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"Canada's Roll of Honour"

Controversy over Casualty Notification and Publication during the Second World War

Timothy Balzer

During the present Afghanistan mission, the reporting of casualties receives more media attention than any other aspect of Canadian operations. Usually within a day, the life story of each fatality appears in the media, followed by footage of the ramp ceremony and reports from the hometown funeral. Politicians debated whether to lower the national flag on the Peace Tower after every fatality. None of this could have occurred during the Second World War due to limitations in communications, administration and the sheer number of casualties. Processing each casualty report overseas, dispatching it to Ottawa and then to the next-of-kin, while allowing sufficient time before publication in the press, took days and often weeks. The Canadian Army sometimes suffered more casualties in a single day of battle than its entire losses in Afghanistan. Nor are there the same levels of security concerns since limited losses do not allow the Taliban to use casualty reports to estimate combat effectiveness of Canadian units. Obviously, in 1939-1945 there could not be today's level of discussion about individual casualties in the national media, nor the capability of transmitting the news as quickly. Nonetheless, casualty reporting constituted an important element of

Abstract: During the Second World War, the Canadian Army's announcement of casualties to next-of-kin and the press often caused controversy. Even though the army tried to notify family and public as quickly as possible, it could not always do so. Unofficial communications with the family, procedural failures, and more frequently press and censorship errors, caused occasional mistakes in casualty reporting. Moreover, the interests of Canada's allies often prevented the timely publication of casualty names and figures, as in the aftermath of the Dieppe Raid, Sicily campaign and Normandy landings. These delays were often for alleged security reasons, sometimes with questionable justification. This led to widespread, albeit inaccurate, suspicion of political manipulation of this process by the Canadian Army and federal government.

the army's handling of operational news. This article examines the machinery and politics behind the notification of next-of-kin and the publication of casualty names and numbers in the news media. Even though the army generally wished to notify the family, members and public as quickly and accurately as possible, it could not always do so. Unofficial communications with the family, procedural failures, and more frequently press and censorship errors, caused occasional mistakes in casualty reporting. Moreover, the

interests and regulations of Canada's senior allies often prevented the timely publication of casualty names and figures usually on the grounds of security, sometimes with questionable justification, frequently resulting in conflict.

The administration of army casualty reporting went through numerous small refinements during the war, but the basic structure and procedure remained relatively constant. Canadian Military Headquarters (CMHQ) in London served as the overseas records office and conduit for transmitting casualty reports to Ottawa. Initially, the administrative procedure for each casualty report was painstaking; an individual casualty card had to be processed, double-checked with the unit and against existing casualty records files, before transmission to the records office at National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ).¹ As the army grew in size and some Canadian formations deployed to the Mediterranean and later to France, CMHQ could no longer confirm each casualty with his unit. Instead, the Second Echelon, the support and administrative units of the army, received the information in the theatre from units and hospitals and forwarded it to CMHQ. Once the cable arrived at the Directorate of Records in Ottawa, the information



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Casualty notification during the Canadian mission to Afghanistan is considerably quicker, and more public, than the official system in place during the Second World War.

was again processed and a telegram of notification sent to the next-of-kin. The name was added to the publication list only after confirmation of the notification's receipt. This took time: according to a March 1944 army press release, "a casualty notice can hardly be expected to reach Canada in less than a week or ten days."² Two of the major objectives of this system were preventing mistaken reports and ensuring the next-of-kin did not have the shock of learning about the death of a family member from a media report.

Despite these painstaking precautions, mistakes happened. In some cases, the responsibility for error lay with the army itself. During the aftermath of the bloody Dieppe raid in August 1942, many mistakes resulted from waiving normal procedures to speed through the enormous number of casualties clogging up the untried system. To speed the process, Second Echelon telephoned casualties to Records "before they had been able to do a proper check."³ The initial information was based on inaccurate pre-embarkation lists and sometimes on anecdotal information collected at the check posts as the men returned from the raid, which resulted in reports of death based on "hearsay evidence" alone.⁴ No formal

courts of inquiry were held until nine or ten days later. Conducted by the individual units, with sworn eyewitness evidence, they provided reliable answers about many casualties.⁵ Unfortunately, numerous cables were despatched prior to this. The records office deliberately cabled the names to Ottawa, even though they were aware that the status of some casualties would change. It was more important, in the light of the pressure from NDHQ, to get the names out quickly, with some errors, than to delay their transmission and ensure accuracy. This did not prevent NDHQ from later complaining about changes in the status of casualties that grieved the next-of-kin.⁶

This departure from normal procedure resulted in the categories of some casualties changing two or even three times. The exact numbers of changes were described "as a small percentage" of the casualties, but they may have been as high as 14 percent.⁷ These changes in category doubtless led to unnecessary grief in many Canadian homes. For example, Mrs. R.W. Barton of Toronto was told her son was missing, the next day he was reported as safe, but several days later he returned to missing status.⁸ The rush to get the casualties to next-of-kin doubtless

was beneficial to those who received correct information, but it caused immense uncertainty for those who received inaccurate cables.

