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Photo by Ken Bell, NAC PA 132839

Privates Vera Cartwright and Enid Powell lend contrast to the Nazi costumes of Sergeants Frank Schuster and Johnny Wayne and Captain Ralph Wickberg. Banville, France, 30 July 1944.

“It Made Them Forget About the War For a Minute” Canadian Army, Navy and Air Force Entertainment Units During the Second World War

Laurel Halladay

On 3 February 1944, wounded Canadian service personnel recuperating in a British hospital were delighted to hear that a concert party, part of the Canadian Army Show, was in the area and would be performing for patients that evening. The variety show was extremely well-received; singing, dancing and comedy routines seemed to be exactly what the injured needed to raise their spirits. After the show was over, a man in a wheelchair approached performer James Cameron and exclaimed “it was so good to see that – please come back again.” The Captain in charge of this satisfied patient wrung Cameron’s hand and enthusiastically declared “First Canadian show I’ve seen, Major-Brother, and it was like mail from home.”¹ Under consideration here is the development and function of the Second World War Canadian military entertainment units that inspired such comments.

The Army, Navy and Air Force each had their own entertainment divisions, staffed by male and female military personnel who could sing, dance, act, juggle, play musical instruments or otherwise amuse. In performing for both civilian and military audiences, these units sought to increase morale among troops at home and overseas, encourage recruitment into the services and promote the war effort in general. While the units were, in the estimation of all involved parties, very successful in meeting these

objectives, the entertainment program of the Department of National Defence had two additional and likely unintentional benefits. The shows provided a forum in which civilians and military personnel were exposed to each other’s divergent wartime experiences, with the exchange of cultural information between performers and audience members unifying the focus of both groups and becoming a catalyst to achieve total mobilization for waging war. Furthermore, the investment in military entertainment units represented a form of government subsidy for the performing arts that had long-term dividends. Canadian military funding for the arts during this period created not just a demand for homegrown entertainment but a pool of skilled artists who were well placed to meet that demand and who inevitably sparked an explosion in the development of our national culture in the postwar years. For example, composer/arranger Robert Farnon, francophone singer Roger Doucet, author Eric Nicol, comedians Johnny Wayne and Frank Shuster and James Bond’s Miss Money Penny (Lois Maxwell) all got their artistic training in the wartime Canadian military. Other veterans became key creative staff of CBC radio and television and the National Film Board, while many of their comrades took their talents back to small communities across Canada, providing instruction to hundreds of students and organizing local performances of all kinds.

In one sense, Canadian troop entertainment during the Second World War was a modern manifestation of a long national tradition. British and French army and navy groups stationed in Canada long before the twentieth century developed garrison theatre that served to exert influence over both military personnel and local populations. Literally playing out French-English conflict on the stage in the production of farces and comedies, garrison theatrical activity increased "in periods of political or cultural crisis...[and was used] as a velvet-glove method of cultural assertion."² Garrison theatre in turn provided an antecedent for morale-managing activities in the Great War, when the Canadians became famous for the well-received theatrics of groups like the Dumbells and the Princess Patricia's Comedy Company who performed for front-line troops and civilian audiences.³ Military-derived entertainment meant to counter poor morale was thus a well-established practice by the outbreak of the Second World War.

Morale and Manpower

The issue of poor morale arose not very long after Canada declared war in 1939, and increased in importance following the disasters at Hong Kong and Dieppe.⁴ Those two events provided the discouraged in both military and civilian circles with a point of reference for their critiques of the war effort. By early 1943, popular opinion held that the Canadian military had neglected to distinguish itself in the war, and that inactivity and failure was wreaking havoc with the mental health of all military personnel – especially those posted overseas and along Canada's eastern coast.⁵ While there may have been little factual evidence that Canadian servicemen were breaking down under the strain of tedious home defence, disappointing results in the North Atlantic, and constant training in another country, Ottawa acknowledged that indeed poor civilian and military morale was to be expected in the future. The small-scale entertainment infrastructure set up in response to the pre-Sicily invasion period, including canteens, dance halls and civilian billeting, was a useful boost to morale but something more was needed – active combat. Leaders throughout the Canadian military structure were sensitive in varying degrees to pressure from the Canadian public and its government and it has been claimed that breakdown theories and the

demand that the Canadian military be given the opportunity for glory were the very reasons Canadians were sent to Sicily, an expectation that "a little bloodletting"⁶ would solve several problems at once.⁷

For the army, the exhaustion casualties that were created in the Mediterranean theatre forced authorities to rapidly update their perception of the condition and they dealt with it.⁸ Exhaustion was still widely thought to be a result of lax discipline, which in turn was a direct result of low morale; by 1943 organized military entertainment had been instituted to ease the morale problem and how it contributed to battle fatigue and other "disciplinary problems." The nature of the battle in Sicily and Italy – high casualty figures, prolonged duration and the resulting wastage rates – struck fear in the hearts of Canadian politicians and military officials and led to an overall greater stringency in handling exhaustion cases when the shortage of manpower became most extreme. The contribution of battle exhaustion to increased wastage rates added to the wider manpower crisis facing the Canadian forces, a serious point of contention on the home front and one that threatened to augment the already tense French-English factionalism in Canada via the conscription issue. In addition, the possibility of a comparatively short conflict in the Mediterranean and European theatres through a limited supply of rank and file soldiers, most specifically infantrymen, was put in jeopardy. Once it was regarded as fundamental to relaxation and recreation, government-instigated entertainment, however naively conceptualized, became a panacea that, it was hoped, would have an ameliorating effect at all levels. The entertainment program was thus rationalized by planners as a useful political and military tool against battle exhaustion, disciplinary problems, stalls in recruitment and poor morale and the negative consequences these conditions had both overseas and at home.⁹

