The American Influence on the Canadian Military, 1939–1963

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On Armistice Day in 1927, officials of the Canadian and United States governments dedicated a monument at Arlington Cemetery near Washington to commemorate the service of those Americans who had fought with Canadian forces before their country became a belligerent in the Great War. The occasion, stage-managed by Vincent Massey, Canada’s first Minister to the United States, was a glittering ceremony featuring permanent force infantry of the Royal Canadian Regiment and the Royal 22e Régiment in their British-pattern scarlet tunics, as well as the pipes and drums of the 48th Highlanders, a well-known kilted Toronto militia regiment. Everyone was on their best behaviour, and the occasion was a great success, even the review of the infantry at the White House by the taciturn, if not comatose, President Calvin Coolidge.

So what? What made this visit by the RCRs and the Vandoos to Washington so noteworthy was that it was completely unprecedented, the Canadians being the first units in red coats to appear in the American capital since Washington was burned by the British (as retaliation for the torching of York) in 1814.1 The undefended border and the “century of peace” that followed the War of 1812 were already staples of after dinner speeches in both countries, but the military relations between the two countries were almost non-existent. Even during the Great War there had been little direct cooperation, other than some limited naval and air efforts to counter German U-boats in North American waters and minor combined anti-Bolshevik operations during the Allied intervention in North Russia and Siberia. Worse still, there was some resentment in Canada at the long delay before the U.S. entered the war and the shrill American claims after the Armistice that the Americans had won the war virtually singlehanded.

Strikingly, the military staff in both countries continued to plan for war against the other. In Ottawa, Colonel J. Sutherland Brown, the Director of Military Operations and Intelligence at National Defence headquarters from 1920 to 1927, had the responsibility for producing war plans. His Defence Scheme No. 1, slated to become operational in the event of a breakdown in relations between the U.S. and Britain, was based on the assumption that the major threat to Canada was an invasion by American forces. Such a threat, Brown maintained, could best be countered by launching Canadian “flying columns” at key points in the United States. Brown and other officers even undertook reconnaissance trips to spy out their objectives and the best routes toward them, and Brown himself avidly collected postcards showing strategic American locations.2 In the U.S., similar studies took form at much the same time at the Army and Navy War Colleges and at the War Plans divisions of the two services, both as training exercises and as contingency plans. The American army’s “Plan Red” for war with Great Britain foresaw the occupation of Canada by four armies with the intention to “hold in perpetuity all . . . territories gained. . . . The Dominion government will be abolished.” “Buster” Brown’s scheme was cancelled in 1931, war with the United States seeming utterly impossible to contemplate in Ottawa; the U.S. plans remained on the books until 1937 and war college students did additional
studies in 1938. Until a few years before the outbreak of the Second World War, in other words, conflict between the North American nations was considered a possibility for the defence planners in Ottawa and Washington.

I

The prospect of another world war changed everything. The threat posed by aggressive Nazis, Fascists, and Japanese militarists was all too real, one that had to be faced. Hesitantly, Canada and the United States began to come together in their own interests. The process is well known: President Franklin Roosevelt’s growing concern about the defencelessness of the Canadian coasts and his increasing desire to secure naval bases in Canada and land access to Alaska; his regular conversations on defence with Prime Minister Mackenzie King after 1935; the first ever meetings of the Canadian and U.S. chiefs of staffs in January and November 1938 to discuss Pacific Coast defences; and Roosevelt’s pledge at Kingston, Ontario in August, 1938 that the United States “will not stand idly by if domination of Canadian soil is threatened by any other empire” followed a few days later by a reciprocal promise from Mackenzie King. 4

Canada went to war “at Britain’s side” in September 1939 and the U.S. remained neutral. There was no cooperation of a military nature between them until the disasters of May and June 1940 drove France from the war and left Britain all but alone in the face of Hitler’s Nazi legions. From being a minor partner in the war effort, Canada had suddenly become Britain’s ranking ally.