Nor was Dieppe the only time that the army made mistakes in casualty reporting. Serious delays in next-of-kin notification took place during the Sicilian campaign in July and August 1943. In July 1943, the casualty notification telegrams experienced "lengthy delays" because they competed with operational traffic that took first priority. Although Second Echelon received its own equipment allowing communication with London, it still could not use it on 24 July because Eisenhower's Allied Force Headquarters (AFHQ) had not yet assigned it a radio frequency.⁹ Because of the delayed casualty reports, the instances of next-of-kin learning of casualties by other channels increased and resulted in some anger in the press, which will be discussed below.

Another embarrassing situation arose on 30 December 1943, at the Army Directorate of Records at NDHQ, when a typist, processing four casualties, mistakenly entered "killed" in the place of "wounded" on the duplicator stencil. The correct status already appeared on an earlier form, but another clerk changed that form to match the incorrect stencil. As a result, the next-of-kin of the four men received telegrams notifying them of the soldiers' deaths. The error escaped detection despite three checking points in the procedure, including a review by the directorate duty officer. The four soldiers remained deceased until resurrected by an update on the condition of one of the wounded,

alerting the Directorate of Records to the error, who sent the correct information to the next-of-kin.¹⁰ A 10 January 1944 Canadian Press (CP) story reported the outrage of one of the families, and the Edmonton branch of the Canadian Legion sent a protest to NDHQ. The story, as carried by the *Ottawa Journal*, came to the notice of NDHQ and the records office. A resulting investigation led to changes that ensured more stringent double-checking in the office.¹¹ It is no coincidence that two weeks later a press release from NDHQ Army Public Relations described a visit by Minister of National Defence J. Layton Ralston to the Casualties Section of the Directorate of Records. He underscored the need for accuracy and speed to the staff and said that he was "deeply impressed by the great care taken by the casualty section to guard against errors."¹²

Despite the steps taken after January 1944, a similar mistake happened in November 1944 when a Toronto mother, informed of the death of her officer son, within hours received a second telegram explaining that the first cable was erroneous and he had suffered only a light wound. Unfortunately, the records department did not correct the inaccuracy in the publication list for the newspapers and the error was repeated.¹³ Mistakes happened more frequently during the campaign in Northwest Europe. A Directorate of Records memorandum dated 10 October 1944 complained about delays and inaccuracies in the reports sent both by units at the front and the hospitals. Progress reports on "dangerously ill" and "seriously ill" came only rarely, while the

directorates felt they should be weekly or bi-weekly. "Discrepancies and mistakes in reporting" also resulted from "carelessness in the writing of cables" and "adding inexperienced personnel in the peak period we are going through."¹⁴

Thus, despite the attempts by the army to avoid errors and delay, circumstances and clerical mistakes occasionally resulted in the next-of-kin receiving erroneous or belated casualty reports. Sometimes, as in Sicily, the army, despite its best efforts to send casualty notification, ran into difficulties beyond its control. At other times, such as Dieppe and the autumn of 1944, the sheer number of casualties increased the likelihood of error. The information received in Canada always depended on the accuracy of the report from the front, during heavy fighting; mistakes were inevitable because casualty reports did not always have priority for the staff of combat units. In any case, the mere fact that casualty reports involved at least four steps before reaching the next-of-kin increased the possibility of clerical mistakes. While understandable and probably inevitable, these errors

caused unnecessary grief and worry for the families affected by them.

In addition to military blunders in notifying next-of-kin, sometimes the families of casualties received notice through unofficial communications, often from other soldiers or even callous hoaxers. Sometimes this news was completely false or misleading. In April 1940, the *Globe and Mail* reported that the father of a corporal in the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry received word of his son's death in Norway. Since the Canadian Army denied rumours of having troops in Norway, this became front-page news. The story puzzled officials at NDHQ, but quick inquiries requested by Gillis Purcell of the CP revealed the supposedly deceased soldier still with his company in the UK. It never surfaced whether the parents were victims of a hoax or some kind of administrative mistake.¹⁵ On other occasions, cruel deceivers telephoned the next-of-kin of service personnel informing them of their family member's death. A November 1942 RCAF press release described this hoax as occurring "frequently" and indicated that there were multiple perpetrators.

CFJIC Z-8471-18



Canadian prisoners of war led through Dieppe by German soldiers. These men made up the bulk of the "missing" casualties held back from publication for a month at British insistence.

Newspapers reported other occasions and with other services and no doubt this could have occurred with the army as well.¹⁶

More often unofficial reports of casualties came through well-meaning letters from other soldiers. After Dieppe, grieving next-of-kin received shocking news by these unofficial channels, although this was contrary to regulations. While censorship of soldiers' mail existed, it tended to be haphazard and many soldiers and officers ignored the rules.¹⁷ While those writing casualties' families were well intentioned, they probably did not resolve the uncertainty; as long as no official word came, hope doubtless remained. Other next-of-kin were stunned when letters addressed to missing personnel returned, mistakenly stamped "deceased."¹⁸ This was a result of two foul ups: the unit prematurely labelling a missing

man as deceased, and the letter being returned instead of sent to the dead letter office.¹⁹

The practise of personnel writing to next-of-kin continued after Dieppe. A 10 October 1944 Directorate of Records memorandum outlined the problems caused by unofficial notifications:

A great amount of casualties, both fatal and otherwise, are being reported to the next-of-kin by personal cables and mail long before the official report is received at this office. This not only puts this Headquarters in an embarrassing position but adds greatly to the burden of answering enquiries on a matter which has not been officially reported to this office. A notable example of this occurred lately when H/Capt. Mooney, a R.C. Chaplain, was killed in action, the news of his death was "officially" reported to all

RC district Chaplains in Canada by the Principal Chaplain (RC), almost one week before the notification cable was received in this office.²⁰

The memorandum failed to mention the uncertainty that the next-of-kin experienced until officially notified. Much of the blame for the situation addressed in the memorandum lay with the slowness of official communications. While a private cable might conceivably beat military telegraph communication back to Canada, soldier's mail should not have. The writers may sometimes have expected the recipient to possess the news by the time the letter arrived.

