



PA C-007998

Officers of the Strathcona Horse – South African War.

CANADA'S PARTICIPATION IN THE WARS OF THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY: PLANTING THE SEEDS OF MILITARY AUTONOMY AND NATIONAL COMMAND

by Major-General Daniel Gosselin

Introduction

The history of the Canadian participation in the major conflicts of the early part of the 20th century – the South African War (Boer War) and the First World War – is well documented and provides an excellent understanding of the impact of Canada's contribution to these wars. Earlier studies have focused on analyzing the diplomacy and the preparations for Canada's participation in these conflicts, on narrating the campaigns and battles, and on describing the tactics employed.

Canadian military history is also rich in the study of the performances of Canadian military commanders, but poor in the study of command. This is regrettable in many ways, especially because command is so intrinsically linked to the effective civil control of military operations. As one Canadian authority on command notes: "Command is important not merely because effective command often wins wars, but because

national command is the instrument that connects the [military] forces to the government," and vice-versa.¹ In this article, command is defined as a function that has to be exercised if a military force is to exist and operate. National command is more specific, and is command exercised within one nation – as opposed to within a coalition or alliance.

The current Canadian Forces (CF) commitment in Afghanistan is the most significant expeditionary operation by the Canadian military since the Korean War. With CF elements at present operating under *Operation Enduring Freedom*, a US-led coalition, and transitioning by mid-summer 2006 to alliance command under the International and Security Assistance Force (ISAF) of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO),

Major-General Daniel Gosselin, OMM, CD, a PhD candidate in military history at Queen's University, is Director General International Security Policy at National Defence Headquarters.



CMU map by Monica Muller

command between 1899 and 1918 is often described as “colonial command”, characterized by near-total subordination to Great Britain.³ Still, the period between the Boer War and the end of the First World War saw an important evolution in the means of control over Canadian expeditionary forces, planting the seeds that would result in greater Canadian national military autonomy in the subsequent conflicts of the 20th Century. While the Canadian command arrangements developed in an ad hoc fashion, these became more extensive as Canada’s military contribution grew in magnitude. Further, as Canadian military forces became more independent in the field – operationally, logistically and – administratively – and as they gained operational credibility and

discussions to help understand the origins and the evolution of Canada’s national command, and to assist in properly framing its importance, are highly pertinent.

In accounts of past Canadian wars and operations, command is rarely discussed, except for failed operations such as the Dieppe Raid in 1942 or CF participation in the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission in Somalia in 1993. Even though the chain of military command always permeates all aspects of Canadian military operations, in most studies, there is seldom any attempt to describe how the national command structure was established, or to explain how Canadian senior commanders exercised command.² Consequently, because of the paucity of discussion and analysis on this important element of warfare, the fundamental link that exists between national command and the achievement of Canada’s strategic objectives is often misunderstood and neglected.

This article will analyze the role that national military command played in Canada’s overseas operations in the first two wars of the 20th Century. The first section explains the importance of the concept of command in war, and its link to civil control of the military, providing the framework of analysis necessary to assess Canada’s national command. The next section examines the command organization and control mechanisms of Canada’s fighting forces during both the Boer War and the First World War.

Canada did not gain autonomy and control of her external policy until 1931, when the Statute of Westminster was enacted by the British Parliament. Canada’s national

achieved some success, the degree of civil control of the military and the structure of national command witnessed a corresponding progression.

Civil Control and National Command

- Command:** 1. The authority vested in an individual of the armed forces for the direction, coordination, and control of military forces. 2. An order given by a commander; that is, the will of the commander expressed for the purpose of bringing a particular action. 3. A unit, group of units, organization or area under the authority of a single individual. 4. To dominate an area or situation. 5. To exercise command.⁴

– North Atlantic Treaty Organization,
Glossary of Terms and Definitions

The assumption of military subordination to another nation always has been strongly embedded in Canada’s military and political structures, reflecting the reality of the 20th Century that invariably saw Canada as a junior partner in larger war coalitions. For any nation participating in coalition or alliance combat, reconciling the demands of national sovereignty with the need for military efficiency is always a difficult challenge, more so in a war waged by a dominant coalition member that can make decisions to suit its own interests.⁵

Because of the many inherent complexities arising in coalition warfare, the manner in which command is exercised is central to the achievement of a nation’s strategic objectives. One of the most contentious aspects

of coalition operations remains the command arrangements, reflecting the sensitivity that nations have over who will command their forces, what authority the designated coalition commander will have, and the degree of control national authorities will retain over the employment of their forces.

The functions that the term ‘command’ defines are as old as war itself. Unfortunately, historical perspectives on command are quite limited. Moreover, while there is abundant academic literature on the topic of civil control of the military, there has been limited discussion of the importance of national command, and its link to effective civil control of the military. To add to the complexity of comprehending command, the term tends to be used gratuitously in the literature and its varied meanings, often leading to confusion and misinterpretations.⁶ Consequently, it is important to clarify the concepts and the terminology surrounding command in war.