The first entertainment units to be created and brought up to full establishment figures during the Second World War were military staff bands. Building on a tradition of musical accompaniment for the armed forces, by late 1940 Canadian Army command had formed ten military bands consisting of roughly 27 musicians and one bandmaster each. All members were military personnel who were

Right: Johnny Wayne and Frank Shuster performing in a CBC radio broadcast of *The Army Show*, Ottawa, 21 January 1944.

Below right: Portion of a script from a Canadian Army Show broadcast in December 1942.



mustered as bandsmen in either the Navy, Army or Air Force. With a strong horn section and sheet music in hand, these bands performed for parades of all types, dances and funerals, as well as a number of civilian engagements. Army bands traveled more extensively than either Navy or Air Force groups, throughout the UK, Italy and Europe under harsh conditions and lent official military affairs dignity and pomp. On beaches, in bombed-out streets, and often on the road for years at a time, bands like the Royal Canadian Ordnance Corps Band, the Royal Canadian Armoured Corp Band and the 1st and 2nd Canadian Infantry Division bands traveled just behind the troops and were thus on hand for a number of significant events, such as the march past of the entire 3rd Canadian Infantry Division in Utrecht, Holland on 6 June 1945.¹⁰

For all that troops appreciated the military bands, this kind of entertainment did not allow for laughter or sing-along and continually reminded them of the job they were in the military to do. Military bands were not, to any great extent, influenced by musical trends, functioning as they did to perpetuate the timelessness of armed struggle and the tradition of the Canadian armed forces. While hearing regimental songs and instantly recognizable tunes from military bands was stirring to a

SM: Good morning, Gentlemen.
 All: Good morning, Sergeant-Major.
 SM: Is everybody happy, Gentlemen?
 All: Ooooooh yes.
 SM: Everyone feeling fit, Gentlemen?
 All: Ooooooh yes.
 SM: Alright men, now pay attention. I've just received a complaint from the guard-house and I'm going to get the person responsible. The man who sneaked out of barracks last night and met the woman out of bounds will step forward.
 Sound: MARCHING FEET
 SM: Company Halt...Now men, this usually calls for severe punishment but since your Christmas leave passes are waiting for you at the Orderly Room, I'll let it go.
 Johnny: Say Sergeant-Major...What'll we do for money?
 SM: Why, your army pay is sufficient.
 Johnny: Is it?
 SM: Of course, look at me. I get \$12 for my first child, \$12 for my second child and \$12 for my third child.
 Johnny: How much do you get for your wife?
 SM: I'll take any reasonable offer.
 Sound: DOOR SLAM
 Frank: Well...c'mon Johnny...let's get our Christmas passes at the Orderly Room. There's a good looking CWAC girl over there.
 Johnny: Oh...you haven't got a chance, Frank. She's got a fiancé.
 Frank: What's the difference? As long as she isn't going steady...

Source: The Canadian Army Show Broadcast No. 2 on December 20, 1942 from Montreal. Written by Sgts. Wayne and Shuster. RG 24, Volume 16670, volume 2, appendix 1, Canadian Army Show.

serviceman's morale, horns and drums did not present the full spectrum of entertainment to troops who no doubt wanted to relax, sit back and be distracted by dancers, singers and comedy routines that would allow them even for a short time to forget where they were.

The rise in popularity of the big band sound in the US had changed the ear of Canadian audiences in general, who soon grew to appreciate greater the musical layering of bands that included string instruments and singers and allowed listeners to express themselves through the latest dance fads. American cinema was also modifying the expectations audiences had for their wartime entertainment. Huge production numbers, newly in vogue amongst Hollywood studios, meant audiences demanded visually stimulating acts that could easily blend comedy, dance, music and vocals with elaborate costumes and props. Canadian Army, Navy and Air Force entertainment units had the task of satisfying these modern tastes while increasing morale.

While military bands were not the light entertainment sought by service personnel on most occasions because they did not allow for an escapist type of recreation, civilian groups seemed too out of touch with the military to relate to them in any way through music. As civilians, they were less effective in enhancing the

extremely important spirit of comradeship because they themselves were not members of the military team and thus were unfamiliar with service conditions and social trends within the military. Although bands like Mart Kenney and His Western Gentlemen were indeed very popular with civilian audiences and did a great deal of work for the war effort through Victory Loan drives and free entertainment for troops in Canada,¹¹ they were not entirely engaging to military personnel because they lacked any relation to military life and were strictly dance bands, not variety acts of the vaudevillian sort. The answer then was to form variety groups from the ranks of each service.