A similar situation occurred during the Sicily campaign with the casualty notifications hampered by the lack of a Second Echelon radio frequency. Additionally, mountainous terrain, poor quality batteries, and a lack of radio equipment due to the loss of supply ships meant that communications between Canadian units proved difficult, adding to casualty reporting delays.²¹ This resulted in the inevitable informal revelations. The most conspicuous case, which the *Conservative Globe and Mail* attempted to turn into a government embarrassing *cause célèbre*, involved the family of Lieutenant-Colonel Ralph Crowe of the Royal Canadian Regiment, killed on 24 July. On 6 August several journalists asked the family for pictures of Crowe, explaining they wanted pictures of all members of the regiment. The family later learned that stories of Crowe's death began circulating at the local military district headquarters that



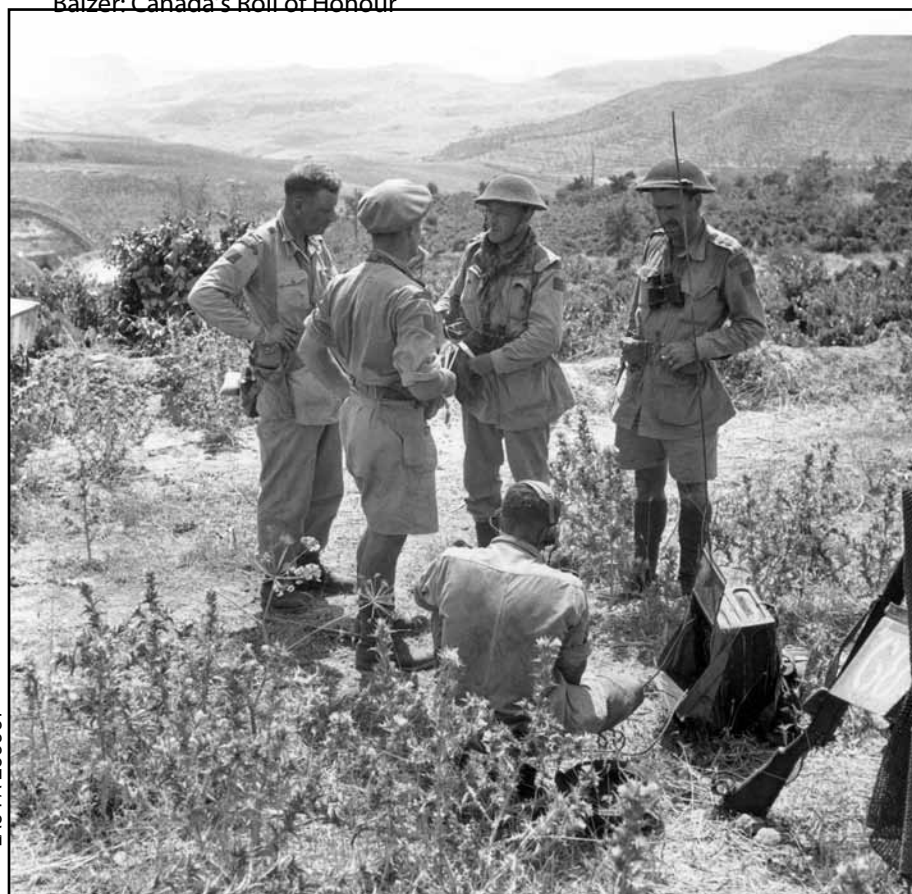
Library and Archives Canada (LAC) PA 132777

Lieutenant-Colonel R.M. Crowe (right) and Major J.H.W. Pope of the Royal Canadian Regiment were both killed in Sicily. The delay in notifying Crowe's next-of-kin caused public controversy.