In 1940, the US Army *Staff Officers’ Field Manual* defined command as a responsibility. “The commander alone is responsible to his superior for all his unit does or fails to do. He cannot shift this responsibility to his staff or to subordinate commanders.”⁷ To one American historian who studied command in the aftermath of the Second World War, the essence of command is best conveyed by the concentration of responsibility and commensurate authority in one individual.⁸ Military historian Martin Van Creveld authored a seminal study, published in the mid-1980s, which reviewed the evolution of command. In *Command*

“Canada did not gain autonomy and control over her external policy until 1931, when the Statute of Westminster was enacted by the British Parliament.”

in War, he argues that command is more than ‘a responsibility’ and, as a result, he defines the term in broader terms, as “a function that has to be exercised if a military force is to exist and operate.”⁹

From this explanation, it follows that command must link the civil authorities to the tactical commanders on the ground, in the air, or at sea. Consequently, command is always associated with a ‘chain of command’,¹⁰

which should never by-pass a commander in the chain. A superior commander can only command the commanders on the next subordinate level of authority. Accordingly, the chain of command is an important instrument of command, exercised through the flow of orders and information, and acting as a hierarchy of individual commanders, with delegated authority, who take decisions within their connected military formations and units.¹¹

Because of the severe consequences of war, command authorities must leave no doubt as to which commander is responsible for which decisions and actions – or inaction – and to which superior officer a commander must account in the performance of his responsibilities. “Command, the legal authority to issue orders and demand obedience, must be sharply defined in law, unambiguously delineated in organization, and obvious in execution,” explains political scientist Douglas Bland.¹² If any of these conditions fails, then accountability and control of the armed forces also fail. It is only through the establishment of a robust framework of military command that a country’s national interests can be achieved in war.

The *linkage* between national military command and civil control of a nation’s military forces is central to the achievement of a nation’s strategic objectives in war. In Western democracies, civil control of the military means that the legitimate responsibility for the direction and actions of the military rests with civilians outside the defence establishment.¹³ The terms ‘high command’ or ‘supreme command’ are frequently employed in historical works to denote the overall civilian direction of war, where decisions about the strategy and conduct of the war are taken within a coalition or alliance council, exemplified



Men of a Boer Commando during the South African War.

DND photo PMP81-491



The 1st Gordon Highlanders and Royal Canadian Regiment, mingled together, fording the Modder River on Saturday morning, 18 February 1900.

policies and interests of the Canadian government.¹⁷ In addition, because Canada is signatory to several international agreements (such as the Geneva Conventions or the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court), and is respectful of international law, deployed CF personnel must abide by those agreements and laws, even if the coalition lead nation may not be a signatory to certain agreements, or may not recognize the legality of a number of international laws. A recent example of this situation is in the area of landmines, where Canada has signed the *Mine Ban Treaty* – an international agreement that bans anti-personnel landmines – while the United States has not, a factor that might place additional restrictions on Canada when operating in a coalition with the US.¹⁸

by the Allied High Command during the Second World War. Civil control of military operations undertaken by one nation – in contrast to a coalition or alliance council – is often termed ‘national command’.¹⁴

‘Military command’, on the other hand, implies a more limited scope of activity than ‘supreme command’, and denotes the more specific actions of “directing and controlling operational forces”.¹⁵ Military commanders, from the strategic to the tactical levels, exercise military command. ‘National military command’ is even more limited than military command, and refers more exclusively to the direction of military forces of one nation. Unlike the conflicts of the early 20th Century, when British commanders had near-complete authority over Canadian soldiers, national command responsibilities are no longer delegated to foreign leaders or commanders. As General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote in 1948: “Every commander in the field possesses direct disciplinary power over all subordinates of his own nationality and of his own service.... But such authority and power cannot be given by any country to an individual of another nation.”¹⁶ In older texts, the term ‘military administration’ is frequently used to refer to those important but non-operational activities in a theatre of war. Today, the expression ‘national military command’ incorporates the command of units performing operational activities, as well as the administrative, disciplinary and logistical functions.

The requirements of Canadian national command demand that the political direction of national military forces, and the command exercised over Canadian units, take place according to the laws, principles,

Decision-making, from the strategic direction of the war to the planning and execution of tactical engagements, is the core constituent of command in war. Civil control and military command in war are greatly simplified when only one nation participates (on one side), as this nation – and its appointed commanders down the chain of command – possesses the sole authority to make all decisions related to the conduct of the war. The complications with civil control and command arise when several nations participate in military operations as a coalition or an alliance.

In international operations, where military forces from different nations unite to contribute, nations will typically agree to relinquish aspects of decision-making to a higher war council (for the grand strategy of war), and to coalition commanders (for the conduct of operations), making the direction of war, and the command arrangements, inherently more complex. Nations participating in a coalition will readily accept the need for a coordinated approach to the higher direction of war, and for collective decision-making. However, handing over command authority of national forces within a theatre of war is another matter.

