Frustrated Belligerence The Unhappy History of the 5th Canadian Division in the First World War

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During the First World War, the 5th Canadian Division fought no battles, won no honours, and earned no glory. Histories of the war accord it no more than the briefest of mentions, and even then its status is often misrepresented. It is a case study on the salient influence of political expediency and the limits on the Canadian conduct of the war. Coveted by the British, but regarded with ambivalence by its Canadian political and military superiors, the division’s course and fate were powerfully influenced by the three intertwined factors of politics, manpower availability, and British demands for another fighting division at the front. Political expediency led to its formation, the appointment of its commander, its continued survival in the face of Canadian manpower shortages, and finally to its eventual disbandment. Recruitment problems crucially impacted the division, as the Canadian political authorities tried to strike a balance between their desire to satisfy the British demands for a fifth Canadian division on the Western Front and the ability to maintain the four existing divisions on active service. The British high command was keen to add another superb Canadian division at the front, and it was relentless in pressuring Canadian authorities for it. The aim of this article is to describe and analyze the history of the 5th Division through the lens of three factors listed above. The paper examines the circumstances of the division’s formation, the selection of its commander, the rationale for its continued existence, struggles with the British regarding its status, and the division’s fate.

Dawn

In the summer of 1916, Sir Sam Hughes, the minister of militia and defence, believed Canada could raise more divisions than the four it had already fielded. Hughes was the dominant figure in the 5th Division’s formation and development. The mercurial Hughes, aged 63, was a self-made man from Lindsay, Ontario, whom Sir Robert Borden, the Canadian prime minister, appointed to the Militia and Defence portfolio in 1911. Hughes was pugnacious, partisan, grandiose, frenetic, and unfettered by self-doubt. He was supremely confident in his judgment of people and situations. This attitude contributed to Hughes’ desire for personal control over “his boys.” He established a confused and overlapping set of authorities

Abstract: The 5th Division’s inception, career, and eventual fate in the First World War were powerfully conditioned by Canadian political imperatives, manpower availability, and tension between the Canadian authorities’ desire to satisfy British demands for another division and recognition of manpower shortages. Activated in part to ensure a divisional command for the son of Sam Hughes, it was disbanded once the threat of Hughes and other political necessities had receded. Its well-trained personnel were a valuable addition to the Canadian Corps, when replacements were at a premium. The unhappy career of the division illustrates how political expediency powerfully influenced decision-making, but also the limits of senior Canadian politicians and officers willingness to satisfy domestic and imperial political demands.
that reflected his desire to centralize all decision-making under his aegis. Hughes was also a dangerous man to cross – although a staunch friend – he was an inveterate enemy to those he thought wronged him or his cause.

Discovering Australia had five divisions in France and two in Egypt, Hughes believed Canada, with its larger population, “can put at least eight if not ten Divisions into the field.” Australia’s male population in 1911 was 2.3 million versus Canada’s 3.8 million, suggesting that Hughes’ notion was not entirely far-fetched. He immediately followed by ensuring a cadre remained in England that could help form a fifth and sixth division when the 4th Canadian Division left England for France in August 1916. The 4th Division’s artillery remained for further training and could be co-opted for the 5th Division – the 4th Division in France was supported by the British Lahore Division’s artillery.

In September 1916, Hughes promised the chief of the imperial general staff (CIGS), General Sir William Robertson, that a fifth division would be ready in November and a sixth early in the New Year. This promise indicated Hughes was confident he would remain in charge of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) and could fulfill his pledge. It also illustrated the degree to which Hughes was out of touch with the declining volunteer rate in Canada, a subject to be discussed later, and the consequent impact on providing replacements for the Canadian Corps. Hughes was adamant that the battalions intended to form the 5th Division must not be used to supply drafts to the divisions at the front. In October, he responded to the request from the Canadian authorities in England to break up battalions to provide replacements for the heavy losses suffered by Canadian divisions on the Somme with, “Stand firm. Let our divisions rest. We will get all six divisions in shape. Surely Byng cannot repeat June 3rd every month [referring to the costly Battle of Mount Sorrel].” This order came at a time when the corps had already suffered 18,000 casualties on the Somme, with an estimated 7,000 more by the end of the month and only 13,000 replacements available.

An unattributed document, but which appears from internal evidence to date from October or November 1916, suggested the means by which Hughes planned to maintain six divisions in the field. This document called for a force of two corps of three divisions each, with one division per corps always out of the line to absorb replacements and conduct training. This proposal meant no more than four divisions would be in the firing line at a time, so no additional troops would be exposed to enemy fire, and, therefore, would not increase the replacement burden. This plan, however, required the British to agree to the restricted usage of the additional divisions – a restriction they neither would nor could accept, as military exigencies might demand that all the divisions be committed to the line. Borden would later use a variant of this approach to demonstrate to the British that he was willing to send the 5th Division to the front, but with unacceptable conditions.

While not officially authorized, the planning for the formation of the 5th Division proceeded during the fall of 1916 as the Canadian authorities in England struggled to gather the specialists and equipment needed for a full division, while trying to satisfy the replacement demands of the Canadian Corps. An active service division required a core of 12 infantry battalions, plus pioneer, medical, engineer, supply, signals, artillery, and headquarters units, amounting to about 18,000 men. These units needed officers, NCOs, men, equipment, and training supplies if the division was to embark for the continent, but all were in short supply.