Communications difficulties during the Sicilian campaign contributed to delays in casualty reporting.

same day. Two days later the family received a 30 July letter from a Canadian Public Relations officer in London, a friend, informing them of the news. Seeking confirmation, the family made inquiries to NDHQ, through the local military district, which reported that it had no notification. "The assured and relieved" family received the official telegram the next day. The *Globe and Mail* quoted the remarks of an unnamed officer, a family friend, that the situation was "difficult to justify" and he hoped that the publicity would lead to "some reorganization of the records [system] and press releases" so "that a similar experience not will not come to next of kin of future casualties in this war."²²

A response by NDHQ explained that overcrowded communications systems resulted in casualty notifications delays "during the first three weeks of the Sicilian campaign" and "a number of despatches failed to reach base during that period." NDHQ knew of a report of Lieutenant-Colonel Crowe's death but it "had not been confirmed."²³ The *Globe and Mail*, unimpressed by the explanation, published several editorials accusing the army of "brutal callousness," although perhaps not "intentional," since information in London on 30 July should have reached NDHQ the next day. An even stronger critique followed after the editors learned of a second officer's family informed unofficially of his death. The editorial accused NDHQ of "inexcusable fumbling," dismissing its explanation as "a piece of deplorable casuistry" and condemning the Ottawa HQ for "refusal...ever to admit a mistake or concede that it could be in error. It is always ready with a denial,



LAC PA 169997

explanation, or an excuse."²⁴ The *Globe and Mail* editorials showed little understanding of the need for accuracy in army casualty procedure. Just because stories of someone's death had reached London did not mean that next-of-kin could receive notification. Avoiding inaccurate reports and needless grief prevented such reckless action. The Dieppe raid had demonstrated the dangers of ignoring procedure for speed. Nor did the arrival of rumours in a Canadian military district or even NDHQ mean that the Directorate of Records knew of the information. The *Globe and Mail* editors seemed more intent on building outrage to embarrass the King government than on understanding the situation. Nevertheless, slow processing of casualty reports left the army open to such accusations.

The third type of mistake in next-of-kin notification happened when the press, contrary to regulations, published the names of casualties before official word reached the

family. Slight revisions to the regulations sometimes occurred. The 10 October 1940 press censorship directive stated:

Casualties in the Canadian services should not be published or broadcast until an official casualty list has been released. There are three reasons for this:

- a) So that relatives may receive their first notification through official sources.
- b) So that no information of value to the enemy be revealed in details of the time, place and other circumstances of the casualty.
- c) So as to thwart the possible attempts of enemy agents to lower morale by spreading false news of casualties.

Occasionally it happens that the facts of a casualty become known in a community before an official list has been published. In these cases, if the above requirements appear to have been satisfied, an exception may be made but editors

should consult the press censors before publication.²⁵

The news media usually observed the directive, but in July 1942, the Canadian censorship authorities issued a reminder to wait for official notification following the premature publication of the names of two officer cadets who drowned in Ottawa.²⁶ Several months later after the Dieppe raid, during an interview by Fred Griffin of the *Toronto Star*, Lieutenant-Colonel Dollard Menard of the Fusiliers Mont-Royal, mentioned Captain Alleyn's death, whose parents then learned of this when the story appeared in *L'Évènement*.²⁷ Considering the number of casualties at Dieppe, that merely one incident occurred shows the overall cooperation of the press.

The Sicilian campaign led to some major changes ensuring that next-of-kin received official news first. On 23 July 1943, the Ottawa records office learned that the *Toronto Telegram* and the *Toronto Star* published different reports each naming a wounded Canadian soldier. The surprised families of both men inquired to the records office, which knew nothing about the casualties. The same day, Lieutenant-Colonel F.X. Jennings, the Army's director of public relations, while checking on two CP despatches containing names of wounded, discovered several other names unknown to the Directorate of Records. Jennings requested that the CP hold the stories. In spite of this, on 24 July, a CP despatch appeared in the *Montreal Gazette*; a clipping of this article in the army files has three names underlined with a prominent "no" written beside them. Either the CP ignored Jennings's earlier advice or another dispatch arrived that CP sent to the newspapers without scrutiny.²⁸ These incidents resulted in the adjutant general consulting the chief press censor, who sent a new directive instructing news



CFJIC ZK 28

Lieutenant-Colonel Dollard Menard commanded Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal during the Dieppe operation. Public statements he made after the raid circumvented the official channels for casualty notification.

organizations that whenever a story contained the name of a casualty, the publisher should send the copy to the censors for review. Alternatively, the press could contact the Army Directorate of Records directly, which would now have an officer on duty 24 hours a day in order to make checking easier.²⁹ These concessions to the press appear to have resolved the problem, which like that of the unofficial notifications, resulted in part from the slow rate in which casualty reports reached Ottawa.

While these errors of casualty notification were shocking for the next-of-kin, the numbers of people directly affected remained relatively small. In contrast, the publication of casualty lists and totals helped shape the public image of the conflict, a critical concern to the Canadian Army. Nonetheless, as with many other policies, those of the more senior allies, particularly the British, limited the Canadian Army's options. This occasionally led to accusations of the Canadian government deliberately concealing casualties to make the war

more palatable. Thus, it is necessary to trace the development of army procedures for the publication of casualty lists and numbers and how Allied policies shaped them.

Early in the war, the publication of Canadian Army casualties resulted in little controversy, since casualties were relatively few. The first two Canadian Army casualty lists appeared on 22 June 1940. They provided the name, nature of casualty and the next-of-kin, but not the name of the regiment, lest the enemy calculate unit strength. Instead, the name appeared with a territorial pseudonym such as "Central Ontario regiment" or named the service branch such as "Royal Canadian Artillery." Details about the circumstances did not appear in the list itself, although the introductory paragraph occasionally provided bare information, such as the cause of some accidental deaths. Still most casualties resulted from sickness or accidents, only sporadically from German bombs or torpedoes, and the numbers were relatively small: 484 total dead and missing to 27 November 1941.³⁰ The Japanese attack on Hong Kong changed this.