As a former senior commander of UN forces in Korea remarked several years ago, relinquishing control of national military forces is an act of trust and confidence that is unequalled in relations between nations.¹⁹ The transfer of control of military forces is done by a nation solely for the broader purpose of military efficiency – that is, for providing the largest

possible concentration of power in the fewest possible hands. In other words, to achieve a greater war effort and ensure unity of command, nations might delegate restricted sovereignty over military forces to a lead nation in a coalition – such as Canada to Great Britain in the First World War – or to an alliance, such as Canada to NATO during the Kosovo War.²⁰

With command being normally conceptualized as ‘indivisible’, employing the term ‘unity of command’ is repetitive. Nevertheless, the expression was developed during the Second World War to account for the bringing together under a single commander of the military elements ordinarily commanded and controlled by separate sources of national authority, each ‘sovereign’ within its own sphere. Therefore, in international operations, to speak of ‘unity of command’ is to imply alliance or coalition warfare. With the experience and lessons acquired over the years by Western militaries during many conflicts, an elaborate nomenclature and strict protocols have been established to define the degree of ‘control’ over military forces that is transferred between nations. The command arrangements expressed through these mechanisms of transfer stipulate which commander is responsible – and accountable – for which decision and action.²¹

Finally, the more substantial a nation’s contribution is to the coalition war effort – usually measured in terms of troops and military assets contributed, and financial responsibility assumed – the more influence and control this nation is expected to have over the overall strategic direction of the war, and the command of military operations. Hence, the easier it will be for this nation to fully exercise national command over its forces, and to align the coalition objectives with its national objectives.

Canadian National Command in British-Led Wars

Determining the degree of national command that is exercised by a nation during a war conducted by a large coalition or an alliance is a complex endeavour that involves analyzing several determinants. The key determinants that influence the ability of a nation to achieve its strategic objectives are the capacity: (1) to direct or influence the strategic direction of the war; (2) to retain national command of its own forces; (3) to plan, direct, coordinate, and control operational activities within a theatre of war; (4) to gain access to senior military leadership positions within the command structure of the coalition or alliance; and (5) to logistically support and administer its national troops.

The South African War

Canada’s experiences with transferring the command and control of military forces to another nation essentially originate with the South African War, when the Canadian contingent was assigned to, and integrated with, British forces. This marked the first occasion that Canada dispatched troops in significant numbers for an overseas conflict. Otherwise known as the Boer War, which took place between 1899 and 1902, it saw British and Dominion forces pitted against the Afrikaner Republics of South Africa and the Orange Free State. By the time the war ended, more than 7300 soldiers and 16 nurses had sailed from Canada to South Africa, and approximately 270 perished there.

Despite Canada’s strong ties to the Empire, and the demands of the Anglophone community that Canada fulfil her obligations to the mother country, the decision to participate in this ‘foreign’ war was a difficult one for Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier. Strong French-Canadian opposition to the war, and concerns that the dispatch of Canadian soldiers would set a precedent for future imperial adventures, created deep divisions inside the Canadian Cabinet and contributed to Laurier’s indecision.²² In the end, under strong pressures for participation, including offers by prominent Canadian citizens to raise units privately, Laurier and the Cabinet agreed to field a Canadian contingent.

“Decision-making, from the strategic direction of the war to the planning and execution of tactical engagements, is the core constituent of command in war.”

The proposal initially made by the British government was that Canada and other self-governing colonies should provide units of “about 125 men.”²³ When orders were issued by the Canadian government to raise the troops, “few people had been happy with the decision to organize the men into small, independent, company-sized units, which could be broken up and readily absorbed into the imperial army.”²⁴ The Militia Department was determined to retain the Canadian character of the Canadian contribution. Thus, there was immediate interest in creating a unified Canadian contingent. Lord Minto, the British Governor General, suggested to Laurier, “... if troops are to be offered at all, that they should be offered as a Canadian contingent to act as such... and [the offer] would appear to me more dignified, and also we could find a much better officer to command it.”²⁵ As a result, Minto telegraphed the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Joseph Chamberlain, as follows:

After full consideration my Ministers have decided to offer a regiment of infantry, 1,000 strong, under command of Lieutenant-Colonel [William D.] Otter... My Ministers hope the Canadian contingent will be kept together as much as possible, but realize that this much must be left to discretion of War Office and Commander-in-Chief.²⁶

“This marked the first occasion that Canada dispatched troops in significant numbers for an overseas conflict.”

This episode did set a precedent for Canada. In this first significant overseas military intervention, “Canadians wanted to serve together, under their own officers,”²⁷ and Canadian soldiers have insisted on doing so ever since. The decision by Canada, eventually accepted by Chamberlain, was important for a number of reasons. It allowed Canada to preserve the unity of the Canadian contingent and to permit the appointment of many more officers, including a lieutenant-colonel to command the regiment. The formation of a regiment also meant the creation of a regimental administrative structure and headquarters, and justified the addition of auxiliary staff, all of which eventually enhanced the contingent’s prestige, autonomy and self-sufficiency. Even the names of the units were chosen to “make it clear that, contrary to the stated intentions of the initial Privy Council minute, the men... were not British army recruits but men with a temporary appointment in the Canadian permanent militia.”²⁸ The seeds of Canadian autonomy in expeditionary wars had been planted, and they would grow over two subsequent world wars.