The three branches of the military each had their own entertainment units made up of performers drawn from their own post-basic training personnel but their formations, structure and life cycles were quite varied for groups that had fundamentally the same operational goals. Without exception, the purpose of the entertainment groups was to increase morale among the troops and facilitate recruitment to the services. It also represented a means by which the military could control service personnel's off-duty hours: military-generated diversions meant servicemen could stay on their bases and be watched over by their officers and the military police.

Three CWACs applying makeup for a Canadian Army Show in France, August 1944.



NAC C147408

The Canadian Army Shows

The formation of the Canadian Army Show (CAS) occurred because of the perceived crisis in morale, but took the form that it did partly as a response to American efforts toward maintaining the morale of mobilizing troops south of the border. The Americans anticipated the need for such a service before they had actually entered the war and, in February 1941, developed the United Service Organizations (USO) from a number of national citizen committees. With the success of such shows as Irving Berlin's "This is The Army," Canadian officials became convinced that their country required a parallel and permanent confederation of interests in troop welfare and recruitment. Proposals for just such an entity, one that eventually included groups like the Canadian Red Cross, the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire and the Canadian Young Men's Christian Association as part of the Auxiliary Services Section, were developed within the war committee of the cabinet in the summer of 1942 and forwarded for approval in October. At that time, the purpose of producing such a show was clearly laid out; a touring Broadway-type show and its subsequent radio broadcasts would become "a new medium for recruiting" while increasing public and Army morale.

Approved by the Minister of National Defense and the Chief of the General Staff, and funded through both the national government and the National Recruiting Campaign, the new concert

party had already begun to gather talented Army personnel and planned a national broadcasting schedule by December.¹² The unit, by then a recognized section of National Defence and part of the active force, was comprised of 19 male dancers and singers, 24 female dancers and singers, 37 orchestra members and a stage crew of 19 assembled under the name "The Army Show." In March 1943, after about six months rehearsal and organization at Victoria Theater in Toronto, the show departed for a Canadian tour by rail, taking with it Frank Shuster and Johnny Wayne as writers and performers and singers Roger Doucet and Jimmie Shields.

Officially organized under the War Charities Act (with all proceeds for the welfare of the troops) and under the sponsorship of the "Army Show Fund,"¹³ this original group was eventually split into five smaller lettered units (two musical revues and three variety shows) of about 20 members each that were shipped to the U.K. in December 1943. There they joined four Canadian Concert Parties (Army) that had been formed on the initiative of members of McNaughton's 1st Canadian Army in the Spring of 1942. With a quarter million Canadian troops in the UK in the months preceding the invasion of Sicily, "The Tin Hats," "The Kit Bags," "The Bandoliers" and "The Forage Caps" struggled to keep up with demand and as a brief reward for expanding what began as a self-entertainment program, enjoyed great autonomy in terms of locations and material until the arrival of CAS officials. While the focus of entertainment

NAC PA 151171



Above: A scene from the Army Show on CBC Radio, 21 January 1944, featuring singer Joan Dallas.

Right: Two members of the Kit Bags prepare for a show in London, 30 March 1942.



operations had turned to England by the fourth year of the war, a small troupe remained in Canada, the "About Faces of 1944," that, in addition to continual touring, functioned to funnel reinforcements overseas. The standard tour of duty rotation for shows included Great Britain, France, Italy and then back to Canada. When posted to either the Northwest European Theatre (NWET) or the Mediterranean theatre, Canadian Army Shows were often brought up to slightly higher establishment figures and always given numbered detachment identifications that reflected their overseas attachment to the Auxiliary Services Section. Each group changed its name, nominal roles and stage material after a tour and more than 40 detachments were invented and then disbanded in this manner by 1946.

Unlike the Navy and Air Force shows that just quietly stopped operating, the entertainment infrastructure of the Canadian Army went out with a bang after it became undeniable that the demand for shows was approaching zero along with the numbers of troops to be repatriated. By October 1945, most army shows, including those that had been touring hospitals in England, had been dismantled. Those entertainers who wished to remain in the UK were posted to the "Rhythm Rodeo," a show whose over the top nature was a late answer to the "Meet the Navy" show in elaborate production numbers. Based at Pepper Harrow in England, "Rhythm Rodeo" included 91 cast and crew members, including 29 members of the Canadian Women's Army Corps. Corrals and stables had been built to accommodate the 70-odd horses needed to conduct the tent show, shipped from northern England by rail, while the cast rehearsed for about nine weeks, preparing for their opening on 15 December. A month later, "Rhythm Rodeo" had folded up its tent and by March 1946, all live entertainment in the Canadian Army was dispensed with.

The Royal Canadian Air Force Shows

The Royal Canadian Air Force led the military in forming entertainment units and many of their successes and failures were noted by officials in the Army and Navy. As airfields, bases and Flight Training Schools (FTSs) were generally located in more isolated and remote

locations, the Air Force realized early on that an effort had to be made to increase morale by entertaining airmen who had few available forms of recreation. By July 1942, a proposal to form entertainment groups in the various air command areas of Canada had been forwarded for action. In that these entertainment groups, comprised entirely of service personnel, were initially conceived as entertainment exclusively for air force personnel, the program's original goals emphasized disciplinary goals over recruitment or morale *per se*. Certainly the program sought to bolster service morale and recruitment figures among civilians in isolated areas, but RCAF officials most importantly aspired to provide "desirable after-duty activities and entertainment."¹⁴ Shows by and for service personnel were seen to be a morally correct way of distracting air force personnel from less healthy forms of recreation. This important early goal of the program greatly affected the choice of material throughout the duration of the war. Shows were to be of a high moral standard, and many pains were taken to protect Air Force members from racier programs.