**Detour**

Momentous changes in the political and military structure of the overseas forces interrupted the formation of the 5th Division. By late 1916, the administrative and training system in England was clearly not functioning effectively. The most obvious manifestation of this failure was the system’s inability to replace the losses incurred on the Somme. Despite the availability of 126,420 men in England in November...
1916, there were only 3,387 trained men to meet the need for 16,188 replacements, because men were tied up in battalions intended for the 5th and 6th Divisions, inefficient manpower utilization, and inadequate procedures for returning wounded men to active service. Senior officers in the Canadian Corps, the British, and even Borden complained about the disorganization and misrule.

Borden had a terrible dilemma. It was apparent Hughes could not rectify the serious problems with the overseas administration. Hughes, however, had a powerful constituency in Canada, believing his claims of accomplishments. Borden, non-confrontational by nature, feared the damage the truculent Hughes could do if ousted. Rather than asking for Hughes’ resignation, Borden sought to marginalize him by establishing a separate ministry for overseas forces to limit Hughes’ control over the CEF, whilst letting him retain his cabinet role as the minister of militia for forces in Canada. Hughes refused to accept Borden’s ploy, and eventually his outrageous behaviour forced Borden to demand his resignation. After much anguish, intrigue, and pleas, Hughes finally resigned in November 1916.

This afforded Borden the opportunity to make changes. Sir George Perley, an astute politician and an anglophile, would head a new ministry of Overseas Military Forces of Canada (OMFC), and retain his position as acting high commissioner in London. The new ministry would take over from the militia department the large, and hitherto chaotic Canadian organization of training camps, barracks, supply depots and other facilities in England. The intention was that the organization in England should more effectively carry out its prime responsibility for dispatching trained reinforcements to the corps. In Canada, Borden appointed Sir Edward Kemp as minister of militia in place of Hughes. Kemp had served as a minister without portfolio at the start of the war. He acted as Borden’s trouble-shooter investigating operations of various departments and then served as the first chairman of the War Purchasing Committee in 1915. Again, the intention was that the forces in Canada should better support the overseas effort by more efficiently organizing, training and dispatching reinforcements to England. In late 1917, Kemp would replace Perley as the minister of the OMFC, while Major-General Sir Sydney Mewburn took over the militia portfolio.

What is puzzling is that, despite his history of petulance and penchant for partisan attacks on political enemies, Hughes offered only a muted reaction to the devastating loss of his ministry. Certainly, there were instructions to Conservatives not to attack Hughes unless he attacked the government. Hughes’ actions, so contrary to his modus operandi, strongly suggest there was an undocumented quid pro quo. Most likely it involved Garnet Hughes – Sam Hughes’ son – receiving command of a division, based on Borden’s singular, repeated, and fervent lobbying on behalf of the younger Hughes to be discussed below. Borden’s campaign was a recurring strand of politics that influenced the course of the 5th Division; Garnet Hughes was indeed eventually appointed to command the division.

Garnet Burke Hughes, was a 33-year-old Canadian Militia officer and civil engineer. He graduated from Canada’s Royal Military College – first in his class in 1901 – passed the Militia Staff Course, had long service in the Militia, and was the junior major in Arthur Currie’s 50th Regiment in Victoria before the war. Hughes, early in the war, was the brigade-major of Richard Turner’s 3rd Brigade in the 1st Canadian Division, with the rank of lieutenant-colonel, a full rank higher than normal for such an appointment. He performed poorly in the Battle of Second Ypres and the British commander of the 1st Division, Lieutenant-General
Sir Edwin Alderson, transferred him to the 2nd Division. Through his father’s influence, Hughes received command of the 1st Brigade in November 1915 which he led at Mount Sorrel and on the Somme, where he neither distinguished nor disgraced himself. The strains of command, however, wore him down.

The first opportunity for Borden to intervene to secure Garnet a division came when command of the 2nd Division became available. With the formation of the new overseas ministry, Perley appointed Major-General Richard Turner VC, commander of 2nd Division, to head Canadian forces in England. Borden was anxious that Garnet replace Turner, but the commander of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng, preferred Major-General Henry Burstall, a Canadian Permanent Force officer. Borden was unhappy with the selection and argued “I have no doubt that the man selected by Byng is much inferior to other mentioned [Garnet].” Perley, given the final authority on promotions by Borden, respected Byng and was determined to minimize the appearance of political influence. Perley accepted Byng’s recommendation and thus thwarted the prime minister.

Doubts About a Fifth Division

The new ministers, Perley and Kemp, had serious doubts as to the viability of a fifth division. Perley informed Borden in early November 1916 that, despite British pressure, it was unlikely there were sufficient troops to maintain a fifth division. In December, Perley asked Kemp for an estimate of manpower availability for the next six months to determine the formation’s fate. Perley admitted to being torn between his imperial duty in satisfying the CIGS and keeping the existing forces at full strength. Kemp’s response was Canada could send 15,000 men every three months for the next nine months, but that this would be insufficient to maintain the existing forces. In addition, Kemp was adamant that the 5th Division should not be sent to the front, and, believing Perley was considering acceding to the British demands, pointedly asked Borden if “Canadian authorities in England intend to act independent of our advice with regard to this matter.” Perley had to write Kemp a soothing letter making it clear that while the formation of the division was to proceed, it was not deploying to France.