Canada had no influence on the direction of the war in South Africa. After all, the Canadian contribution was just over 7000 troops of almost half a million Empire troops in total. Considering the *British North America Act* restricted Canadian jurisdiction over its troops to its territorial limits, Canadian historian Carman Miller contends that Canada did “exercise considerable... control over its troops in South Africa.”²⁹ Moreover, British setbacks during the initial part of the conflict ensured that Canada’s contribution, albeit small, would be more than a token gesture of imperial solidarity.³⁰

There is no evidence that the officer commanding the Canadian troops was given any specific instructions prior to departing Canada to guide him with respect to the operational employment of the contingent. Except for establishing the duration of the deployment of the troops to South Africa, Canada had imposed very few restrictions on their employment. Lieutenant-Colonel William D. Otter, the first commanding officer and national contingent commander, left for South Africa with orders from the General Officer Commanding (GOC) the Canadian militia, requiring him to maintain a daily war diary and to report weekly on unit strengths, including deaths and casualties, to both Canadian and British military authorities. He also received letters regularly from the Department of the Militia, containing requests for information, advice and instructions. In addition, influential individuals, such as future Minister of Militia and Defence Sam Hughes and four newspaper correspondents, were “put upon [Otter]... by the civil authorities” to report on the employment of the contingent.³¹

Activities of the Canadian units were followed closely in Canada, and frequently were reported in newspapers. Otter was also the target of a flood of letters and

telegrams, public and private, demanding information about the contingent and its individual members. In addition, he soon discovered that “...I had to serve two masters, the one in the form of the general commanding [the] Orange River [region], in whose command we were serving and to whom I had to make daily reports, returns... and the other our own

Department at Ottawa, which required even more similar information.”³² The burden of defining the practical limitations of this dual servitude, of reporting to two governments, was demanding upon Otter, who complained “incessantly to his wife of the ambiguity of his command,”³³ a challenge that many Canadian general officers would also face in future conflicts.

The conduct of operations in South Africa was the responsibility of the British military commanders. Canadian officers were not involved in the planning of military *campaigns*, and were even left out of the planning for some key *tactical* engagements. A typical example was the Battle of Paardeberg in February 1900, during which Otter and his battalion were “left to their own devices.”³⁴ Early confusion over the British chain of command – of which the Canadian units were part – complicated strategy on the ground, created confusion and resulted in vague orders – all of which had tragic consequences for the Canadians.

Administratively and logistically, Canada contributed the minimum. The nation paid for the cost of clothing, arming, equipping, and transporting the men to South Africa, but the British government then paid the soldiers and provided their logistical and medical support. Under considerable public pressure, the Canadian government eventually undertook to absorb the difference between the rate of pay for British infantry and that of the Canadian active militia.³⁵ While the administration of Canadians remained within Canadian control (such as appointments, promotions, and transfers), the Canadians were subject to British military law under the provisions of the *British Army Act*, and, therefore, the British authorities controlled all disciplinary matters.³⁶ While the modest Canadian contingent was commanded by a Canadian officer, Otter “did all in his power to make the Canadian contingent conform strictly to British military regulations,”³⁷ chiefly to overcome the British suspicions about the efficacy of colonial troops.

The South African War was purely a British war, with the participating dominions of the British Empire having no voice in the strategic direction of the conflict. At the time, Canada was still a self-governing colony with no formal control over its foreign policy. The Canadian strategic objectives, which exclusively consisted of a military contribution to the war in support of the needs of the Empire, were achieved independently of the need for any Canadian government control over the planning and conduct of military operations. The Canadian command structure, which did not develop beyond the tactical level, reflected this reality. Except for minor administrative matters retained within

the control of the Canadian commanding officers, the British authorities had complete command of the Canadian forces, with the full authority to issue orders to Canadian commanders, to discipline Canadian soldiers, and to employ the forces and assign missions within the theatre of operations as dictated by the campaign.

In South Africa, the Canadians and other colonials soon discovered the pitfalls of placing their national forces under the operational command of foreign commanders. Sam Hughes, for one, was greatly influenced by the experience, and returned to Canada to complain of the “British military incompetence in war.”³⁸ Still, the Canadians had fought for the first time as a Canadian entity and had “made a name for themselves... [with] their fighting record.”³⁹ Come the next war, Canadian soldiers would ask to fight together again, this time in a Canadian division, and later a corps, under Canadian operational command.

The First World War

The situation during the First World War differed from South Africa because, when put to the test, “Canadians were unwilling to surrender control over their own war effort.”⁴⁰ For the first time in its history, Canada fielded an enormous military force, which gave rise to new problems of command and control. Canada’s constitutional position was still that of a ‘self-governing colony’, with no foreign policy of its own. As the war proceeded, however, and as the Canadian overseas force grew to four infantry divisions totalling 80,000 men by 1916, and established a solid reputation on the battlefield, Canadian governmental authority over its members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) was increasingly established. In all, approximately 620,000 Canadians served in the CEF, and well over 60,000 would lose their lives during the war.