But Britain was desperately weak, barely able to defend its home islands let alone to protect Canada. By itself Canada could not have defended its territory against either a German attack after Britain was occupied or a

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Yanks ferrying Canadian infantry in Korea, 1951 or 1952. (NAC PA 132638)
sudden Japanese raid on the Pacific coast. The logic of the situation was clear and Prime Minister Mackenzie King was quick to seize the opportunity when President Roosevelt invited him to a meeting at Ogdensburg, New York, in mid-August 1940. The resulting agreement, which included a Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD), guaranteed Canadian security during the war and allowed the fullest possible military support to Britain; at the same time, it marked the establishment of a permanent defence relationship between the two countries.

Certainly, there was no doubt who was the junior in the relationship. With a population of just over ten million, most of its effective military forces in the United Kingdom and with more on the way there, Canada was a virtual supplicant, seeking the help of the 125 million-strong United States to defend its homeland in a world suddenly made unaccustomedly perilous. There was every sign of this in the negotiations over a strategic defence plan for the continent when the Americans proved to be as difficult to deal with as the British had ever been. The U.S. generals' demands for unity of command seemed to translate into complete administrative and operational control over all Canadian forces involved in the defence of

and the real beginnings of the close and complex military links that persist to the present. The United States had definitively replaced the United Kingdom as Canada's senior defence partner.
North America, an aim that was partly defeated and only with enormous difficulty. Washington, for its part, resisted Canada's efforts to establish a military mission in the U.S. capital, and when it sent troops into Canada in 1942 to build a highway to Alaska, they sometimes acted more as an army of occupation than as allies. There were also serious difficulties in working out command relationships with the American services operating in Newfoundland.

Still, the wartime cooperation with the United States was generally good. Some 8,864 Americans served in the Royal Canadian Air Force during the war, and more than five thousand continued their service after the United States entered the war in December 1941. RCAF squadrons participated in the defence of Alaska and Canadian Army troops shared in the re-conquest of the Aleutian Islands. A combined Canadian-American unit, the First Special Service Force, saw action in the Aleutians, Italy and France, and American army divisions served under command of First Canadian Army at various points during the campaign in Northwest Europe in 1944-45. Canada also had a division prepared for service in the invasion of Japan, one that was to be organized on American lines and equipped with U.S. weapons. Why? As General A.G.L. McNaughton, the Defence Minister at the time and always a cautious man in dealing with the Yanks, said, "One of the primary reasons ... was to obtain experience with the United States system of Army organization and U.S. equipment in view of the obvious necessity for the future to co-ordinate the defence of North America. . . ." As that suggested, post-hostilities planners in Ottawa clearly foresaw the increasing tension between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., understanding that this obliged Canada to carefully consider its role in the defence of the continent.

The events of the war had marked a historic change in Canada's place in the world. Curiously, however, there was as yet little sign of this in the attitudes, equipment, and training of the Canadian forces. The direct influence of the American military on their Canadian counterparts was still relatively limited. The methods and models for Canadian soldiers, sailors and airmen without question remained British in 1945.

II

Britain's military weakness in 1940 had pushed Canada into its first defence alliance with the United States. The Mother Country would never recover its military power in a postwar world that had room for only two superpowers with their global reach and massive nuclear arsenals. Ideological similarities and geography both made certain that Canada's policy generally moved in tandem with that of its neighbour, and the military marched to a different beat in the postwar years. In North America, the Military Cooperation Committee, a joint planning body spun off from the Permanent Joint Board on Defence, began the process of integrating continental defences in the spring of 1946. The Canadian military planners worried about their cousins' practices and occasionally alarmist assessments. General Guy Simonds, arguably the most successful Canadian wartime commander, complained in 1947 that the American "military authorities made plans based entirely on potential enemy capabilities, whereas it was the practice in Canada to take into consideration not only capabilities but probabilities." Officers like Simonds tried to maintain the filial links with the British forces (Simonds even created a Regular Force regiment of Canadian Guards when he was Chief of the General Staff a few years later), but it was increasingly a vain struggle as the Cold War wore on and American power increased.