The government and military authorities responsible for despatching two Canadian regiments to Hong Kong never intended them to engage in combat. Posting regiments to colonial garrisons released British troops to fight while ensuring that Canadians did not, helping keep the genie of conscription tightly sealed in its bottle. Unlike similar earlier missions in Newfoundland and Jamaica, it ended with the total loss of these units. When the Japanese entered into hostilities against the United States and Britain on 7 December 1941, the Winnipeg Grenadiers and the Royal Rifles of Canada, numbering 1,974 troops, found themselves in a doomed position with no chance of victory or relief. By 23 December, after

a brutal struggle, the garrison surrendered.³¹ The army had to rely on London for information on the battle. Carl Vincent's discussion of the Hong Kong news shows that the government handled most of the publicity depending on scanty British reports based on Japanese sources and included deceptive British claims about a planned relief of the garrison by the HMS *Prince of Wales*.³² NDHQ Public Relations did release a press circular trying to paint as bright a picture as possible. Quoting Mackenzie King and Ralston, it emphasised the heroic defence and claimed that it relieved pressure on Bataan and Malaya, and that it was so successful the Japanese commander

needed to offer terms rather than demand "unconditional surrender." This last claim allegedly came from "a Japanese report" indicating the lack of intelligence available to Ottawa about its own troops in Hong Kong.³³

Given this dearth of accurate information, news about casualties was even more difficult to obtain. Communications from Hong Kong were sparse and there were few casualty reports. Ralston announced several Canadian casualties, two men slightly wounded on 10 December, and a few other accounts of individual casualties emerged.³⁴ The first Hong Kong casualty list appeared on 31 December with only eleven names. The army admitted,

"There is no likelihood of further lists for some time until the International Committee of the Red Cross can obtain details and send them here."³⁵

The casualty notification took a very long time and led to some frustration and accusations of political reasons for the delay. On 3 February, Ralston responded to a Baptist minister's accusations that the government was concealing the Hong Kong casualty list until after a February by-election. At least one letter to the government from a soldier's family member made similar charges. Ralston admitted his limited sources of information, based only on the estimate of a reporter who escaped from Hong Kong and

Top: Arrival of the Canadian brigade in Hong Kong, 16 November 1941; Bottom: A group of Canadian and British prisoners of war captured at Hong Kong are liberated at the end of the war. Canadian casualty notifications from Hong Kong were much delayed due to the complete loss of the Hong Kong force which resulted in almost total dependence on the Japanese for information about casualties. This led to a lengthy period of uncertainty about the individual fates of most Canadian soldiers after the battle.

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speculated that one third of Canadians were dead, injured or captured during the fighting and the rest became prisoners after the surrender. Ralston refused to make any definitive statement on casualties with such incomplete information but wanted to dispel rumours placing the Canadian dead at 50 percent.³⁶ Later that month the government released estimates of the total casualties based on Japanese reports, given through Argentina as protecting power, of 1,689 Canadians prisoners, inferring that the remaining 296 were dead or missing.³⁷

The actual notifications of the individual soldier's fate took over a year. On 2 September 1942, the Department of National Defence announced the names of 507 prisoners, based on the receipt of prisoners' letters carried by the *Gripsholm*, a diplomatic exchange ship, rather than by Japanese notification. The letters were "heavily censored" and many rejected outright by the Japanese, and the press release warned against drawing conclusions about the fate of those not mentioned.³⁸ The first prisoner list, based on Japanese notification, consisted of 296 names and was released on 16 October 1942; others followed over the next months.³⁹ By December, 1,593 individuals had been named, although not all by official Japanese reports.⁴⁰

Obtaining the complete lists required diplomatic manoeuvring. When the Japanese inquired about the status of Japanese interned in Canada, the government agreed to cooperate, provided the Japanese furnished all the names of Canadian military prisoners. On 17 August, the Department of External Affairs reported that the POW lists were "virtually complete."⁴¹ The entire process took an excruciating year and a half. The Hong Kong incident



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The grave of 18-year-old Private Morton Thompson of the Royal Rifles of Canada. Stanley Cemetery, Hong Kong, October 1945.

occurred in the Pacific theatre and the casualty reporting process, unlike that in Europe, remained almost totally in the hands of the Japanese, the Red Cross, and the protecting power. Thus, it was an extremely atypical case for the Canadian Army during the Second World War.

The Dieppe raid shaped Canadian Army casualty reporting more than any other event. As with much else connected with the raid, the publication of casualties became clouded in the haze of distrust. Someone suspecting a conspiracy to deceive the public about Dieppe could not help but notice the delays in casualty reporting in the newspapers. The slow release of the casualties was suspicious enough, but delaying publication of the names of the missing, which comprised the vast majority of the casualties, until 15 September was worse. Seemingly, the military hoped to delay negative public reaction or to preserve public morale by softening the blow. Some newspapers, however, were already suspicious. On 3 September, the *Ottawa Journal* warned that the