While it can be argued, “the Canadian government had no understanding of the idea of national command at the beginning of World War I,”⁴¹ Canadian autonomy in this war started with Canada bearing “the full cost of her military contribution.”⁴² As historian Desmond Morton notes, this decision ensured Canada a “practical influence of the management of her contingent and vital leverage in expanding both her control of her forces and her involvement in the over-all management of the war.”⁴³ In the end, Canada paid its way, reimbursed the British for the cost of artillery ammunition, and paid for all expenses – except accommodation for Canadian troops stationed in England.⁴⁴ It was also established early in the war that the British War Office would have no responsibility for the administration of Canadian troops in Britain.⁴⁵

As had been the case at the beginning of the South African War, Canada fought to maintain Canadian units as indigenous national entities. The report of a conversation in London in October 1914 between Major-General Sam

Hughes, Minister of Militia and Defence, and Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, over the status of the 1st Canadian Division is worth relating here:

Sir Sam marched up to Kitchener’s desk. When he arrived at the desk Kitchener spoke up quickly and in a very stern voice said: “Hughes, I see you have brought over a number of men from Canada; they are of course without training and this would apply to the officers; I have decided to divide them up among the British regiments; they will be of very little use to us as they are.” Sir Sam replied: “Sir, do I understand you to say that you are going to break up these Canadian regiments that came over? Why, it will kill recruiting in Canada.” Kitchener answered: “You have your orders, carry them out.” Sir Sam replied: “I’ll be damned if I will,” turned on his heels and marched out.⁴⁶

Following an exchange of cables between governments, it was decided that the Canadian units and the 1st Canadian Division should not be broken up, but be kept together to operate and fight as Canadian formations in the field. This decision would eventually allow Canada to establish its credibility, and Canadian Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie to eventually command the Canadian Corps in 1917 and 1918.

Upon departing London, Hughes left behind his ‘special representative’, Colonel J.W. Carson, to speak for the Canadian government and to sort out the



Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie.

CWM 197.0261-0639 painting by Sir William Newenham Montague Orpen



Landing of the First Canadian Division at Saint-Nazaire, 1915.

financial arrangements with respect to the Canadian contingent.⁴⁷ Eventually, to maintain influence in England, and at the insistence of Canada's acting High Commissioner, in 1916 the Canadian government created the Overseas Ministry, to establish "means to control all but the tactical disposition of its expeditionary force."⁴⁸ Only as a cabinet minister "could a colonial official carry weight in the councils of the empire."⁴⁹

In a letter to the British authorities, Prime Minister Robert Borden had rationalized the establishment of the Overseas Ministry by the fact that "the forces despatched by Canada for overseas service in Europe will number not less than 256,000," and that an organization such as the Ministry was now necessary to control Canadian overseas forces.⁵⁰ The Ministry provided for continued civil control of the Canadian military, and ensured that the will of the government was supreme in all matters relating to the Canadian forces. Political considerations were important in the management of the Canadian forces overseas, and the new minister, the Honourable G.H. Perley, was responsible for negotiations with the British government on all issues affecting overseas forces. The Ministry was also the conduit for communications on matters of policy between the Militia Department and the overseas commanders.

Besides addressing the financial arrangements for the Canadian participation, Canadian military representatives in Britain carried out three main functions: the training and dispatch to France of reinforcements to replace casualties; the organization, training and dispatch of additional units and formations; and the rehabilitation of the wounded. The Ministry had set up a complete military staff, under the command of the "General Officer Commanding Canadians in England," to relieve the Corps headquarters of all possible administrative matters not relevant to the efficient operation of a fighting force.⁵¹ With the Overseas Ministry thus securing a firm grip on Canadian military administration, Canadian military autonomy was extended. The British War Office never questioned this Canadian authority over the CEF in Britain, provided the Canadian authorities had no intention of interfering with the operational authority of the British command.⁵²

Operational control of all Canadian troops for matters relating to military operations had been delegated to the Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces, with the General Officer Commanding the Canadian Corps on the continent having authority for all matters relating to personnel or policy affecting the Corps. The Canadian government had recognized, in a *Memorandum Outlining the Command and Control*

of the Overseas Military Forces of Canada, the operational authority of the British military over Canadian elements in the theatre of operations:

Where military forces acting in conjunction within approximately the same area, independent commands are a well-recognized source of weakness. The Canadian Government, having in the field a force numerically far weaker than that of the British Government, decided therefore, in so far as military operations were concerned, to place under British authority that portion of its force which from time to time might be stationed within the fighting area. Consequently, the Canadian Corps Commander is directly responsible to the British Command-in-Chief in connection with all military operations.⁵³

“Still, the Canadians had fought for the first time as a Canadian entity and had ‘made a name for themselves...’”