Development of the entertainment groups in the RCAF first involved the commanding officer in each training command completing a survey of talent in their area. Those undergoing training in aircrew or ground crew categories were not eligible to be involved in this recruitment until they had completed their basic training regime. In this way, detailed lists of skilled performers, both of amateur and professional backgrounds, were forwarded to AFHQ in Ottawa. Eventually enough talent was found to develop, in succession, a traveling entertainment group (deemed a "major show") in each training command, along with more sporadic formations of "minor shows." "Minor shows" were minor only in size (usually involving less than 10 people in total), for their purpose was to fill the gaps in entertainment between appearances of the "major shows" which had much larger areas to cover. They were also responsible for stimulating self-entertainment in each area (like setting up regular quiz programs and amateur hours in which participation was encouraged with the offer of prize money) and conducting radio broadcasts that were thought to increase recruitment figures. The radio program in the RCAF got its start in Alberta where the oil industry made the broadcast of commercial free

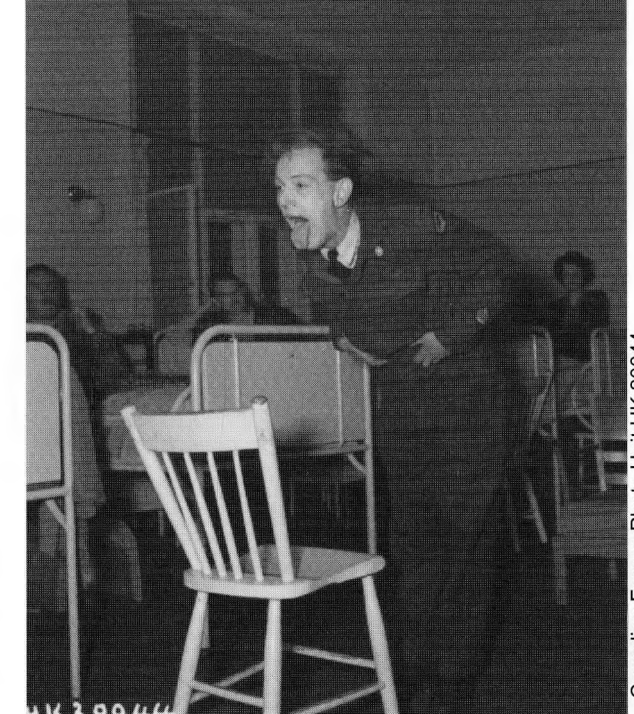
Canadian Forces Photo Unit PL 16216



Corporal Henry Singer, the versatile musician who wrote most of the hit show, "Blackouts of 1943."

shows possible,¹⁵ an arrangement that was eventually mimicked all over the country.

Entertainment groups were established in all Commands in an attempt to ensure a more equitable distribution of entertainment and were regionally suited for administrative purposes in the early years.¹⁶ An entertainment group first toured their own training command area and then proceeded to tour other commands throughout Canada before proceeding overseas, where they were placed under the guidance of the Air Force's Entertainment Services Section. The first RCAF musical revue to travel widely was "The Blackouts of 1943," seen by some 70,000 service personnel as No. 1 Entertainment Group attached to No. 4 Training Command (Alberta). RCAF HQ Overseas had made provisions for the attachment of entertainment units to that location by July 1943 and this group of 33 headed to England for a premiere at the London Comedy Theatre in January 1944 under the name "The Blackouts." The "All Clear" show followed that act with a cast of 34.¹⁷ Shortly a few quite small all-male groups and one all-girl revue of six or seven members were formed that toured extensively in each Air Command area of Canada, often making use of trucks, station wagons and military planes to transport personnel and equipment. For national tours, all were administratively attached to RCAF Station Rockcliffe in Ottawa instead of their regional training command areas and given Entertainment Group numbers. It was widely



Canadian Forces Photo Unit UK 20044

Fran Dowie of the "Blackouts" performs for recovering servicemen in an English hospital in 1945.

thought that the RCAF showed the best spirit in entertaining the troops and had not been uneconomical or vainglorious in their operations. At times, these shows were presented to domestic POW camps, the only service of the three to venture into these venues. The smaller troupe sizes of RCAF shows were also ideal for touring Britain's bases and hospitals. RCAF groups did not tour in Italy or the Northwest European theatre as Air Force personnel were concentrated in England. The first in, the RCAF were also the first to downsize their entertainment units. By October 1945, all RCAF entertainers in Canada had been released from service while only 69 performers remained overseas, awaiting repatriation in England.¹⁸

The Royal Canadian Navy Show

In contrast to the other services, there was only one major naval production and rather than fluctuating quite drastically in establishment numbers, it steadily grew until its disbandment in 1946. The Navy was the last of the three services to produce widely-seen troop entertainment and had, in the early years, relied on the services of other military revues and volunteer and civilian shows like the all-girl employee group the Eaton's Masquers and the very popular Lifebuoy Follies Revue. At times, service organizations like the Salvation Army formed and fully sponsored non-military groups such as the Red Shield Concert Party to entertain