slow release of casualty figures could lead to the "possible public impression – probably a wrong and dangerous one – that the military authorities themselves were trying to cover up something."⁴² On 12 September, W.D. Herridge, former Prime Minister R.B. Bennett's brother-in-law, complained about the delay in a speech to the Ottawa Kiwanis Club.⁴³ The release of the names of the missing on 15 September did not stop the criticism. The *Regina Leader-Post* accused the military of a "soft pedal" strategy to try to minimise the impact of the casualties.⁴⁴ On 26 September, the Nova Scotia Newspaper Association charged the government with covering up the Dieppe losses

and demanded swifter release of information in the future.⁴⁵ Over time, criticism of the delays faded and later works, apart from Gillis Purcell's 1946 thesis on Press Censorship, did not raise the issue. Purcell, citing Ross Munro, accused the military of abusing censorship to delay the casualty numbers to cushion the blow. In 1942, however, Purcell had written to McNaughton supporting the policy of withholding information from the press, even though he claimed already knew the "inside" story of Dieppe directly from Ross Munro.⁴⁶

The delay in publishing the list of the missing until 15 September seems suspicious. Until 25 August, the newspapers published the names of the missing along with the other casualties, but two days later announced a delay in reporting them to allow those who had avoided the Germans to escape. The notice observed, "Any word getting through to the enemy that they are missing is of course a signal for a search."⁴⁷ On 4 September, the newspapers printed the military claim that the procedure

was "in accordance with agreed censorship practise of the United Nations."⁴⁸ It seems no coincidence that the Army Council offered this justification on the same day as the *Ottawa Journal's* critical editorial about the delay.⁴⁹

These explanations, especially about escape, seem very far-fetched. Escape from Dieppe by anyone pinned down on the beaches and unable to get through impenetrable defences was impossible. A few Canadians escaped, but during transportation away from Dieppe after their capture. Secondly, the Germans were unlikely to assume that the missing had escaped because of the nature of modern warfare and amphibious operations. Artillery could blow men to pieces or their bodies float out to sea. The Germans left the dead in place below the high water line, hoping the tide might wash them higher up the beach; many bodies were likely carried out to sea.⁵⁰ The idea that the Germans would go through the painstaking process of comparing the names of the missing to prisoner rolls, and use valuable manpower to search for them when they were probably dead, seems farcical. In fact, almost a year after the raid, 246 Canadians remained missing.⁵¹

The pressure for delay originated in the British Ministry of Information (MoI). On 22 August, CMHQ cabled NDHQ with a rather confused message: "as a result of a despatch from Adam Marshall, Montreal, to *Evening Standard* here, MoI request that names of officers and numbers

of casualties be not ...released to press for time being."⁵² NDHQ requested specific information about the MoI's concerns, explaining that they had already sent out casualty lists, although they had not given the total casualties.⁵³ On 24 August CMHQ, after a long discussion with the MoI, responded to NDHQ, explaining that the concern of the MoI was naming missing personnel. In earlier Commando raids, some missing soldiers had been able to escape; therefore NDHQ should withhold publication of the missing for three weeks to a month, although next-of kin could still be informed.

There was also an appeal to alliance unity, since British and Americans were also missing, any publication of the names of the missing would jeopardize "the desired security for all concerned."⁵⁴ How the publication of Canadian names would compromise the security of missing British and Americans went unexplained. NDHQ consented to the MoI policy on 24 August.⁵⁵ In agreement with the British and Americans, the release date of the names for publication was set for 15 September.⁵⁶

Was the MoI really concerned about the escape of missing personnel? There is some reason to suspect that



German public relations photographs of Canadian soldiers captured at Dieppe. In Canada the delayed release of casualty information was linked to the need to deny useful information to the Germans that might help them recapture escaped prisoners. However, the delayed release was pushed by the British who did not want to release specific casualty information on any one operation.

this concern was secondary to the goal of forcing the Canadians into adhering to the British policy of not releasing the total casualties of any action. On 8 September, during his defence of Dieppe in Parliament, Churchill reminded the House "it is not the practise to give exact figures of casualties in men or materiel suffered in individual operations."⁵⁷ This policy was to keep the enemy from being able to deduce the effectiveness of their tactics and the strength of British units. The reporting of all casualties was delayed for up to a month then divided up for publication so it was not apparent in which engagement they were incurred.⁵⁸ This would work for the British forces in combat on several fronts but not for the Canadians, whose only action was the raid. To conceal the extent of the Dieppe disaster from the British people, the MoI had to convince Canada to withhold the publication of missing personnel. Still this only delayed the revelation and Churchill faced potentially embarrassing questions about discrepancies in his earlier claims about Dieppe following Canada's publication of the total casualty figures.⁵⁹ This move by British authorities was the first in a long effort to get Canada to comply with their casualty reporting policies.

Was the Canadian military convinced of the necessity to protect missing escapees, or did they simply comply to keep the casualty total from Canadians longer? Four factors indicate that the army took the MoI's claims at face value. First, the "Roll of Honour," as the casualty lists were titled, originally included both the missing and a running total of the casualties in the operation. This was not the action of an organization determined to conceal the losses. After three days of discussing the MoI request, the Army agreed to halt publication. If the Canadian army had been looking for an "easy out" on

the casualties, it could have complied much more quickly.