While the British had operational control for all military engagements, this did not deprive Currie of the right, and the duty, to question British operational plans, and even to veto them on occasion. Currie occasionally did exercise his *de facto* veto over Field Marshal Haig (Commander-in-Chief of the British armies) and other British commanders to “forestall potentially disastrous decisions on Haig’s part.”⁵⁴ Currie also protested strongly against breaking up the Canadian Corps and employing its divisions separately. He even engaged the Overseas Minister, Edward Kemp, to put pressure on the British War Ministry.⁵⁵ Like Otter nearly 20 years before, the Canadian commander considered himself answerable to both the British commanders and to the Canadian government. Currie’s autonomy also allowed him to develop and introduce tactical innovations in the Canadian Corps, a control over doctrine and tactics that even British commanders could never gain.⁵⁶ This last element proved to be important for Currie and the Canadian Corps during the magnificent 100-Days Campaign conducted at the end of the war.

To represent Canadian interests on the continent, the Overseas Ministry created a Canadian section at the second echelon of the British General Headquarters (GHQ) in France, commanded by a brigadier, who also assumed responsibility for Canadian units outside the Corps. The move had a dual significance for Canada, as Canadian historian Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson noted: “It established a close liaison between the O.M.F.C. [Overseas Military Forces of Canada] and the British headquarters responsible for tactical employment of Canadian troops; and it was an important step in the evolution of Canada’s control over her own forces.”⁵⁷ This section was to represent the Overseas Ministry in all matters at GHQ, to act as the liaison office between the Minister, the War Office, and the Canadian Corps, and to provide a channel of communication on domestic matters between the Ministry and the

Corps. However, Kemp, by then the Overseas Minister, had to press both British and Canadian senior officers into accepting the enhanced authority for a Canadian representative at GHQ.

In the end, the British War Office showed no particular opposition to the creation of this section (which included representatives of the adjutant-general, quartermaster-general, and medical, dental and chaplain services), as long as the Canadian officer commanding it did not get involved in operational matters. The officer so selected also had to be acceptable to Currie, who did not want to lose control over appointments of officers in the Corps, or have a Canadian officer interfering with his operational command from the GHQ. After the new section had been operating for a while, the British authorities expressed their entire satisfaction with these new arrangements, as the Canadians were assuming greater responsibilities for Canadian affairs, not only in Great Britain, but also in France.⁵⁸ The presence of a senior Canadian liaison officer in the GHQ also became an enabler for Currie.

Despite its operational success in the field, Canada had very limited influence over the direction of the war. Early on, Britain had formed a War Cabinet, but there was no precedent for a Dominion Prime Minister, such as Borden, who was considered the head of a separate ministry, sitting in the Cabinet of Great Britain.⁵⁹ The Committee of Imperial Defence, of which Borden was a member, existed largely for peacetime cooperation between the armed forces of the Colonies and Dominions of the Empire, and it met only at Imperial Conferences (i.e., in 1907, 1909, and 1911). It was not until March 1917, when the war had reached perhaps its most critical point, that the new ‘Imperial War Cabinet’ was brought into being. British Prime Minister Lloyd George had declared, upon instituting the new cabinet, that the status of the Dominion ministers was “one of absolute equality with that of the members of the British War Cabinet.”⁶⁰ The Canadian Prime Minister travelled to England in 1917 at the invitation of the British Government to attend the first meetings of this new cabinet. It did not deal with operational matters, but was concerned mainly with issues such as foreign policy, war aims, size of contingents, manpower, munitions and war materials.⁶¹ In practical terms, despite the creation of the Imperial War Cabinet, the Dominion prime ministers “gained little share in the direction of the war.”⁶²

Nevertheless, by 1917, Canada combined most of the elements necessary for the government to ensure that its imperatives and strategic objectives were addressed, and its military contribution optimized. At the political level, a cabinet minister had been established to liaise with the British Government and War Office, and to attend meetings of the Imperial

War Cabinet. At the military level, while Canadians were not involved in theatre-wide campaign planning, the Canadian national command structure overseas consisted of three key constituents, allowing Canada to function effectively: a senior Canadian operational commander (with a robust corps-level headquarters general staff to plan operations) directing Canadians in the field with instructions to maintain the Canadians as a single coherent fighting force; a Chief of the General Staff of the rank of lieutenant-general within the Overseas Ministry to command and administer the troops in England and to conduct liaison with the Militia Department in Ottawa; and a senior officer of the rank of brigadier at British GHQ in France for formal military liaison. As was the case during the South African War, the CEF still remained subject to the British

“Currie also protested strongly against breaking up the Canadian Corps and employing its divisions separately.”

the requirement for a strong national command structure. As Canadian military historian C.P. Stacey observed, the influence of the First World War on Canadian officers would be important. During the Second World War, the Canadian military forces would be commanded by senior officers “whose ideas and attitudes had been formed in the strongly national atmosphere of the Canadian Corps of 1915-1918.”⁶⁴ While the concept of an Overseas Ministry has not been repeated by Canada, because the circumstances in future

regulations and to the *Army Act* – but, because Canada commanded its own corps, Canadian officers largely carried out the administration of military law.⁶⁵

The Canadian Army of the First World War became the chief vehicle of the national effort and the national spirit. More importantly, however, the large Canadian war effort validated

the key elements established during the First World War for the expeditionary military command structure would remain a useful model for Canadian participation in large coalition or alliance operations, even to this day.