Decision

Unexpectedly, in late December, Perley gave Turner permission to proceed with the division’s tentative activation. Turner hurriedly inspected the infantry battalions at Witley to select which would join the division. Turner must not have been satisfied, as he ordered one battalion (156th Battalion) that had already been broken up to...
be reformed, the 104th PEI and 105th New Brunswick Battalions to be amalgamated, and another transferred to the division from Bramshott camp (160th Battalion).36 Turner had to strike a balance between the military effectiveness of the battalions available, the regional origin of the units, and the ability to maintain their strength. As a result, the division initially consisted of six battalions from Ontario, two from Quebec, and one each from Alberta, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia. Later shortages of manpower necessitated breaking up the two Western Canadian and one Quebec battalions and their replacement by three Ontario battalions.37

Given the considerable doubts expressed by both the ministers of militia and OMFC, why then did Perley authorize the formation of the division? It was apparent that it was unlikely ever to deploy to France, and the costs of equipping and maintaining the division were considerable. The Quartermaster-General's department estimated the additional equipment and yearly operating costs for the 5th Division’s transportation at £245,000 or over a million dollars over the costs for a standard training camp.38 The most likely reason for the division’s formation was political expediency in providing a divisional command for Garnet Hughes. Borden was once again exceedingly anxious about who was to command the division, cabling Perley in late January, “Please consult me before final decision. This is very important.”39 Typically, Borden only intervened in politically sensitive matters, and he had explicitly granted Perley complete authority over promotions, so this interference suggests he had a political agenda, especially as the incumbent commander had seniority over Hughes, as discussed below.40

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5th Division Simplified Organization Chart

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Shortly after Perley’s decision to activate the division in early January, Turner asked Hughes, still commanding the 1st Brigade, if he would accept command with the stipulation that the division might not proceed overseas, at least until the replacement situation improved. Hughes replied on 20 January, accepting the appointment and seeking Turner’s support, and hoping his acceptance would not preclude him from the opportunity to command a division at the front. The Canadian Representative to the British General Headquarters in France, Lieutenant-Colonel Manley Sims, formally offered the division to Hughes, on 3 February. Hughes accepted with the information from Sims that Canadian authorities did not intend to send the division to France. Sims informed Turner that Hughes was not in good health and should be recalled immediately – photographs of Hughes, as commander of 1st Brigade, show a haggard figure. Byng, in his congratulatory note to Hughes on his appointment, commented “When you left I thought you anything but quite fit and that you really wanted a proper rest.” The 5th Division’s war diary recorded Hughes’ appointment on 10 February, and he took over the division three days later. On learning of Hughes’ appointment from Perley, Borden cabled, “Quite approve of proposed appointment.”

Hughes was junior to the incumbent divisional commander, Brigadier-General R.G.E. Leckie, and this provides further evidence that Hughes’ appointment was politically motivated. Leckie’s promotion to command of a brigade at the front predated Garnet’s, and Leckie had been the chief of the general staff on the elder Hughes’ Acting Sub-Militia Council, until relieved by Turner in December 1916. Leckie would have been an
understandable appointment given his experience, seniority, and the need to find him a substantive post in England commensurate with his rank. His relief was “a complete surprise” to Leckie, and he was incensed that a third officer junior to him had received a division – the other two being Major-General David Watson (4th Division), and Major-General H. Burstall (2nd Division). Leckie demanded another command at the front or at least a promotion to major-general to antedate Garnet’s promotion in recognition of his being superseded. Perley had no position to offer Leckie in England; the Canadian Corps did not want him, so Perley had to inveigle Kemp in Canada to find Leckie a suitable position and promotion.47

Decline in Recruiting

The second factor influencing the fate of the 5th Division was the Borden government’s mishandling of the manpower situation leading to shortfalls in replacements. Lacking an appreciation of manpower needs and resources, the government did not recognize the decline in volunteers in 1916, in part because the large number of battalions moving overseas masked the situation.48 Many of these battalions, however, had not been able to recruit to full strength; there were severe difficulties finding volunteers for service, especially in Quebec and the Maritimes. According to a June 1916 report from the Special Committee on Recruiting, while Ontario had reached 75 percent of its quota of recruits, the Western provinces 114 percent, the Maritimes were only at 48 percent and Quebec at 25 percent, and the Quebec total was predominantly English-speaking. The same report indicated only three percent of French-speaking men enlisted while the equivalent totals for Canadian-born anglophones were 13 percent and UK born were 60 percent.49 The British born was high as a result of the recent influx of immigrants from the UK just prior to the war.

Major-General Willoughby Gwatkin, chief of the general staff in Ottawa, sent Borden a memo in April 1917 setting out in detail the serious shortfall in manpower, and pleaded that 50,000 men be compelled to serve. Gwatkin estimated that the CEF needed 20,000 to 30,000 men over the summer, but that there were only 18,496 men in the CEF in Canada, and most of these were unsuitable or unavailable. Only 4,000 men were joining per month, and some of these would be unfit for active service.50 The result of this was a collapse in the number of men arriving in England from Canada. The chart below illustrates how the numbers sent overseas declined from a peak of 15,197 in April 1917 to a low of 261 in July. The March and April peaks were the result of Canadian authorities rushing drafts to England, as the Admiralty could not guarantee protection against U-Boats in the long daylight hours of May, June and July.51 The chart illustrates the challenge the OMFC faced in finding sufficient replacements, as it provided almost 20,000 more men than it received from Canada. Combing-out units in England and returning wounded men made up the difference.