Photo by R.G. Arless, NAC PA 152138



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Photo by F.R. Kemp, NAC PA 147134

Naval personnel.¹⁹ Navy officials began in 1943²⁰ to direct most of their attention to establishing one large show from their own ranks that would provide for the "entertainment of naval, army and air force personnel on active service, promotion of recruiting (and the) maintenance of public morale and good will."²¹ Following the Army's lead, in mid-1943, a small naval concert party called the "HCMS *Bytown*" had been formed. The "*Bytown*" show had the same spirit as "Meet the Navy" eventually would. It showcased "25 delightful Wrens (the dancing 'Curvettes') who looked as though they'd never seen a uniform, so trim and light of foot they were"²² and introduced the song "The Boy in the Bell-Bottomed Trousers." Its cast, including eventual show favorites like singer Oscar Natzke and dancers Allan Lund and Blanche Harris (later Lund), was absorbed to form the nucleus of the much bigger production "Meet the Navy." "Meet the Navy" featured 38 Wrens and 41 male performers along with 27 musicians and many more in technical positions for a show that was said to combine "the saltiness of the sea, the freshness of Canadian youth and the precision of Broadway." They did two tours of Canada in a special Canadian Pacific Railway train after their premiere in September 1943, including smaller break-off shows for hospitals and Victory Loan drives, playing to a domestic audience totaling some half a million people.²³ Profits made from civilian audiences went to the Canadian Naval Service Benevolent Trust Fund,

Top left: Chorus line rehearsal for the "Meet the Navy" show, Ottawa, 27 August 1943.

Above left: The chorus line of the "Meet the Navy" show in 1943.

Left: Blanche and Allan Lund (right) speak with Noel Coward (left) at the London premier of the Navy Show, February 1945.

a donation that totaled just under \$300,000 by October 1946.²⁴ After receiving rave reviews in Canada, the group then proceeded overseas for shows in Scotland and England in October 1944 under the auspices of Britain's Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) with all profits placed in the King George Fund for Sailors. Although the Army and Air Force had organized their own overseas tours, the Canadian Navy deemed ENSA's assistance as unavoidable and put them in charge of coordinating tours in the UK's larger cities and through the largest concentrations of Allied forces on the continent. With ENSA's help, "Meet the Navy" traveled through France, Holland, Belgium and Germany in the summer and fall of 1945.

"Meet the Navy" continued to grow to a cast and crew of just under 200 and enjoyed a great deal of media attention that eventually culminated in a British feature film. It only contracted in size in late 1946 after most of its members had applied for discharge and the demand for the show had decreased. Total audience figures for the show's three-year run are estimated at one and a half million service personnel and civilians.²⁵

The Nature of Government Financial Backing

The establishment of entertainment troupes within the military necessitated detailed and special financial arrangements with all parties attempting to balance the need for entertainment with the need for responsible and prudent expenditure of public funds. The arrangements finally made for tours of Canada reflected an efficacious combination of cost recovery, profit and charitable contributions that left no cause for debate or negative criticism among the public. In their infancy, all three services very vocally reported that no public funds were to be used in the operation of the troupes, but in reality all "borrowed" capital from the Department of National Defence. The Army Show was allotted \$7,000 to get started while the Navy Show budgeted for \$100,000 to cover transportation expenses during their Canadian tours. Both shows were able to pay these loans back from civilian door revenues (whether they actually did or not is unclear), and the domestic

tours were so well received that they helped finance overseas forays. The Air Force varied in this somewhat because their income from ticket receipts was quite low compared to the Army and Navy. The Air Force often played in more sequestered areas, separated from civilian populations in some cases, and never charged American personnel, who made up a good portion of the audience here in Canada, to see the show. AFHQ handled budgeting and, before production, each show submitted a cost analysis that had to be approved before the show was able to tour. Most Air Force productions cost about \$1,500 to get established, a figure that included costumes, scenery, lights and public address systems, with a few hundred dollars a year for upkeep on the shows in operation which the DND covered.²⁶ National Defence likely took on this cost expecting that with such small shows and the impossibility of them heading into Italy or Europe, future costs could be kept relatively low. The Air Force shows put any profits back into AFHQ to pay off these loans and were not associated with any charity, except that they often allowed auxiliary organizations to accept donations before the show. Like other units within the military, health and dental care (including cosmetic work that was viewed as essential to a favorable stage appearance), wages and room and board were provided by DND and all other expenditures were reviewed by department accountants, subject to periodic audits.