Conclusion

This article has examined the historical evolution of Canada’s national military command for Canada’s overseas operations during the South African War and the First World War. Between 1899 and 1918, Canadian soldiers – and their national commanders – developed a powerful sense of identity that progressively supplanted their imperial enthusiasm. While neither Laurier nor Borden sought to influence the conduct or resolution of the wars, there were nevertheless several important differences in how Canada managed its participation. The substantial Canadian military contribution in the Great War gave the country a stronger voice in many matters related to its participation in the field.

The establishment of the Overseas Ministry in London in 1916, with both a cabinet minister and a Chief of the General Staff, allowed for a unified authority overseas and for greater influence with the British War Office and the Ministry of Defence than would have been otherwise possible. During the First World War, the Canadian government achieved greater control over its military forces than in South Africa, both administratively and operationally.



CMJ collection



PA photo 000832

Canadian soldiers returning from trenches during the Battle of the Somme.

Administrative control of units deployed overseas, seldom given much attention in the early days of a conflict, is an essential and critical constituent of national command. Many elements that directly affect the daily lives of the soldiers – such as pay, mail service, feeding and medical support – fall under the umbrella of administrative control. Therefore, it was important for Canada to improve this facet of command as the First World War progressed. The creation of a Canadian section at the British General Headquarters provided for greater control over Canadian forces scattered throughout France. In addition, unlike the Boer War, in which Canada had assumed few fiscal responsibilities for its soldiers, Canada now accepted to defray all costs, eventually adding a quarter of a billion dollars to the national debt by the end of hostilities.

But it was in the operational realm where Canada recorded the most significant progress. Having deployed a very large force overseas, Canada could demand unity of the 1st Canadian Division from the commencement of hostilities, and – as its reputation as a solid fighting force grew, and Canadian commanders proved their competence – it could press for command of larger indigenous formations,

“Administrative control of units deployed overseas, seldom given much attention in the early days of a conflict, is an essential and critical constituent of national command.”

such as the Canadian Corps. Even then, Canada acquired very little influence over the development of theatre-wide campaign plans, and it would take another war for Canadian generals and staff officers to participate at that level of war. Canadian politicians and senior commanders also recognized early that exercising national command over Canada’s deployed military forces was an important contributing element for expressing national autonomy. For Canadian commanders, accountability to national authorities – facilitated through the development of a more robust national military command framework – had been significantly strengthened during the First World War, and it would continue to evolve in future conflicts. As Canadian nationalism increased during the 20th Century, Canada’s national command arrangements would continue to evolve during ensuing conflicts, such as the Second World War.

The author wishes to express his sincere thanks to Dr. Allan English and Dr. Douglas L. Bland of Queen’s University for their constructive comments.