Demands by the British

The final factor that shaped the story of the 5th Division was demands by the British for its early dispatch to the front. In early November 1916, shortly after Perley took over as minister of the OMFC, he met Robertson, who made a strong plea to deploy the 5th Division to France, but Perley resisted. He explained the Canadian manpower situation to Robertson and argued that it was unlikely that five divisions could be sufficiently reinforced. He obtained Robertson’s grudging agreement that it was wiser to maintain four full-strength divisions in France than five understrength.53 Nevertheless, the deputy CIGS wrote Perley on 17 November 1916 pressing

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for more details on progress with appointing command and staff personnel for the division and reiterating Robertson’s interest in the division. Perley pushed back in his reply and asked for time to build up his organization before he could give a definitive answer. The British, recognizing Perley’s reluctance to make a commitment, responded with “Sir William Robertson hopes you will agree to forming a division at Witley as soon as possible, for training purposes, without prejudice to the question of its subsequently being sent overseas.” This would become a standard British negotiating tactic, in the face of Canadian intransigence, to move the Canadians closer to the position sought by the British.

This Canadian reluctance may have contributed to Robertson’s subsequent advice to the new British Prime Minister David Lloyd George to prod the Dominions to increase recruitment. This resulted in an appeal from Lloyd George to the Dominions requesting more men in December 1916. The British believed Canada could contribute more, as, at the beginning of 1917, the British had already imposed conscription and had 17.2 percent of its men in uniform while only 9.6 percent of Canadian men served.

The British doggedly persisted and Robertson wrote to Perley again on 1 January 1917 urging dispatch of the division to France in February. This was an impossibly short lead-time, even if the Canadian authorities been in favour of sending the division. Perley stalled, asked for yet more time to gather data on the reinforcement situation and to speak with Turner, a task complicated by the fact that Turner was implementing significant reforms in the Canadian administration in England. Undeterred, Robertson sent a handwritten note in reply four days later reiterating the necessity of sending the division to the front. To reach a decision, Robertson, the deputy CIGS, and the secretary of state for war Lord Derby met with Perley and Turner. Not surprisingly given the British enthusiasm for the division and Canadian ambivalence, the two sides left with a different understanding of the meeting’s decisions. Both parties agreed that there were not enough drafts in the pipeline to maintain a fifth division in the field. Despite this, the British believed the 5th Division was to be manned as soon as possible with “A” category men - soldiers fit to serve on active duty – and the 4th Division’s artillery was to remain with the 5th Division until replacement units arrived from Canada. Perley wanted it understood that the 5th Division would be a source of replacements if necessary, potentially delaying its readiness, and agreement that Canada could not raise another divisional artillery formation. The British wanted the 5th Division to be used as replacement source only if there were no trained replacements available. In addition, as the 5th Division was a home defence unit, it required dedicated artillery. Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig’s decision as the commander in chief of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to reorganize divisional artillery solved the artillery problem, by reducing the number of field artillery brigades per division. His proposals freed up sufficient guns to form a new 4th Division artillery in France and permanently assign the 4th Division artillery in England to the 5th Division.

Keen for a fifth Canadian division, Haig drove Robertson’s demands. In early January, he wanted to know from Robertson when it would be ready to deploy, as he was counting on it in his plans for 1917, including the Arras offensive and an expected attack in Flanders. Robertson had to inform Haig there was “no definite decision” on deploying the division. Haig, seemingly oblivious of the doubtful status of the division, continued all through 1917 to assume it would reach him. As late as mid-January 1918, he still counted the 5th Division in his total of divisions available to him to commit to the line in France.

In February 1917, unable to get commitment from Canadian authorities in England, the British High Command sent a formal plea through the Colonial Office to the governor-general of Canada requesting more troops and specifically the 5th Division. Perley advised the secretary of state for the
colonies, Walter Long, not to mention the 5th Division in the cable, and warned there would be consequences if the request became public.68 Perley was most likely concerned that such overt British pressure would have negative political consequences and affect recruiting. The British approach failed.

Also in February, the War Office, based on instructions from the British War Cabinet, asked for the “despatch of the 5th Canadian Division to France as soon as its training is sufficiently advanced.”69 Three aspects of this request are interesting: the War Office was invoking the considerable prestige and power of the British cabinet in its request to apply more pressure on the anglophile Perley; the note included a detailed listing of Canadian manpower resources available in England and base depots in France to counter Canadian claims of insufficient replacements; and, the division was to move, not when its training was complete, but only when “sufficiently advanced,” in recognition that the Canadian replacement numbers were unlikely to be adequate. The British objective was to get the division to France, so, if the replacement situation did further deteriorate, it would be a far more difficult decision to disband it in France than if it were in England. It would, also, be an additional incentive for Canadian authorities to ramp up their recruiting effort or introduce compulsory service. The British insistence on getting the division to France while it was still forming perplexed Turner.70 In penciled comments on the letter, Turner noted that the replacements listed as available would be insufficient to cover expected losses from the spring offensive in which the Canadian Corps was to participate, so the British analysis was flawed.