While donations from corporate interests and the government-supplied startup costs enabled the shows to begin touring domestically, after arrival overseas, money and financial bureaucracy troubles soon plagued the shows of the Army and Air Force. Away from Canada, the shows no longer had access to civilian ticket money in any great amount as they only periodically charged British, Italian and European populations to see the shows, operating as they did on a servicemen first seated policy. This reduced cash flow meant that personnel in charge of the shows were forced to send pleas to both overseas and domestic Defence headquarters for funds to reequip worn out or stolen equipment, a process that took extended periods of time and often hampered the quality of the show. Officers in charge of the units or the relevant Auxiliary Services Officer often had some money for small purchases

(which was useful only when the goods needed were actually available for sale) but larger expenditures were delayed or on occasion, refused outright. Faced with a policy of financial restraint, both the Canadian government and the financial committees of the shows which held capital in Canada were unfamiliar with the conditions entertainers performed in overseas and were often reluctant to release funds for what they viewed to be questionable purchases. They were perhaps too stingy, even considering that the money allotted for refitting would decrease the amount later given to charity or re-funneled back into the DND. Shoes, for example, that had been danced in for two years of two shows a day, six days a week needed to be replaced but government bean counters often pointed to the original shipping inventories that claimed everyone already had a pair of shoes. Purchases of make-up, stockings and feminine hygiene products were subject to the most intense scrutiny, as all three services viewed these items as personal and unnecessary to the operation of the groups. In the worst situation, DND was initially reluctant to purchase musical instruments for its personnel and several entertainers were forced to use their own equipment that DND paid a very small rent on and provided insurance for.²⁷ After years of touring, the instruments invariably wore out, were lost or stolen in transit. Replacements overseas were especially hard to get. While Canadian entertainers routinely "liberated" instruments from civilian populations, this was not an ideal source for new equipment and no doubt encouraged civilians to steal from the shows, which they did often in every theatre of the war. Everything from chocolate to public address systems, trucks to bell-bottomed

trousers and harmonicas were lifted by thieves overseas. While some items were eventually recovered, loss of equipment usually meant the show concerned had to change certain stage numbers permanently.

The Material

Satirization was the prime ingredient in all comedic sketches performed. Military life was mocked in the shows of all three services in basically the same way, via a "Joe" character that represented the serviceman who gets the job nobody wants. "You'll Get Used to It," possibly the most famous song done by military entertainers and the one that seems to have survived the most vibrantly within the memories of audiences of the period, had a sad sack figure in overalls describing the rigors of life in the Navy but managing to convey the idea that any number of hardships can be tolerated after one gets used to them. The RCAF had an equivalent number in each touring group, such as the "Blackouts of 1943" song "Why Am I Always Joe?," which was basically a lament from the airman who was eternally on the business end of a mop or stationed at the sink washing dishes. The one rough rule of thumb in the satire of military life was that only the highest-ranking officers in the military were likely to be featured in a mean or malicious manner, most often as buffoons with puffed out chests. Unlike during the Great War, naming these officers or incorporating the names of officers in the audience was strongly discouraged as it was seen to undermine the authority of those same officers and because not naming them was a comedic technique that functioned to let the audience assign those characteristics to whomever they wished. Further, officers were never brought on stage to be made fun of. Everyone else was fair game and it was recommended that writers "take a few digs at the M.T. [motor transport], equipment, pay accounts, fire department or service police and you have a skit which will undoubtedly appeal to the personnel."²⁸

Likewise, all shows presented their female cast in the same way. While the women's divisions of the Canadian military constantly attempted to reassure the public that the military participation of

women would not compromise their femininity, military shows presented a version of femininity that had a distinct sexual edge to it and actually served to reinforce the commonly held idea that servicewomen had compromised their moral decorum by joining up.²⁹ All-female dancing chorus lines were an extremely popular number in all three services' shows, the successful synchronicity of movement revealing both a great deal of rehearsal and of leg for service personnel audiences. Other skits showed women contributing to the war effort from the comfort of their kitchens, participating in on-stage beauty pageants or performing in bathing suits. One particular Canadian Army Show, written by Sergeants Frank Shuster and Johnny Wayne, had the Canadian Women's Army Corps representative say "The CWAC are here to release

men for more active duty. I am here so that one man can get into action," to which Frank replies "Here I am, babe!"³⁰ Finally, military shows always had bits concerning personalities in the Axis and the battle against them. Hitler, of course, was the primary target but Mussolini and the entire Japanese race came up often during comedic sketches, sometimes all at once:

- Vernon: I suppose you want some flowers?
 More: Yes. We want you to plant some Hitler Stinkweed, some Mussolini Mustardplant and some Hirohito Poison Ivy.
 Vernon: You'll never win any prizes with that combination.
 More: Why not? They'll be the three biggest smellers of 1943.³¹

*You'll get used to it, you'll get used to it
 Molto Vino, Quanta Costa, you'll get used to it
 You get a panoramic view, lots of mutton in your stew
 Mepacrine and margarine, dysentery to make you lean
 It's wonderful, it's marvelous, dehydrated spuds and carrots you'll adore
 You gotta get used to it, and when you're used to it
 You will find that you are lining up for more
 You'll be so whacky, you'll be glad when we have won this ruddy war.*

To keep stage material fresh and relevant, old stand-bys were modified to better suit the circumstances of any particular audience. Pte. Weinzwieg wrote these new verses of the famous WW II song for troops stationed in Italy. The original, copyrighted in Canada in 1942, featured words by Victor Gordon and music by Freddy Grant.

Source: June 28, 1944. No. 1 Detachment Canadian Army Show "Mixed Fun" war diary, volume 2. RG 24, Volume 16671, 3rd Detachment, 1 Canadian Army Show, 21 Army Group.

