servants to spare. It had few financial resources. Aside from a branch of the Royal Naval Reserve, in St. John's there were four church-sponsored cadet corps, a branch of the non-denominational Legion of Frontiersmen, and a rifle club. However, Morris was confident his government could meet its commitment.

Newfoundlanders, at least those in St. John's and surrounding areas, supported the war effort. It would have been inconceivable for them not to answer Britain's call.

Governor Sir Walter Davidson was prepared to take the lead, with Morris working behind the scenes. At a public meeting on August 12, Davidson established himself as head of what became the Newfoundland Patriotic Association (NPA). This was a non-partisan, extra-parliamentary body that quickly grew from its original 55 St. John's members to 300 island-wide. Its initial purpose was to raise and equip a military force of 500 men plus reserves. Over time, however, its responsibilities grew to encompass most aspects of the war effort. Various local committees did most of the work, but major decisions had first to be approved by the NPA, the prime minister and opposition leader J. M. Kent (later William F. Lloyd).

The NPA managed the war effort for nearly three years, with generally good results. It was a complex but flexible arrangement that drew on available military, business and professional expertise, enjoyed the support of those who most counted, and kept potentially disruptive forces at bay. But by the spring of 1917 it was clear that if the Newfoundland Regiment was to be maintained as a fighting force, the colony's elected representatives had to do more, particularly with respect to recruitment. In July 1917 the National (coalition) Government was created, which included a Department of Militia.

As the Department of Militia gradually took over the various war-related tasks, the NPA faded into the background. At the end of hostilities it resurfaced to address the question of a war memorial.

The Newfoundland Commitment

Newfoundlanders served on land, at sea, in the air and in the nursing services. They served willingly (no conscripts served overseas), fought hard, and died hard. Nearly 12,000 enlisted in the three Newfoundland forces—the **Newfoundland Regiment**, the **Royal Naval Reserve** and the **Newfoundland Forestry Corps**—as well as the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF). These men represented nearly 10 percent of the total male population, or 35.6 percent of young men between the ages of 19 and 35.

The Newfoundland Regiment

The formation of the Newfoundland Patriotic Association (NPA) on August 12 provided the structure for organizing the war effort and for raising the necessary forces for service overseas. Initially, the Association proposed to raise 500 men for a military contingent and to increase the size of the Naval Reserve to 1000.

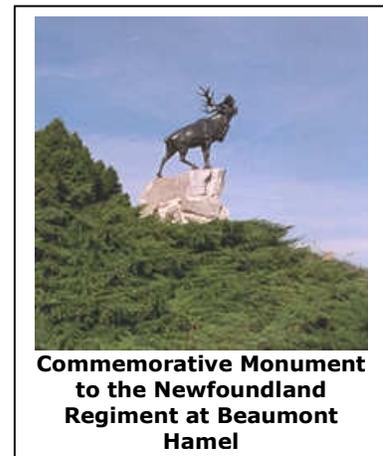
The response in Newfoundland to the August 22 proclamation calling for volunteers was overwhelming. Within days 335 men had signed up, two thirds coming from the city cadet brigades. By the end of the first week, it appeared as if the entire 500 might be made up from St. John's. By September 26, when enlistment tapered off, nearly 1000 volunteers had signed up.

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Half passed the required medical exams and moved to tent lines established at nearby Pleasantville. These were the First Five Hundred, a rag tag little army of enthusiastic volunteers, officered by the sons of the city's elite, and attired in a variety of military costumes. The men were issued locally obtained blue puttees, which gave them their popular, if unofficial, designation, "The Blue Puttees." The terms of enlistment were "for the duration of the war, but not exceeding one year." By war's end, over four years later, a total of 6,241 Newfoundland men had served in the regiment, 4,668 as unpaid volunteers. During the War, the Newfoundland Regiment was assigned to the 88th Brigade of the 29th Division of the British Army.

Recruitment for the regiment was not a major problem for the first two years. However, the near annihilation of the regiment at Beaumont Hamel on July 1, 1916, and costly major engagements in October at Gueudecourt and at Monchy-le-Preux the following April, increased pressure on the colony to find additional men. A draft of 500 arrived in late June and early July 1917 but the Battle of Cambrai that November and December left the regiment with 250 men of all ranks.