The War Office asked for a definitive answer to their earlier requests at the end of February. Perley’s deputy minister, Walter Gow, replied on 2 March politely but firmly telling the British they could not meet their demands. Gow referred to the conference in January and said that nothing significant had changed the conference’s decisions. Gow reiterated the standard Canadian position that upcoming operations would place a severe strain on the replacement system, thus making it impossible to support five divisions, and it was thus not advisable to send the division to France.71 The Canadians adopted a consistent position, asserting it was better to maintain four full-strength divisions than five weak ones and that Canadian resources were inadequate. Subsequent events were to vindicate this strategy as the casualties at Vimy Ridge and follow-on operations stressed the Canadian replacement system almost to the breaking point.

During Borden’s visit to England for the Imperial War Conference early in 1917, he and Perley met with Long who, again, made a plea for the 5th Division’s commitment. Borden was willing to consider sending the division if the British could guarantee that only four divisions would be in the line at a time, harking back to the earlier proposal. Long could not possibly guarantee this, as Borden likely knew.72 There was one final attempt at a meeting of the Imperial War Cabinet on 30 March, where Borden evaded the issue when Robertson queried him about the division’s availability.73 The British were hoping to confront Borden and force a commitment in front of his peers, but Borden was too shrewd a politician to allow this to happen. In mid-March, as a possible
compromise, Gow notified the War Office that the 5th Division was ready to move within England and Scotland as necessary. This would place the division in a more useful mobile role in home defence. Gow was also careful to ensure the War Office was aware the division was incomplete. This would place the division in a more useful mobile role in home defence. Gow was also careful to ensure the War Office was aware the division was incomplete.74 Nine days later, the British tested the division with a two-day State of Emergency, based on a purported German invasion, which the division passed.75

It was not until the end of May that the British again returned to the issue of the division – more urgent now given the success of the Canadian Corps in the Arras offensive and Borden having announced a proposed conscription act. Robertson pointed out the satisfactory state of reinforcements in the Canadian Corps and that the division was needed at the front.76 Supporting Robertson’s position was the fact, noted in Haig’s diary in early July, that the Canadians were the only force in the BEF with a surplus of replacements. All the other contingents were under-strength.77

Robertson, not satisfied with just a direct appeal to Perley, also cabled the Canadian governor-general on the necessity of getting the division to the front.78 Gow was finally able to close down the British requests with a carefully reasoned letter that explained the Canadians rather than having a surplus of replacements would probably have to use the 5th Division to keep the Canadian Corps at full strength through 1917 with present levels of attrition. He pointed out that Canadian authorities had already raided the 5th Division to supply replacements for the front.79

In a curious coda to these demands for the 5th Division, in June 1918, the new CIGS, General Sir Henry Wilson, made a desperate request. The German spring offensives had reduced a number of British divisions to cadre strength, and the British were anxious to field more formations. Wilson asked the Canadians to replace one battalion in each of their brigades with an American battalion, thus freeing up forces to form a fifth division. Alternatively he suggested they form a division out of Canadian Forestry and Railway troops. Turner and Kemp refused to change the organization of the corps, and Kemp pointed out the short sightedness of Wilson’s Forestry and Rail request as it would cripple timber production and essential railway construction.80

Division’s Development

Returning to the division’s development, the War Office officially authorized its organization on 18 January following the 12 January 1917 conference, with Turner’s headquarters issuing the Canadian order shortly afterwards.81 The division formed at Witley Camp in Surrey, approximately 60 kilometres southwest of London. It consisted of three infantry brigades – the 13th, 14th and 15th. Brigadier-General J.F.L. Embury commanded the 13th Brigade. Embury was 42 years old, a solicitor, and the prewar Militia commander of the 95th Saskatchewan Rifle Regiment. He had successfully led the 28th (Saskatchewan) Battalion in Turner’s 2nd Division until wounded at the Battle of Courcelette on 15 September 1916. After recovering, he commanded the 10th Training Brigade, which became the 13th Brigade.82 The commander of the 14th Brigade was Brigadier-General A.E. Swift, who was in his late forties and was a Permanent Force major, with service in the South African War. Prewar, he was the inspector of arms and ammunition. He commanded the 2nd Battalion in the Canadian Corps for over a year and then led the 11th Training Brigade, which became the 14th Brigade.83
E.C. Ashton, who would have a long and distinguished career in the Canadian Army, commanded the 15th Brigade. Prewar, Ashton, a 43-year-old physician, was in charge of a Militia artillery battery and had passed the Militia Staff Course. He formed the 36th Battalion and later commanded the 9th Reserve Brigade, and the Canadian Training Division at Shorncliffe. He was recalled to Canada in November 1917 to take over as the adjutant-general, and he later rose to chief of the general staff. It is difficult to evaluate the three brigadier-generals as they did not command their brigades in battle, but Swift and Embury had commanded battalions at the front for an extended period, so were as qualified as any in the Canadian Corps for promotion to brigadier-general. Turner, as GOC 2nd Division, rated Embury as the battalion commander most qualified for appointment as a brigade GOC in March 1916. Ashton’s later ascent to the senior post in the Canadian Army also suggests a competent commander.