NOTES

1. Douglas L. Bland, "Military Command in Canada," in Bernd Horn and Stephen J. Harris (eds.), *Generalship and the Art of the Admiral* (St. Catharines: Vanwell Publishing, 2000), p. 135.
2. Three notable exceptions are: Desmond Morton, *A Peculiar Kind of Politics: Canada's Overseas Ministry in the First World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982); and C.P. Stacey, "The Organization and Control of Canadian Fighting Forces," in *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Queen's Printers, 1970); and Stephen J. Harris, *Canadian Brass* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).
3. Bland, *Ibid.*, p. 126.
4. NATO *Glossary of Terms* (A-AD-AAP/JX-001), AAP-6 (Brussels: NATO Headquarters, 2004), p. 2-C-7.
5. In this article, 'alliance' means a pre-arranged association of nations formally established to advance common interests, such as NATO. A 'coalition' [of the willing] denotes more temporary arrangements, usually without the cover of a formal treaty. The term 'nation' is used synonymously with the word 'country'.
6. For a more complete discussion on 'command and control', see Ross Pigeau and Carol McCann, "Re-Conceptualizing Command and Control," *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Spring 2002), pp. 53-63.
7. US Army *Field Staff Officers Manual*, cited in Richard M. Leighton, "Allied Unity of Command in the Second World War: A Study in Regional Military Organization," *Political Science Quarterly* Vol. 67, No. 3 (September 1952), p. 401.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Martin Van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 5.
10. In older historical texts, the term 'chain of responsibility' will also be employed to express the same meaning as the term 'chain of command'. Colonel A. F. Duguid, *Official History of the Canadian Forces in The Great War, 1914-1919* (Ottawa: J.O. Patenaude, 1938), p. 126.
11. For a more complete discussion on this theme, see the 'Chain of Command', in *Dishonoured Legacy: The Lessons of the Somalia Affair*, Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Deployment of Canadian Forces to Somalia (Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1997).
12. Douglas Bland, *Chiefs of Defence: Government and the Unified Command of the Canadian Armed Forces* (Toronto: Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, 1995), p. 177.
13. Douglas Bland, "A Unified Theory of Civil-Military Relations," *Armed Forces and Society* (Fall 1999), p. 10. While both the adjectives 'civil' and 'civilian' control are used alternately in the literature, the term 'civil' is more predominant today and is employed throughout this article.
14. This is different than 'national direction' of defence or the military, which usually deals with the government formulation of defence policy and the civil control of national defence business.
15. Bland, *Chiefs of Defence*, p. 175.
16. As quoted in Leighton, p. 402.
17. Bland, "Military Command in Canada," p. 126 and p. 134.
18. The *Mine Ban Treaty* (also *Ottawa Treaty*) is formally the *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction*. General Robert W. RisCassi, "Principles for Coalition Warfare," *Joint Forces Quarterly* (Summer 1993), p. 67.
19. Unity of command means that, "in a military unit or formation, a single commander will be authorized to plan and direct operations. The commander will be held responsible for an operation's success or failure, and has the authority to direct and control the personnel and materiel committed to the task." *Canadian Forces Operations manual*, B-GJ-005-300/FP-000 (Ottawa: Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff, 2004), p. 2-4.
20. The nomenclature includes terms such as 'full command', 'operational command', 'operational control', and tactical control'. A review of this nomenclature is beyond the scope of this paper; the interested reader should consult the *CF Operations Manual*, pp. 2-1 to 2-5.
21. Carman Miller, *Painting the Map Red* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), pp. 16-48.
22. Canadian Army, Historical Section, *Canadian Policy on the Employment of Canadian Military Forces in Wartime, 1899-1945* (Ottawa: Army Headquarters, 1952), p. 1.
23. Miller, p. 49.
24. Lord Minto, as quoted in C.P. Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict, 1867-1921* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1984), p. 60.
25. As cited in Brian A. Reid, *Our Little Army in the Field: the Canadians in South Africa, 1899-1902* (St. Catharines: Vanwell Publishing Limited, 1996), p. 24.
26. C.P. Stacey, "Canada and the South African War: II: How Canada Got into the War," *Canadian Army Journal* Vol. 4 (Summer 1950), pp. 45-46.
27. Miller, p. 51.
28. This limitation of Canadian jurisdiction was mitigated by the provisions of the United Kingdom's colonial law, which permitted a colony to raise troops, within or outside the borders of that colony. Miller, pp. 51-52.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
30. Miller, pp. 68-69.
31. Desmond Morton, *The Canadian General Sir William Otter* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1974), p. 180.
32. Desmond Morton, "Junior but Sovereign Allies: The Transformation of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 8 (October 1979), p. 32.
33. Miller, p. 92. For a complete description of the battle, see pp. 86-101.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 53. Canada also continued to provide reinforcements, special supplies, and any pensions and allowances, including separation allowances.
35. Morton, "Junior but Sovereign Allies," p. 32; and Miller, p. 52.
36. Miller, p. 70.
37. Ronald Haycock, *Sam Hughes: The Public Career of a Controversial Canadian* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1986), p. 92.
38. Reid, p. 172.
39. Desmond Morton, *A Peculiar Kind of Politics: Canada's Overseas Ministry in the First World War*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), p. vii.
40. Bland, *Chiefs of Defence*, p. 177.
41. Morton, "Junior but Sovereign Allies," p. 34.
42. Morton, *Peculiar Kind of Politics*, p. 26.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200.
44. Canadian Army Headquarters, *Canadian Policy on the Employment of Canadian Military Forces in Wartime, 1899-1945*, Report No. 52 (Ottawa: Army Historical Section, May 1952), pp. 2-3.
45. Duguid, pp. 126-127.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
47. Morton, *Peculiar Kind of Politics*, p. 169.
48. Morton, "Junior but Sovereign Allies," p. 36.
49. Letter in Canadian Army Headquarters, Historical Section, *The Command of the Overseas Military Forces of Canada in the United Kingdom, 1914-1918*, Report No. 98 (Ottawa: Directorate of History, July 1986), pp. 97-98.
50. Morton, *Peculiar Kind of Politics*, p. 34 and p. 85. The title changed to "Chief of the General Staff" in the spring of 1918.
51. *Ibid.*, pp. 160-167 and p. 204.
52. *The Command of the Overseas Military Forces*, p. 102.
53. Shane B. Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire* (St. Catharines: Vanwell Publishing, 2004), p. 19.
54. John Swettenham, *To Seize the Victory: The Canadian Corps in World War I* (Toronto: the Ryerson Press, 1965), pp. 201-204.
55. Schreiber, p. 19.
56. Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919: The Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer and Controller of Stationery, 1962), p. 355.
57. Morton, *Peculiar Kind of Politics*, pp. 166-168.
58. George M. Wrong, "Canada and Imperial War Cabinet," *Canadian Historical Review* Vol. 1 No.1 (March 1920), p. 11.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
60. Lord Hankey, *The Supreme Command 1914-1918* Vol. 2 (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961), pp. 661-662.
61. Morton, *Peculiar Kind of Politics*, p. 111.
62. Chris Madsen, *Another Kind of Justice* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999), pp. 43-44.
63. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, p. 205.