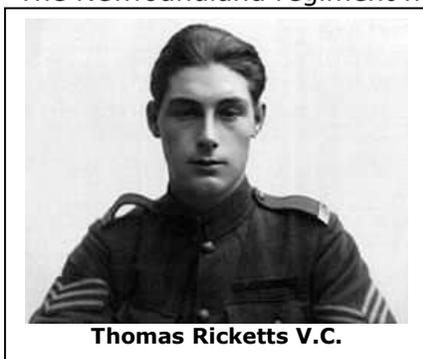


**Commemorative Monument
to the Newfoundland
Regiment at Beaumont
Hamel**

While its actions at Ypres and Cambrai resulted in the regiment receiving the "Royal" designation, recruitment now became a serious problem. In August 1917, the new National Government created a Department of Militia. Over the course of the summer the number of men offering to serve had dropped dramatically. Inducements – such as allowances for married men and others with dependents and a highly publicized recruiting drive that fall – met with limited success.

Calls for conscription came from several quarters. The government eventually realized that some form of compulsory service was necessary, but delayed until April 1918 when it became obvious that the regiment was badly under strength and that drastic measures were called for.

The Newfoundland government proclaimed the Military Service Act on May 11, 1918. As with the similar legislation in Britain and Canada, this act allowed the government to conscript men for service. In the end, these conscripts were not sent to the Western Front. The Newfoundland regiment had been withdrawn from service briefly in May, but the last



Thomas Ricketts V.C.

batch of volunteers allowed it to serve with distinction as part of the British 9th Division at the Fourth Battle of Ypres. As a consequence, the regiment was able to claim that it had served throughout the war as a truly volunteer force.

Private Thomas Ricketts of the Regiment was awarded the Victoria Cross for his action near Steenbeck in Flanders. He was 17 at the time of the action, making him the youngest "Canadian" to receive the award. His medal is on display in the Canadian War Museum.

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The Royal Naval Reserve

At the turn of the twentieth century, an intense naval rivalry with Germany had inspired efforts to strengthen Britain's naval resources. Newfoundland had been no exception. In 1902, the government authorized the establishment of a 600-man Royal Naval Reserve and, in October of the same year, the British Admiralty assigned the HMS *Calypso* to train the new reservists. Enlistees trained in St. John's for 28 days and remained available for service for five years. The Newfoundland Naval Reserve was thus well established by the outbreak of hostilities.



Royal Naval Reservists on a wharf adjacent to the HMS *Calypso*, ca. 1914.

Courtesy of Darrell Hillier, St. John's, Newfoundland.

On August 2, 1914, as concerns heightened about a European war, reservists were called to active duty. Commander A. MacDermott expected problems with the call-up, as it was the height of the fishing season, but his fears were unfounded. MacDermott reported that once the call was issued "*every man-jack of them (responded) and with no trouble at all, though many of them had to walk fifty or sixty miles to the nearest steamer or railway station*"

Unlike the men of the First Newfoundland Regiment, who remained with their unit, the members of the Naval Reserve were

dispersed throughout the Royal Navy. MacDermott recounted that Newfoundland's sailors "*were scattered throughout every flotilla and squadron in the war zone, and earned high praise from their commanding officers everywhere*". The transition to military life proved an easy one for the reservists. MacDermott, recalling his experience as a Naval officer, said that, "*Newfoundlanders took to naval life and routine like ducks to water . . . Their conduct was exemplary, punishments were practically unknown, and every order was carried out with cheerful alacrity and seamanlike intelligence . . . I may say, indeed, that there were no smarter-looking men in the whole Service*".

In addition to their service overseas with the Royal Navy, members of the reserve also served at home, forming a protective guard at the Admiralty wireless station in Mount Pearl and manning a 12-pounder gun at Fort Waldegrave to protect the entrance to St. John's Harbour.

By the end of the war, 1,964 reservists had served. There were 180 fatalities. Sir Winston Churchill later described Newfoundlanders as "*the best small boat men in the world*". The Royal Naval Reserve disbanded in 1920-21.

Newfoundland Forestry Corps

In the summer of 1916, Canada had sent overseas a forestry contingent of approximately 22,000 men. In March 1917, Newfoundland Prime Minister Sir Edward Morris first entertained the idea of forming a Forestry Corps.