At its activation, the division was incomplete, and over the course of the next month, three battalions (160th, 161st, and 199th), the divisional signal company, brigade machine gun companies, engineer field companies, and division train arrived at Witley. However, Lieutenant-Colonel Christian Hore-Ruthven, the British GSO 1, the chief staff officer of the division, did not join until 27 February 1917. He had been GSO 2 of the 2nd Division while Turner was the division’s commander, so his selection was likely a result of him being a known quantity. Hore-Ruthven was a decorated veteran of the South African war and was wounded during 1914. Recognizing the necessity for front line experience in the division, Hughes recruited staff and commanders from the Canadian Corps. His familiarity with officers in the 1st Division led him to poach predominantly from the division. Currie, exasperated at the number of officers he was losing, told Hughes in May that the division was off-limits to further transfers, an understandable reaction.

The battalions selected to make up the division were far from ready for active service, despite the troops being embodied for over a year on average. An early February 1917 assessment of the division’s infantry units indicated a desperate need for trained drafts, instructors and new leadership. The training cycle consisted of ten weeks individual instruction before December 1916 and 14 weeks thereafter, followed by company preparation, company marches, battalion exercises, brigade training, brigade marches and finally division exercises. As nine of the 12 battalions arrived in England before October 1916, they should have completed the battalion level preparation as they had three full months preparation time in England. By February, however, only four were ready for company training with the remainder needing to complete individual training and receive drafts and instructors. Turner’s order that eight of the battalions provide trained replacements to the Canadian Corps further impeded progress. As a result, six of the eight battalions were under-strength, and the other two consisted of untrained drafts, which crippled their readiness.

Poor leadership at the battalion level also hampered the division’s
training. Few officers and NCOs had any front experience, and so were inadequately prepared to instruct their men. Hughes replaced five battalion commanders in May and June and another left because of illness. Later in January 1918, Hughes indicated three of his battalion commanders should be replaced if the division crossed to France which strongly indicates a weak command cadre at the battalion level.

The division was beginning to show progress by May 1917 regaining strength and completing more advanced training, such that the division started brigade exercises. Garnet informed Currie that three battalions were still under-strength, but “We are fairly well advanced with the training” and would be ready in five to six weeks.

A Division in France for Garnet?

In June, another opportunity emerged to provide Garnet Hughes with a front-line division. Major-General Sir Arthur Currie received command of the Canadian Corps after Haig promoted Byng to command Third Army. This left an opening for Hughes to take over Currie’s former command, the 1st Division, and Borden wanted to ensure Garnet received it. Again, the matter of what to do with Hughes loomed large. Manley Sims met Currie on 10 June, and Currie claimed Sims tried to negotiate with him regarding the position, but Currie rejected any interference.

While Currie did not rule out offering Hughes a division, he thought the Permanent Force officer Brigadier-General A.C. Macdonell a better choice. It was unlikely, however, that Currie had any real intention of giving Hughes a division, as demonstrated later in 1918 when he refused him once again. Currie later claimed he had to resist tremendous pressure from the politicians to select Hughes. Historians A.M.J. Hyatt in his biography of Currie and Desmond Morton in his *A Peculiar Kind of Politics* both suggest he probably exaggerated the pressure placed on him. Hyatt also argues Currie had a guilty conscience about his treatment of his former friend.

Currie later had a heated three-hour meeting with Garnet who pleaded for the opportunity to command the 1st Division, but Currie adamantly refused. According to Currie, Hughes stormed out vowing vengeance for the rejection. Henceforth, Currie believed Garnet was an implacable enemy and that Garnet and his father were sure to try and undermine him. However, Currie continued to correspond with Garnet and meet with him in England when on leave, which tends to belie his claim and suggests he overstated the animosity.

Disruption in England

In late May, Turner had to make the difficult decision to gut the division for replacements for the Canadian Corps – a serious setback to the division’s preparations. Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng, earlier in May and still the commander of the Canadian Corps, was unhappy with the number of untrained men he was receiving and suggested it was time to use the 5th Division as a source of trained personnel. This must have been a factor in Turner’s decision to use the 5th Division for replacements. The division experienced considerable turnover at the battlefield level as the desperate need for trained manpower necessitated scrounging the division repeatedly for drafts and even entire battalions to replace losses. Between its official formation date of 23 January and the end of May, one-quarter of its battalions were disbanded because of insufficient recruits. Additionally, there was an imbalance in battalions from regions. Based on population, British Columbia had four more battalions and Quebec two more than they should have had, while Ontario had ten fewer than its population warranted. Shortfalls in recruiting, moreover, made the 128th (Saskatchewan), 199th (Quebec), and 202nd (Alberta) Battalions unsustainable, and Turner disbanded them in May. They were replaced by the 164th (Ontario), 198th (Ontario), and 208th (Toronto) Battalions.

The British Inspector of Infantry’s assessment of the division at the end of June showed only four battalions fit for home defence, five more anticipated as being ready in July and the remaining three not until August. Readiness for home defence was a lower standard than for overseas service, which underlined how far the division would have to progress to be efficient for service on the Western Front. Hore-Ruthven, the division’s GSO I, was even more pessimistic as he estimated that nine battalions would complete battalion training only in August and three in September. This did not include brigade or division exercises. In addition, three of the battalions were new to the division, and he rated them as weak or only fair.

Through June and July the division conducted individual and battalion level training. Then, peculiarly, at the end of July the King inspected the division, which was traditionally the last act before proceeding overseas, but, as the earlier evaluations attest, the division was far from ready.