Signs of this began to be evident in the joint Canadian-U.S. training exercises that began in the late 1940s and even more so during the Korean War, the first major armed struggle of an ideologically driven era. The 25th Canadian Infantry Brigade served as part of the Commonwealth Division in Korea for purely practical reasons. In 1950, even though the government had already made the decision to switch to American-pattern equipment, the Canadian equipment in use was still primarily British (steel helmets, battle dress, 25-pounder
The use of U.S. equipment, the Chief of the General Staff noted, would have required “major changes in... minor tactical doctrine.”

Moreover, the inherited dogma was that American battlefield doctrine was, as befitted a country with a huge population, wasteful of lives and treasure; like Britain, Canada had few of its sons to spare. Brooke Claxton, the Minister of National Defence, shared this received wisdom. After a visit to Korea, where he returned unimpressed with the American commanders and appalled by the “lying” of staff officers who gave the briefings, he wrote a friend that “American expenditures of lives and ammunition are high according to our standards, higher than our people would be willing to accept.”

The Royal Canadian Navy was equally critical of its American cousins. In his memoirs, Admiral Jeffry Brock recalled that the fleet signal book employed by the RCN had one code for going into action: “Enemy in Sight. Am Engagin.” The comparable USN code translated as “Request Permission to Open Fire on the Enemy,” something that Brock was convinced was part and parcel “of the determined
resistance of American officers to make any move at all without the written and signed authorization of someone senior.”

Even so, there was a pressing need “to share the United States Navy’s technical know-how, especially in anti-submarine warfare weaponry.” As one commentator noted, “The coming change was first detected in the new terminology”—the British term “asdic” was superseded by the American word “sonar.”

The establishment of NATO’s Supreme Allied Command Atlantic (SACLANT), with headquarters at Norfolk, Va., also meant that the RCN now had its place with the USN and not the Royal Navy.

Moreover, in Korea the Canadians had learned that not everything about the U.S. forces was bad. Brigadier John Rockingham, the first commander of the 25th Canadian Infantry Brigade, paid a courtesy call on General Horace Robertson, the Australian officer serving in Japan as Commander-in-Chief Commonwealth forces. Robertson wanted the Canadians to use Australian rations “as this would be to Australia’s financial advantage.” Rockingham flatly refused: “I explained that my cooks had been trained to cook American rations and my soldiers had become used to them and liked them very much.”

The RCN, operating three destroyers in Korean waters, found much the same thing. “The Commonwealth base at Kure [Japan] ... had the right kinds of ammunition and machinery spares for the Canadian ships,” Commander Tony German wrote, “but ... British provisions were terrible. Canadian ration scales were
much better than RN now, but in Kure [Japan] they mainly got tough mutton.... From the Americans in Sasebo there was first-rate beef.... ice cream, milk, fresh fruit and vegetables and such magic as frozen French fries. . . ." 25 Armies (and navies too) march on their stomachs and, whenever they could be secured, the Canadians now simply refused to march without American rations.

American equipment too was increasingly coveted. Sometimes this was because U.S. equipment was both more comfortable to wear, better designed for protection, and simply more effective than the Second World War-pattern British material used by the Canadian forces. For example, the steel helmet used in World War II and Korea by British and Canadian forces offered no cover for the back of the neck, weighed a ton, and was so awkward that it was almost impossible to run while wearing it. "The less said about the present helmet the better," wrote one infantry battalion commander. The American helmet, by contrast, offered better protection and, because it had a liner that was removable, could even be used for cooking over an open fire in a pinch. No Canadian wept when the U.K. helmet was scrapped in the late-1950s. Even the Americans’ mess tins, eating utensils and cup were better designed than the comparable Canadian equipment issued to soldiers in the field. 26