Furthermore, the army actually believed that Canadians had escaped from the beaches, no matter how unlikely this might seem in hindsight. Lieutenant-Colonel Menard, during the "Heroes of Dieppe" tour, mentioned that according to information received in Britain, large numbers of Fusiliers Mont-Royal had escaped into France from Dieppe.⁶⁰ How Menard came by the "information" is unclear, although he may have been referring to four soldiers who later escaped from a German train, two of whom had made it to Gibraltar by 7 October.⁶¹ The army quickly killed the story by instructing cable censors to hold all messages dealing with the remarks.⁶² NDHQ ordered both CMHQ and commanders of all Canadian Home Forces Commands to prevent Dieppe personnel from making statements that could compromise the escape of Canadians at large.⁶³ The speedy and vehement warning to all commands makes clear that they believed that many of the missing were still on the loose.

Similarly, the British Air Ministry had requested the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) withhold the names of their missing for five weeks to allow downed aircrew the chance to escape. The RCAF adopted this policy 29 July 1942.⁶⁴ The newspapers were informed, "if only one of our men elude the enemy it will be worth the effort."⁶⁵ McNaughton probably knew of the RCAF decision, if not through official channels, because his own son, Squadron Leader Ian McNaughton, went missing in June 1942.⁶⁶

The final indication that the Canadian Army accepted the MoI's claims was its adoption of the practice of withholding the list of the missing, and later all casualties, for up to four weeks as standard policy.⁶⁷

In the year following the Dieppe raid, NDHQ and the British War Office debated the casualty issue through CMHQ. The British insisted that Canadians wait a month before publishing any casualties because it would be potentially embarrassing if Canada published its losses earlier in joint operations and could assist enemy intelligence to assess the effectiveness of tactics and remaining unit strength.⁶⁸ NDHQ felt the British system would not work in Canada, where there would be "violent protest from press and public opinion" regarding delays in publication and "require [a] complicated procedure open to criticism."⁶⁹ The War Office countered, "Other Dominions have agreed to the policy of delayed releases."⁷⁰ Yet when NDHQ checked through the Canadian high commissioners with New Zealand and Australia, it discovered that the War Office misled them; in most circumstances, both dominions published casualties immediately after notification of next-of-kin. This deception obviously made NDHQ less trustful of the War Office. Because of the fear of criticism about censorship "on grounds other than security," NDHQ demanded "a definite statement" from the War Office and Senior Canadian Combatant in Britain, A.G.L. McNaughton, stating that delays in publishing casualty lists were imperative for security reasons.⁷¹ McNaughton and the War Office agreed. Furthermore, the War Office argued that because Australians and New Zealanders served on several fronts, the enemy gained no valuable information. Canada's situation, with 1st Canadian Division about to embark on the Sicily operation, differed. Should Canada become involved on several fronts, the 30-day delay in casualty publication might change. After months of debate, NDHQ reluctantly decided to follow British procedure, but reserved the



The wounded await evacuation to a Casualty Clearing Station of the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps in the Normandy beachhead, France, 6 June 1944. Canadians became impatient to know the D-Day casualty numbers, especially after the Americans announced theirs.

right to alter this policy if conditions changed, after consulting the War Office.⁷² Nonetheless, the competing motivations behind the NDHQ and War Office – worry over public criticism versus security concerns – guaranteed continued conflict.

Despite this agreement, the disputes continued during the Sicilian campaign. In early August, Ralston felt pressured to announce casualty numbers, especially after the US Secretary of War Stimson released the total American casualties in Sicily up to 22 July. Canadian Adjutant General H.F.G. Letson complained from Ottawa, “These unilateral agreements with Troopers [the War Office] which are not tied with the U.S., place Canada in the position of always being last with the news.” Adding to Ralston’s difficulties, the American papers published casualty records immediately following next-of-kin notification.⁷³ A Wartime Information Board (WIB) memorandum reported

the observations of a United Church clergyman in St. Lambert, Quebec that his parishioners, suspicious at the lack of information, “read between the lines” to speculate on casualty numbers and complained that Americans received more news. Letson requested that CMHQ arrange with the War Office for a similar release, and would go ahead the next day, 10 August, unless there were objections.⁷⁴ Predictably, the War Office objected because, although the Canadian participation in Sicilian combat was completed, the information might be of value to the enemy for future operations. Undaunted, Ottawa kept up the pressure, and the War Office passed on the request to AFHQ, who acceded to Canada’s demands, although this process delayed the announcement until 19 August.⁷⁵ This gave rise to rumours in Canada, like that one, repeated by an Ottawa “charwoman,” “15,000 Canadians had already

been killed.”⁷⁶ Despite this gossip and the sometimes acrimonious relationship with the War Office, the Canadians stuck to their agreement to withhold casualties for 30 days. The first casualty lists appeared in the newspapers on 13 August, a month after the landings, and the last on 16 September, over 30 days after the final Canadian actions.⁷⁷ Thus, despite some unhappiness with British policy, the Canadian Army adhered to the agreement and continued to do so during the Italian campaign. Surprisingly, when the Canadian Army did become active on two fronts in June 1944, the 30-day delay continued, even though there were grounds to challenge it.⁷⁸