At the same time, according to the unpublished 5th Division history, Turner queried Hughes as to when the division would be ready to
proceed to France, and Hughes thought they would be ready by the first week of August. Apparently, there were considerations of sending the division over, but probably notice of the long-planned Canadian attack at Hill 70, finally launched 15 August 1917, and the expected casualties, necessitated second thoughts.\textsuperscript{107} In June, Turner believed it would be possible to commit the 5th Division at the beginning of August if Canada could provide an additional 10,000 men by August and another 10,000 by October.\textsuperscript{108} In July, however, only 261 men and 2,261 in August arrived from Canada.\textsuperscript{109} Borden again cabled Perley he wanted to give volunteering more time before enforcing the proposed Military Service Act – conscription.\textsuperscript{110} This effectively ended any possibility of gaining the additional recruits that Turner needed. Two days after the King’s inspection, Lieutenant-Colonel Hore-Ruthven transferred to take over as the GSO 1 of the 3rd Division in the Canadian Corps. This move further indicated the improbability of the Division reaching France.\textsuperscript{111}

In August, instead of embarking the full division, Perley and Turner decided to send the 5th Division’s artillery to France at the request of the CIGS, along with supporting signals and supply units.\textsuperscript{112} This was the only formation of the division to serve at the front. Compared to infantry, artillery units did not have the same casualty rate and so did not present the same demands for replacements. The preparations for the artillery to move began on 7 August, with the artillery inspected by the Duke of Connaught, the former Canadian governor-general, on 14 August, and it embarked six days later.\textsuperscript{113}

For the remainder of the year, the division conducted more elaborate and extensive brigade level exercises, including six-day marches, trench warfare training, and practice attacks. In October, the engineers were reassigned to help build aerodromes for the Royal Air Force, which was another sign that the division’s future was bleak.\textsuperscript{114}

Denouement

While the division trained in England, attacks at Hill 70 in August and Passchendaele in October and November 1917 drained the available manpower pool, and it became increasingly difficult to justify the 5th Division remaining as a home service division in England. In late October, Borden and the Canadian War Committee considered if dissolution of the division was appropriate and wanted Perley and Turner’s views. Turner requested an analysis by his adjutant-general, Major-General P.E. Thacker. Without using the 5th Division, and assuming 10,000 conscripts arrived in January, Thacker estimated the Canadian forces in France would still run out of replacements by May 1918, and this was before the outcome of the election on conscription was known.\textsuperscript{115} Borden again cabled Perley stating definitively that the War Committee had decided to break up the division.\textsuperscript{116} Despite the dire replacement prediction and the War Committee decision, both Perley and Turner agreed that the division organization should remain intact, but it be used to supply replacements if needed.\textsuperscript{117} Previously, the policy was that the division would only supply drafts if the reserve battalions had no replacements available.\textsuperscript{118}

This provokes the question why Perley and Turner agreed to keep the division intact. It was most likely political expediency related to the December 1917 federal election on the issue of conscription. The prime minister had persuaded select Liberals to join a Unionist Party slate in favour of conscription. To help ensure the election of the Unionist party, Borden also enacted a number of changes to the election act to give the government an edge, one of which was to allow overseas military votes to be assigned to, essentially, any riding the government wished.\textsuperscript{119} Military votes from the contingents abroad were potentially critical to the government’s success, so it was imperative that the military vote for the government. Australia had run two referenda on conscription, and both failed, in part, because of the lack of support of the Australian military.\textsuperscript{120} Breaking up the 5th Division before the election could embitter its members and potentially throw its votes to the Opposition. The unpublished 5th Division history asserts highly placed military and government officials explicitly promised that if Borden’s Unionist party won the division would go to France.\textsuperscript{121} Hughes and members of the staff actively campaigned in favour of the Unionist government contrary to regulations.\textsuperscript{122} The Unionist party won the election by a sufficient majority, such that the military vote switching was not necessary.

With the election success, the division anticipated it would soon cross to France.\textsuperscript{123} A further complication at this time was that the British were reducing each infantry brigade by one battalion because of manpower shortages.\textsuperscript{124} The British War Office suggested the Canadians adopt the same organization, which would free enough battalions to raise a sixth division and would necessitate a second corps. Initially, Kemp, who had replaced Perley as minister of the OMFC, and Turner favoured this proposal. Currie, however, opposed it and recommended the more efficient and effective approach of expanding the engineer, signals, machine gun and transportation establishments, and adding 100 supernumeraries to each of the existing infantry battalions.\textsuperscript{125} Kemp accepted the plan, but it would require disbanding the 5th Division.
A shortage of replacements was the ultimate reason for the disbandment of 5th Division so that its 10,000 trained could be disbursed among the existing four divisions of the Canadian Corps. The influx of manpower was important in allowing the Canadian Corps to maintain its combat power during the heavy fighting of the Last Hundred Days campaign.
Conscription was enacted, but there was to be a considerable lag before trained conscripts arrived at the front. Borden faced increasing pressure to disband the division as recovered wounded were sent back to the line, while the under-strength 5th Division and its 10,000 trained infantry remained in England. This was pressure he found difficult to resist. Following the election success, the need to respond to manpower shortages outweighed the necessity of maintaining the shell of the 5th Division and keeping Sam Hughes mollified through the employment of his son as a division commander. Kemp ordered the division’s disbanding on 10 February 1918. This order was a shock to Garnet Hughes who lamented: “After all we had hoped and planned and worked for it was a stunning blow that the Division should be broken up.”