This desire for American equipment was especially evident at the expensive end—aircraft and missiles. The sky-high costs of developing technologically sophisticated weapons systems were driving smaller nations out of the market. Canada’s experience with the Avro Arrow fighter aircraft is too well known to need comment, 27 but even larger powers like Britain were having their problems in paying the bills. For the U.K. that meant abandoning efforts to develop missile systems of its own. For Canada, the logic of the calculus of expenditures was equally clear. As General Charles Foulkes, the powerful Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, told the Minister of National Defence in 1958, "It appears apparent that we are reaching a stage in Canada where it will not be possible for us to develop and produce further complicated weapons purely for Canadian use. . . ." That meant, he said, that "the defence of North America will have to depend upon the joint development and production of these weapons and weapon systems for our joint use." 28

In fact, even that was a hope, certainly not a certainty. The best Canada could expect was to purchase American air-to-air missiles, Bomarc surface-to-air missiles and aircraft like the CF-101 Voodoo, the CF-104 Starfighter, the CF-5 Freedom Fighter, the CP-140 Aurora, the Boeing 707 and others under schemes that often saw parts built in Canada or offsets for Canadian industry included in the deal. American equipment was not always the very best available, but it was invariably close to it. Moreover, in contrast to the increasingly impecunious Canadian and British armed services, the United States military had the goods of modern warfare in lavish profusion, 29 and the officers and men of the Canadian Forces inevitably and understandably wanted their small share of it. In effect, this equipment envy, this military amour-propre, was often a driving force for policy.

No where was this more true than in the Royal Canadian Air Force. Even before the NORAD agreement formally integrated the air defence systems of the U.S. and Canada in 1957, the RCAF was already tightly linked with the USAF on both a personal and a professional level. 30 "The two air forces," Joseph Jockel wrote of the early 1950s,

came to see the air defence of North America more and more as a problem to be tackled jointly with resources that were becoming more and more intertwined. Direct and permanent links were forged between the two air defence commands, by-passing the more formal channels of communication. . . . 31

He added that the two air forces had every reason to cooperate. They were faced with a common military threat. As airmen, they shared an outlook which created a similar identity and even an emotional bond. They were interested in convincing civilians of the danger to the continent. Both . . . were locked in struggles with their sister services for defence funds. Finally, for the RCAF, the USAF was a source of funding for radar stations and a source of pressure on Ottawa to recognize the importance of air defence. 32
Leonard Johnson, who retired as a major-general, put it more succinctly: “The U.S. Air Force was a big and powerful cousin with whom we identified.” Moreover, until the early 1970s in NATO, Canadian airmen served with the Americans, unlike the army brigade which operated in the British sector of West Germany. And because the Canadian aviation industry (even after the cancellation of the Arrow) was relatively well developed, much more so than was necessary to support Canada’s relatively small air force needs, export sales to the United States were essential. That gave the airmen a community of interest with the industry and both an effective joint lobby with the government. The result from the early 1950s onwards was that the RCAF received the lion’s share of the defence budget and the greatest influence on defence policymaking.

This became especially apparent when the Conservative government of John Diefenbaker decided in 1959 to arm the Canadian Forces with nuclear weapons. The RCAF would have nuclear missiles for its aircraft flying in defence of Canada, a nuclear ground attack role for its CF-104s serving in NATO, and nuclear-armed Bomarc missiles at two bases in Ontario and Quebec. By 1960, however, the government began to waver in its commitment to nuclear weapons and, some might say, in its support for Canada’s alliances. One obvious sign of this came during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 when Diefenbaker resisted the entreaties of his Defence minister and delayed putting Canada’s NORAD aircraft on alert. The Americans were justifiably furious, but in fact the aircraft had been surreptitiously prepared for war, the Defence Minister informally authorizing the action, and every fighter aircraft being armed and put on readiness.