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**Forestry Corps Working in the Forests of
Scotland c. 1917**

Courtesy of the Heritage Society of Grand Falls-Windsor, Grand
Falls-Windsor, Newfoundland

With the organizational assistance of Governor Sir Walter Davidson and the Newfoundland Patriotic Association, a crew of 498 foresters enlisted to work in the United Kingdom. An impressive 776 men had initially volunteered but 278 failed to meet the physical requirements. The British government agreed to pay the cost of maintaining the corps. A large proportion of the Corps was from central Newfoundland, workers from the Anglo-Newfoundland Development (AND) Company in Grand Falls and the Albert E. Reed Company in Bishop's Falls.

Once in the United Kingdom, the Newfoundlanders earned a striking reputation.

Near the Scottish town of Craignivean they erected a 3,000-foot timber chute to move logs over difficult terrain to the mills. The local Timber Supply Department of the Board of Trade later remarked that the chute would *"long be remembered as marking an epoch in forest utilization in Scotland"*

The Volunteer Aid Detachment

The Volunteer Aid Detachment (VAD) consisted of semi-trained nurses who assisted medical services overseas. At least 38 Newfoundland women are known to have joined this organization. VAD members were at first unpaid, and had to be self-sufficient. They had to pay for the necessary lectures and training involved in learning first aid, home nursing, and hygiene. It was not until 1915 that the War Office decided that VAD members would be paid the small sum of £20 per annum.

World War II

Introduction

The strategic geography of Newfoundland and Labrador meant that it played a central role in the Allied war effort in the North Atlantic. Before the war, Newfoundland had already become important in the development of transatlantic flight, especially at the Gander airport and the Botwood seaplane base. The Canadian government took over the defence of these facilities, and later agreed to build additional airbases at Torbay and Goose Bay. The bases at Gander and Goose Bay became vital links in the ferrying of military aircraft to Britain. Torbay was home to fighter squadrons that provided protection against U-boats for convoys of ships headed for Britain, although anti-U boat patrols flew from the other airbases as well. A Canadian naval base at St. John's was the home for escort ships that sailed with these convoys. In 1940, Canada and the United States (US) formed the Permanent Joint Board on Defence to protect the western hemisphere. Although still officially neutral, the US leased an army base in St. John's, an air base at Stephenville, and a naval and army base at Argentia in return for providing Britain with destroyers and military equipment.

Volunteers from Newfoundland and Labrador served at sea, on land, and in the air during the Second World War. Some defended the home front, others fought on the front lines in

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RCAF Pilots at Torbay, 1942
 Courtesy of Library & Archives Canada (PA-133271)

Europe, North Africa, and the Far East. Still more worked as merchant mariners transporting much-needed goods to Allied countries, or as loggers supplying timber products vital to the war effort. Members of various charitable voluntary organizations also contributed to the war effort. The Red Cross, and the Women's Patriotic Association, for example, provided medical services, meals, and other forms of support to thousands of servicemen and women.

Because the Commission of Government chose to avoid conscription during the war, all of the

22,000 Newfoundlanders and Labradorians who served – and the thousands more who applied, but failed to meet medical or other standards of recruitment – did so willingly. This was a sizable contribution from a small country with a population of only 300,000. While many men and women enlisted to help with the war effort, they also joined to earn military wages, then a rare luxury in a country suffering from widespread poverty.

Armed Forces

Aside from some 50 Rangers and 260 members of the Newfoundland Constabulary, Newfoundland and Labrador lacked any form of armed forces when war broke out in September 1939. The Royal Newfoundland Regiment, which fought in the First World War, and the Royal Naval Reserve, which trained local fishermen and seamen for service with the Royal Navy, had both disbanded by 1921.

Of immediate concern to the Commission of Government was the establishment of a home defence force. In October, it created the Newfoundland Militia, later renamed the Newfoundland Regiment in 1943. Before hostilities ended, the Regiment had enlisted some 1,668 men, whose mission was to guard vulnerable areas in St. John's, Bell Island, Harbour Grace, Bay Roberts, Whitbourne, and St. Lawrence. The Commission also formed Home Guard units in Grand Falls and Corner Brook to defend those towns and their valuable paper mills in the event of attack.

Not possessing the financial resources with which to raise and equip ground, air, or naval forces for service overseas – as had been the case with the Royal Newfoundland Regiment during the First World War – the Commission of Government instead allowed Britain and other Allied countries to recruit men and women from Newfoundland and Labrador into their armed forces.