It was a similar blow to the division’s officers as many of them faced the prospect of having to return to Canada or revert in rank to get to France. In particular, there was a problem of what to do with the 120 surplus infantry captains, majors, and lieutenant-colonels from the disbanded battalions along with Garnet Hughes and his brother-in-law, Byron Green, a battalion commander in 5th Division. After some initial reluctance and a plea from Kemp, Currie agreed to accept more surplus officers with most having to revert only a single rank. Any officer with experience overseas could return to the front at their previous rank.

The political implications of Garnet Hughes returning to Canada concerned Borden. Garnet, himself, demanded the War Office recall the British Regular Major-General Louis Lipsett, commander of the 3rd Division, as a means of creating a vacancy for him, but Kemp refused to intervene. Currie indicated he did not want Hughes, ostensibly because he had been away from the front for a year. Hughes rejected Turner’s offer of command of a training area, an appointment in which Hughes could retain his current rank. Eventually, Hughes accepted an unpaid position in the British Munitions Ministry and Green returned to Canada, without any backlash from Sam Hughes towards Borden or the government.

Contrary to the views of some historians, the breakup of the 5th Division did not solve the manpower crisis but did provide a vital buffer to supply the corps with well-trained reinforcements while the conscripts trained. Of the 10,000 infantry in the division, 7,200 became the source of the 100 supernumeraries per battalion and replacements for 50 men per infantry battalion that Currie had drafted to bolster his machine gun organization. The usual losses in holding the line quickly used up the remaining 2,800 men long before the Battle of Amiens in August 1918. The other units of the division were sent as drafts to the Canadian Corps or added to replacement pools in England.

Conclusion

The 5th Division’s inception, career, and eventual fate were powerfully conditioned by Canadian political imperatives and the tension between the Canadian authorities’ wish to satisfy British demands and their recognition of the realities of manpower availability. Activated in part to ensure a divisional command billet for the son of the dangerous Sam Hughes, the 5th Division trained hard and effectively in difficult circumstances for battles it would never fight. Instead, once the threat of Hughes and other political necessities had receded, its well-trained infantry, machine gunners, engineers, and signallers were a valuable addition to the Canadian Corps. Ultimately, despite the unrelenting pressure of senior British officials and the call of empire, Perley, Kemp, and Turner placed greater importance on the pragmatic issues of manpower availability and Canadian interests. Had they not done so, the Canadian Corps would not have had the significant advantage of going into battle at full strength in the crucial offensives in the second half of 1917 and in 1918. At some point if the 5th Division had gone to the Front, the Canadian authorities would have had the difficult choice of disbanding units or even divisions, with the resulting loss of influence, to maintain the corps at some semblance of strength. The unhappy history of the division illustrates how political expediency powerfully influenced decision-making, but also the limits of how far senior Canadian politicians and military figures were willing to satisfy domestic and imperial political needs in the face of manpower constraints.

Notes

5. Cable, Hughes to Borden, 15 August 1916, 77912, LAC MG 26 H v146, Borden Fonds.
7. Canada’s Fifth Division, LAC, p.2.
8. Robertson to Haig, 28 September 1916, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives.
18. Leckie received command of a military district and a temporary promotion to major-general to satisfy him. Leckie to Secretary, Canadian Headquarters, 10 February 1916, 10-L-10, LAC RG 9 III v293; LAC; Perley to Turner, 25 April 1917, 10-L-10, LAC RG 9 III v293.


20. Cable, Borden to Perley, 26 January 1917, v8/2, LAC MG 27 II D12 v8-12, Perley Fonds.

21. Cable, Borden to Perley, 12 January 1917, 31656, LAC MG 26 H v62, Borden Fonds.

22. Note to Garnet Burke Hughes, Undated, LAC MG 27 II D23 v14, Hughes Fonds.

23. Leckie received command of a military district and a temporary promotion to major-general to satisfy him. Leckie to Secretary, Canadian Headquarters, 10 February 1916, 10-L-10, LAC RG 9 III v293; LAC; Perley to Turner, 25 April 1917, 10-L-10, LAC RG 9 III v293.


26. Ibid., p.95.

27. Byng to Hughes, 20 February 1917, 14/5, LAC MG 27 II D23 v14, Hughes Fonds; Sims to Turner, 3 February 1917, LAC RG 30 E46 v10, Turner Fonds.

28. Cable, Perley to Borden, 2 December 1916, 31645, LAC MG 26 H v62, Borden Fonds.

29. Cable, Borden to Perley, 6 December 1916, 31646, LAC MG 26 H v62, Borden Fonds.


31. Cable, Perley to Borden, 20 December 1916, 31649, LAC MG 26 H v62, Borden Fonds; Cable, Borden to Perley, 22 December 1916, 31652, LAC MG 26 H v62, Borden Fonds; Morton, A Peculiar Kind of Politics, p.100.

32. Perley to Borden, 10 November 1916, 39104, LAC MG 26 H v74/75, Borden Fonds.

33. Cable, Perley to Kemp, 19 December 1916, LAC RG 9 III v104.