The 1944 Normandy campaign resulted in further confusion about the publication of casualty numbers. Following the 6 June Normandy landings, apprehensive Canadians with memories of Dieppe awaited news of casualty numbers, but for

several weeks none came. Predictably, the opposition and anti-government newspapers pushed Ralston for the figures. On 16 June, Conservative MP R.B. Hanson demanded the statistics; Ralston replied that the names would follow after 30 days as usual, but "security concerns" prevented giving totals, although he planned to communicate with Allied authorities and release them as soon as safely able.⁷⁹ On 17 June, General Omar Bradley, commander of the American army in Normandy, announced the total American casualties to that date. This immediately led to cries that the Canadian government should do likewise. A *Globe and Mail* editorial said that nothing now prevented the release except the "security" of the government. The editorial reminded the public of the secrecy and delay surrounding the Dieppe casualties, to allow the missing to escape, a situation that no longer existed.⁸⁰ Nor did the criticism come only from the Conservative press. A 22 July despatch from J.A.M. Cook, war correspondent of the Liberal Winnipeg *Free Press*, demonstrated equal bitterness. He credited the Americans for a pattern of greater openness about casualties, while the Canadians appeared even more reluctant than the British did, hiding behind secrecy to conceal their losses. He cited the case of Ortona, the Christmas 1943 battle, of which the public never received precise casualty totals.⁸¹ Cook did not realise that in the Mediterranean, Canada was bound by agreement with the War Office in which the Americans were uninvolved. Additionally, the army never revealed the specific casualties for any battle. Dieppe was an exception because it was obvious in which battle the casualties occurred; in all other campaigns, casualty reports never specified the individual engagements. Cook's article shows that the critiques emanated not only from political motivations, but

also from frustration with the lack of information allowed by military regulations.

In response to these criticisms, Ralston asked CMHQ if he could provide an answer and release Canadian casualty figures. He learned that Bradley's announcement of the American casualties in Normandy was unauthorized. The American First Army censor incorrectly believed Bradley had the right to release the information because there were no specific orders from SHAEF or 21 Army Group prohibiting it. Bradley's act did not automatically allow similar reporting of the casualties of the Second British Army in which the Canadians in Normandy then served.⁸² Ralston believed an acknowledgement of the mistake necessary, but Brigadier Penhale of CMHQ advised him, "since no public announcement of the mistake has been made...it would be wrong for him to refer to it as such in the house."⁸³ Although Ralston agreed to consider Penhale's advice, political necessity led him to inform the House that same day. Hanson, again on the attack, demanded to know why "there is to be one rule for the American people and another for the Canadian people." Ralston implied that Bradley violated an agreement on casualty numbers by making an unauthorized announcement, although he did not say so directly. The newspapers however, fully understood and pointed the fingers at Bradley. Ralston would wait until an authorized casualty release to preserve security.⁸⁴

CMHQ and SHAEF reached an understanding that future casualty numbers would be coordinated with the Canadian government for simultaneous announcement.⁸⁵ These arrangements had mixed results. On 28 June, the release of the first total went smoothly enough; CMHQ received advance warning and coordinated the announcement in

Canada. CMHQ completely missed a later announcement on 5 August because the junior staff handling SHAEF's message believed it routine and did not treat it with the required urgency. The government again faced embarrassment because the Americans beat them to a casualty announcement. It is just as well that CMHQ then arranged with SHAEF for permission to publish total casualty figures after 30 days had passed, although the theatre they occurred in would remain secret. This became the method of casualty announcements for the remainder of the war.⁸⁶

* * * * *

Canada, as a junior partner in the alliance, experienced many frustrations about casualty publication. The British resorted to manipulation to delay bad news after Dieppe and then later lied about the concurrence of other dominions to their policy. Canada's agreement to submit to Allied policies frequently ended with embarrassment for the government, creating suspicions that Ralston and the army concealed casualty numbers to cover up reverses. In all these situations, the sleeping dragon of conscription for overseas service lay underneath much of the tension. By concealing casualty figures, the government may have been hiding a need for drafted reinforcements from Canada. Yet there is no evidence that the government or army ever manipulated casualty reports for political reasons. Rather, in these debates, the Canadian Army eventually chose cooperation with the Allies, over political expediency, despite the political fallout. This guaranteed that the Canadian Army observed the chain of command, as its formations served under British and Allied command. It is unusual in Canadian military history for domestic political concerns to take second place to military necessity,

but casualty reporting during the Second World War is one such case. In the end, poor relations with the USA and UK would have caused the Canadian government greater problems than occasionally appearing overly secretive.

The casualty reporting of the Canadian Army during the Second World War to the next-of-kin and the press was not flawless. Occasional mistakes resulted from a desire to inform the next-of-kin as soon as possible. Other instances, such as clerical errors and the press releasing names too quickly, were regrettable but given the numbers of casualties during the war probably inevitable. Delays resulted from poor communications and publication agreements with allies. Nevertheless, it is clear that the sinister motivations behind errors and delays frequently alluded to by opposition politicians and press were fantasy. Still, these incidents doubtless contributed to many Canadians' distrust of war news. The army attempted to inform next-of-kin and the press as quickly and accurately as possible within the limitations of security, communications, and agreements with allies. Regrettably, as the many incidents recounted here demonstrate, in politics the appearance of guilt can be as damaging as its reality.

Notes

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