The first draft of recruits left St. John's in November 1939 to serve with the British Royal Navy. By the end of the war, 2,889 Newfoundland and Labrador men had enlisted in the navy, more than in any other single branch of the armed forces. These men were dispersed throughout the navy, where they served on hundreds of vessels in every theatre of war.

In contrast to this was the British Royal Artillery, which grouped all of its recruits from Newfoundland and Labrador into two regiments named for their country. The 166th (Newfoundland) Field Regiment served in Britain, North Africa, and Italy; the 59th

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(Newfoundland) Heavy Regiment defended England's coastline for three years before fighting in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany. Before the war ended, some 2,343 Newfoundlanders and Labradorians fought with the Royal Artillery.

The youngest of Britain's armed forces, the Royal Air Force, also recruited in Newfoundland and Labrador, though less extensively than either the Navy or Artillery. By 1945, approximately 712 men had departed St. John's to serve as airmen or ground staff. A portion of these helped form the No. 125 (Newfoundland) Squadron, a night fighter unit that patrolled British skies and coastlines for enemy aircraft or naval vessels.

Volunteers from Newfoundland and Labrador also served in other Allied forces. Canada, for example, recruited 1,160 men into its navy, army, and air force, while more than 500 women served in the Canadian Women's Army Corps, the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service, and the Women's Division of the Royal Canadian Air Force.

Civilian Forces and Volunteer Organizations



Survivors of Torpedoed Merchant Ship, St. John's, 1942

Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada (PA-037424)

Also serving overseas, but not part of the armed forces, were the thousands of men and women who joined the merchant navy and the Newfoundland Overseas Forestry Unit. Some 10,000 Newfoundland and Labrador merchant mariners helped deliver goods to and from Allied countries aboard non-military vessels. Theirs was essential, yet dangerous work, and before the war ended, German forces sank more than 5,000 Allied merchant ships and killed at least 333 of Newfoundland's mariners.

Scattered throughout the United Kingdom's forests, meanwhile, were the almost 3,600 loggers of the Newfoundland Overseas Forestry Unit. These men supplied wood to help build coalmine frames, telegraph poles, and ships, or to rebuild bombed structures.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, a large civilian volunteer movement supported troops overseas and at home. At the forefront was the Women's Patriotic Association (WPA), which helped provide meals, clothes, and other comforts for servicemen and women. At WPA Headquarters in St. John's, for example, naval recruits could receive free sweaters and other woolens made and donated by women from across the island. The WPA also opened the Caribou Hut in downtown St. John's, which provided accommodation and entertainment for visiting members of the armed forces.

Complementing the WPA was the Newfoundland Patriotic Association (also called the Men's Patriotic Association), which helped the Commission recruit volunteers for military service. The Red Cross also did much to provide for the physical and social welfare of servicemen and women. Survivors of torpedoed ships who landed in St. John's frequently received comfort bags from the Red Cross containing razors, shaving soap, brushes, stationary, and other items.

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Post War

In the months following the war, the Royal Artillery and Royal Air Force disbanded their Newfoundland units. Most ground troops, seamen, and airmen had returned home by the end of 1945, while 1,200 loggers remained in the United Kingdom until the following summer. Of the 22,000 volunteers who served, some 1,089 died during the war, and many more were injured.

The Commission of Government devised a civil re-establishment program for returning troops, which helped them find new jobs (or return to old ones), paid them a temporary allowance, and provided pensions and medical treatment for disabled veterans no longer able to work. However, the Commission failed to recognize returning loggers and merchant mariners as veterans because they had not served in the armed forces. Only in the year 2000 did the Canadian government make both groups eligible to receive benefits and pensions.

Conclusion

There was no question that the Commission of Government as it existed in Newfoundland would disappear once World War Two ended. The debate which arose in the mid-1940s is understandable, as there were many vastly different options. Would the Newfoundland electorate simply go back to a constitution it had agreed to suspend in 1933? Would it not be more practical to simply reform the Commission system? Or might voters prefer that their country become a Canadian province?

The final actions of the Commission were designed to ensure that this last option was successful. In 1948, a small majority of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians voted to become Canadians, a decision which became official on 31 March, 1949.

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