The RCAF was not alone in going to war readiness. The Royal Canadian Navy cancelled leaves and put every ship it had (in 1962, it had some!) to sea, relieving the United States Navy of responsibility for a critical sector of the Western Atlantic. One authoritative account summarized the reasoning of Admiral Kenneth Dyer, in command on the East coast: “North America was under direct immediate threat. That included Canada. All the long-standing arrangements and government-to-government agreements said if one partner boosted its defence [readiness] condition, the other followed.” When Ottawa did nothing, Dyer simply acted. His relationship with his U.S. NATO commanders at SACLANT had been formed over the years in countless NATO exercises and was so close and so trusting, his assessment of the Soviet threat so fearful, that he felt obliged to put to sea to assist his ally. “That “band of brothers,” Nelson’s basic way of running things at sea, by mutual understanding and a firm grasp of the basic aim,” Commander Tony German wrote, “was alive and well in North America in 1962. The navy . . . honoured Canada’s duty to stand by her North American ally . . . .” Even if the Prime Minister had wished otherwise.

This same attitude, this putting of the service’s assessment of the threat and its particular needs ahead of government policy, was even more apparent in the next few months. Badly battered by its ineptitude during the Cuban crisis, the government was now about to be brought down by its anti-Americanism and its reluctance to arm the Bomarc missiles it had secured with the nuclear warheads they needed to become effective. A key player in the process was Wing Commander Bill Lee, the head of RCAF public relations in Ottawa. Lee had graduated at the top of his class from the USAF Public Relations School (“renowned as one of the leading institutions in its field,” Paul Hellyer, Defence Minister after 1963, wrote). Now Lee, other RCAF officers, and USAF senior officers worked together to lobby the media against the Diefenbaker policy and in favour of nuclear weapons. As Lee admitted later, “It was a flat-out campaign, because Diefenbaker was not living up to his commitments. Roy Sleman [Canadian Deputy Commander of NORAD] was going bananas down in Colorado Springs. We identified key journalists, business and labour people, and key Tory hitters in Toronto, and some Liberals, too, and flew them out to NORAD. It was very effective.” So it was, as the American view of the defence needs of the North American continent was put forcefully and clearly to key Canadian opinion makers, not least by Air Marshal Sleman and Wing Commander Lee. Significantly, Lee’s campaign had the full support of his superiors, he says,
the Air Council having authorized it, and the Chief of the Air Staff having secured the permission of the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, Air Chief Marshal Frank Miller. "You go ahead," Lee quotes Miller. "Just don't tell me the details." 39 The campaign worked, undoubtedly helped mightily by Diefenbaker's incompetence. In February 1963 the government was defeated in Parliament over its nuclear policy. 40 Within a few months, the incoming Liberal government had accepted the nuclear weaponry.

The significance of this affair and the Cuban missile crisis ought to be clear. The military in Canada in the past had occasionally disagreed with government policy and made known its feelings to the media. That was certainly true during the conscription crisis of 1944, to cite only one example. But these issues in 1962 and 1963 were different, directly involving as they did the policies of a foreign government and its armed services. Whether the actions of John Diefenbaker were malign, stupid, or simply wrong-headed, his administration had been duly and properly elected and was entitled to expect the armed forces to put the Canadian government's policy interests ahead of those of the United States. The military's defence undoubtedly would be that they were doing just that. But in fact, over the years, what had happened was that the formal and informal links between the Canadian and American military—the transgovernmental relations, as political scientists call them—had grown so close that the senior officers placed their service interests and their assessment of the situation ahead of their government's. As Jocelyn Ghent put it, "the Canadian military perceived and acted on a threat that was defined not by their government, but by the transgovernmental group to which they felt much closer, the Canadian-American military." 42

Probabbly this had been inevitable. No small country living cheek-by-jowl with a superpower could expect to retain full military independence and especially not if it were entwined in defence, economic, and political alliances to the extent Canada and the U.S. were. Still, the impropriety of these actions is evident, and their effect on civil-military relations in Canada has never been confronted or even acknowledged by the political leadership. So far as is known, no attempt was ever made to impede or reverse the entrenchment of the transgovernmental linkages that pushed Canadian policy far ahead of the government's wishes in 1962 or that helped to bring down a government in 1963; no serious or sustained effort was made to reverse or even check the Americanization of the armed forces. Indeed, the process of unification, launched by Defence Minister Paul Hellyer in the mid-1960s with the intention, among other things, of giving Canada distinctive military forces, may have speeded the trend by dealing a killing blow to the Army's system of corps and its distinctive and much loved uniforms, buttons and badges. The army had been the least Americanized of the forces before the mid-1960s, 43 proud of its regiments and their traditions. The dark green uniform that came with unification homogenized the Canadian military and weakened the land forces' psychological defences against Americanization. The budget cuts of the Trudeau and Mulroney years and the sometimes slavish adherence of the latter government to Washington's policy have effectively completed the process. If Quebec becomes independent in the 1990s and if the Canadian Forces in consequence abandon their bilingualism, there will be very little remaining other than Canada's self-professed expertise in United Nations peacekeeping to differentiate the military forces of the two countries.