Right: Army Show in progress before an audience of 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, Esquelbecq, Belgium, September 1944.

Below left: Senior CWAC officer, Lieutenant Verity Sweeny assists with the Alice blue gown of singer Mary Leonard in England, 21 June 1945.

Below right: Three 'cow girls' in the Western finale of the Canadian Army Show "Invasion Revue," Banville, France, 27 July 1944.



▼ Photo by H.D. Robinson, NAC PA 150924 ▲ Photo by Ken Bell, NAC PA 141070 ▼ Photo by Ken Bell, NAC PA 132837



World War not only allowed the formation of entertainment units within the military but actually encouraged it. The relationship between military entertainment units and the conscription issue aside, the seriousness of the conflict, especially after Hong Kong and Dieppe, made entertainment concerns an unlikely priority, indeed an important, nationally-orchestrated response to overall poor morale. However, it is and was obvious that the poor state of morale among service personnel by 1942 put the quality of Canada's contribution to the Allied cause and thus its place in the Commonwealth's political and economic family in jeopardy. In essence, the formation of an armed forces-wide entertainment program meant that military officials acknowledged the connection between low morale, disciplinary problems, battle exhaustion, recreation and the quality of performance in the field. The existence of entertainment units in the Canadian military in this period provides evidence that the federal government generally – and the Department of National Defence specifically – were able to think holistically about these issues and, in order to affect positive change, went outside their traditional realm of influence to support the development of Canadian arts and culture during wartime.

Notes

- Unit D Concert Party Report written by J.W. Cameron, WO II -1/c, for period 1 to 29 February 1944, National Archives of Canada (NAC), RG 24, v.16670, Serial 2353, Folder 3, The Army Show November 1943- January 1945, No.1 Canadian Army Show Overseas – Canadian Reinforcement Unit Headquarters.
- Natalie Rewa's contribution on garrison theatre in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Theatre*, eds. Eugene Benson and L.W. Conolly (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp.223-224.
- See Patrick B. O'Neill, "The Canadian Concert Party in France," *Theatre Research in Canada* 4/2 (Fall 1983), pp.197-207 and "Entertaining the Troops," *The Beaver* 69/5 (October/November 1989), pp.59-62.
- R.H. Roy claims the Army in particular entered the conflict with overall high morale and that "the war was well underway before some senior officers at National Defence Headquarters began to suggest that morale in the army...should be watched." His conclusions concerning the onset of concern about morale are based on the monthly "Morale in the Canadian Army" reports of 1942 and 1943. *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 16/2 (Fall 1986), pp.40-45.
- Desmond Morton, *A Military History of Canada*, 3rd edition (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992), pp.209-210.
- George F.G. Stanley, *Canada's Soldiers: The Military History of an Unmilitary People* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1954), p.365.
- Recently J.L. Granatstein has identified a more immediate antidote, had it been available, to poor morale in this period. He argues that "what the Canadians really needed was to be trained effectively and led by officers who knew what they were doing." *Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p.204.
- See Terry Copp and Bill McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Canadian Army, 1939-1945* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).
- While the Department of National Defence was solidly behind the entertainment program, those officials at no point chose to enhance the quality of the program over the quality of the mainstream military infrastructure. In early 1945, for example, the RCAF refused to allow entertainment remustering for anyone in, among others, the hairdressing, butchering, telephone or safety equipment fields. During the same time, the Canadian Army Shows' search for qualified reinforcement musicians was stalled when it was reported that although "countless musicians of high caliber (are) in the Canadian Army...the great percentage are earmarked for Infantry and are therefore 'untouchables.'" Memo from G/C G.A.D. Will, D.A.P.S. to S/L Gilchrist on 23 February 1945, RG 24, v.3291, f. HQ 25-14-14, v. 3, Royal Canadian Air Force and War Diary summary for January 1945; RG 24, v.16672, Serial 2636, Auxiliary Services Entertainment Unit (Army Shows).
- W. Ray Stephens, *The Canadian Entertainers of World War II* (Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 1993), pp.9-28.
- For a full explanation of both the popularity of this band and its work during the war, see Mart Kenney, *Mart Kenney and His Western Gentlemen* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Books, 1981).
- Proposal re: formation of concert party to be known as "The Army Show" and to consist of army personnel, 27 October 1942, RG 24, v.16670, pt. 1, The Army Show, November 12 to 30, 1942. The founding fathers of "The Army Show" included Victor George, Lieutenant-Colonel James Mess, Jack Arthur, Geoffrey Waddington, Rai Purdy, Major W.B. Robinson, Captain J.K. Reid, Edward Harris, and John Pratt, who later gained fame as a cast member of the Navy Show.
- The "Army Show Fund" was governed by a Board of Trustees made up of various members of citizen committees and co-ordinating councils. The Board included 9 members, all men except for the secretarial position, from across Canada, with Saskatoon resident Harry S. Hay as chairman. From "The Army Show: Canada's All Soldier Stage Show" program, unfilled but held by the Glenbow Museum and used in the exhibit "Memories of War, Dreams of Peace" which was shown from November 1995 to March 1996 and curated by Barry Agnew, Senior Curator of Military History, Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta.
- As one station medical officer reported, base entertainment "keeps my venereal disease wards empty." Memo from Air Vice-Marshal J.A. Sully to Air Officer Commanding in the No.1 Training Command area on 31 July 1942, RG 24, v.3218, f.HQ 192-4-8, v. 1, Entertainment Groups Organization and Establishment, Royal Canadian Air Force.
- Memo from J.A. Sully, AVM, on 6 July 1943, in *Ibid.*
- The practice of having entertainment groups administratively attached to their Training Command of origin soon became cumbersome from the perspective of AFHQ in Ottawa, a situation that was further aggravated when RCAF groups began to go overseas. By early 1944, all entertainment group personnel were taken off strength from their training commands and officially posted to RCAF Station Rockcliffe in Ottawa for rations, discipline and quarters, and attached to AFHQ for equipment and pay. When posted overseas then, the prior necessities were taken over by RCAF overseas HQ via the Special Duties List.
- RCAF Press Release No.2210, 17 September 1943, RG 24, v.3289, f.250-14-2, pt. 1, Royal Canadian Air Force.
- Memo from S/L N.M. Gilchrist, Director of Music and Entertainment, concerning demands for RCAF entertainment from Eastern Air Command on 29 October 1945, RG 24, v.3291, f. 250-14-14, v. 3, Policy Governing Entertainment Groups, Royal Canadian Air Force.
- RG 24, v.5689, f.NSS 450-1-20, v. 1, Auxiliary Services (Navy) – Naval Shows General Data and Correspondence.
- For an in-depth discussion of why the Royal Canadian Navy chose 1943 to develop a show, see Laurel Halladay, "Meet the Navy – And Greet the Navy!" The Royal Canadian Navy and Broadway-Style Public Relations, 1943," in *Perspectives on War: Essays on Security, Society and The State*, eds. Jillian Dowding and Chris Bullock (Calgary: Centre for Military and Strategic Studies, 2001), pp.31-42.
- Letter from the Minister of National Defence to the Governor General in council, 31 April 1945, detailing the history of the Navy Show, RG 24, v.3596, f.1210-1, Navy Show General, Royal Canadian Navy.
- Quote from an unidentified newspaper clipping from June 1943, RG 24, v.5689, f.NSS 450-1-20, pt.1, Auxiliary Services (Navy) – Naval Shows General Data and Correspondence.
- Ruth Phillips, "The History of the Royal Canadian Navy's World War II Show 'Meet the Navy,'" 1973. MG 55/31 No.22, 20. This monograph is an uncritical and incomplete history of the show, ostensibly done for the 30th Anniversary Reunion of the show held in Toronto in September 1973.
- RG 24, v.3596, f.1210-1, Financial Arrangements, Royal Canadian Navy.
- Rosamond 'Fiddy' Greer, *The Girls of the King's Navy* (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1983), p.69.
- Overall expenses for Air Force shows were comparatively high when wages, rations and other standard costs for supporting military personnel were taken into account. A total just over \$140, 000 in annually recurring costs and \$12, 470 in non-recurring costs was budgeted in 1943 to cover the operations of the entertainment groups within the four training command areas. These figures do not take into account equipment costs but do include pay, medical and clothing expenses. Estimated Personnel Costs for Entertainment Groups of the RCAF, October 1943, RG 24, v.3218, f. HQ 192-4-8, pt.1, Royal Canadian Air Force.
- In the RCAF for example, only a portion of instruments were purchased by the Department of Munitions and Supply. Later, rents on instruments and other equipment often exceeded what buying the equipment outright would have cost. Higher costs for rental gear resulted from overseas insurance rates, the increased cost of maintenance and repairs in the U.K. and a recompense for a certain amount of wear and tear. RG 24, v.3291, f. HQ 250-14-14, Policy Governing Entertainment Groups, Royal Canadian Air Force.
- Hints on the Production of Station Shows, undated, RG 24, v.3290, f. HQ 250-14-12, Royal Canadian Air Force.
- Ruth Roach Pierson explains both the "moral panic" and "whispering campaign" that servicewomen suffered from during the war in *"They're Still Women After All: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood"* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1986).
- Canadian Army Show Broadcast No.1 on 13 December 1942 from Montreal, RG 24, v.16670, pt.2, appendix one, Canadian Army Show. The CAS alternatively claimed at the end of each broadcast that they were "Canada's Active Army on the Air" or "the living message of the will and spirit of Canada's Active Army." For home broadcasts, the Show attempted to give a glimpse of the soldiers' lives in a number of different places and jobs in an effort to put domestic audiences at ease with the situation.
- The Canadian Army Show broadcast No.15 on 21 March 1943 from Toronto, RG 24, v.16670, pt.5, appendix 2, Canadian Army Show.
- Frank Shuster, interview with the author, 4 July 2000. "Invasion Revue" was the first military entertainment unit to reach Europe after the Normandy invasion and among its ranks were the first CWAC personnel, one of whom was Lois Maxwell, to set foot in France.
- For more information on the ameliorating impact of entertainment units, see Laurel Halladay, "Ladies and Gentlemen, Soldiers and Artists: Canadian Military Entertainers, 1939-1946" (M.A. thesis, University of Calgary, 2000).

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