NOTES

2. James Eayrs, In Defence of Canada: From the Great War to the Great Depression. (Toronto, 1964), pp. 70ff. I have one of Brown's postcards, showing Seneca Mountain in Allegheny State Park, N.Y.
4. There is a brief account of this process in P. Roy et al., Mutual Hostages: Canadians and Japanese During the Second World War. (Toronto, 1990), pp. 35ff.
5. See J.L. Granatstein, "Mackenzie King and Canada at Ogdensburg, August 1940," a paper presented at "The Road from Ogdensburg: Fifty Years of Canada-U.S. Defence Cooperation," St. Lawrence University, August 1990. One sign of the growth of defence relations with the U.S. can be found by comparing
the number of pages devoted to defence in the Department of External Affairs' Documents on Canadian External Relations series: the 1936-1939 volume does not even list defence as a topic under the rubric of Relations with the U.S.; the 1939-1941 volume has 212 pp.; the 1952 volume has 120 pp. for its one year period.


15. For planning for Arctic defences, see Shelagh Grant, Sovereignty or Security?: Government Policy in the Canadian North 1936-1950. (Vancouver, 1988), Chaps. VII, IX.


18. The impact of Communist deceit—and subsequent support for the U.S. position—was strong on military officers who served in Indo-China with the International Control Commissions from 1954 to 1972. The Poles, one of the three countries on the ICC, were difficult to work with, and the North Vietnamese were generally considered ruthless and duplicitous. Information provided to the author and, more generally, Douglas Ross, In the Interests of Peace: Canada and Vietnam 1954-73. (Toronto, 1984) and James Eayrs, In Defence of Canada: Indochina: Roots of Complicity. (Toronto, 1983), esp. Chaps. VII-VIII.


23. Ibid., p.319.


30. James Eayrs, In Defence of Canada: Peacemaking and Deterrence. (Toronto, 1972), pp.59-60 on Air Marshal Robert Leckie (who sometimes fought with the USAF but was basically friendly toward it) and Air Marshal W.A. Curtis. It is also worth recollecting that senior RCAF officers had been short-changed in their search for high command in World War II by the RAF; feelings of bitterness toward the British may well have persisted.


33. Johnson, p.33.
34. Bercuson, "Rhine," pp.15ff. demonstrates that the CGS, General Foulkes, intended Canadians to serve in the U.S. sector for practical reasons, but that it was General Eisenhower who determined that the brigade would operate in the British sector.


37. Information given the author in confidence. For an account of the Canadian response in the crisis, see Granatstein, Canada 1957-1967, pp.113ff.


42. Jocelyn Ghent, "Canada, the United States, and the Cuban Missile Crisis," Pacific Historical Review, XVIII. (May 1979), p.172. There were likely earlier cases of transgovernmental linkages between Canadians and British officers—for example, the decision to send troops to Hong Kong in late 1941. The relations between the two governments in wartime, not to say between the British and Canadian armies who were serving together, were scarcely comparable to that prevailing between Canada and the U.S. two decades later.

43. Writing in 1962, General M.A. Pope noted of the 1920s "how closely ... our army was modelled on that of the United Kingdom; to a considerable extent it still is today." Soldiers and Politicians: The Memoirs of Lt.-Gen. Maurice A. Pope. (Toronto, 1962), p.53.