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Abstract: The date of 10 May 1940 is well known for the start of the German blitzkrieg and the end of Neville Chamberlain's tenure as British Prime Minister. That fateful day also opened a chapter in Canada's war story that, in the end, saw more than 2,600 Canadian servicemen deployed to far-away but strategic Iceland. The Canadian commitment to that remote island from June 1940 to April 1941 was a metaphoric stepping-stone in the long Allied struggle against the Axis powers in the North Atlantic, building what ultimately became a secure strategic bridge for the deployment of the forces that liberated Europe.

Two major events on 10 May 1940 changed the modern world: the Germans began their blitzkrieg roll into France and the Low Countries, conquering each within six weeks; and Neville Chamberlain, the stain of Allied failures in Norway having ruined what was left of his popularity, stepped down as British Prime Minister with Winston Churchill taking his place to fight the growing Nazi war machine. Yet there was a third event on that fateful day. For reasons relating more to Chamberlain's departure than Churchill's arrival, Britain occupied Iceland. Landing under the auspices of Operation Fork, the British had one overarching objective in taking over Iceland—to prevent Germany's seemingly unstoppable, stepping-stone march westward from Scandinavia, thus denying Hitler the strategic advantage of controlling large parts of the North Atlantic.[1] They could not

[1] Donald F. Bittner, *The Lion and The White Falcon* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1983), *passim.*

do it alone, however, particularly by late May when getting their men home from Dunkirk's beaches to protect against an expected invasion consumed British resources and emotions. So the British called on Canada for assistance in garrisoning a remote country on the fringes of an expanding war. The ensuing deployment to Iceland was Canada's first substantial and sustained deployment beyond the British Commonwealth up to that time in the expanding war.

Connections between Canada and Iceland, which dated back more than a millennium, had been particularly active since Confederation.[2] Icelanders permanently settled in Canada in 1875 on lands established as a "reserve for Icelanders" along the southwest shore of Lake Winnipeg.[3] These trans-Atlantic connections bonded the two countries in war as well. More than 1,000 Icelandic-Canadians served as soldiers, nurses and medics during the First World War. They "organized in Winnipeg in 1916 under different Battalions, including the 197th (Vikings of Canada) and the 223rd (Canadian Scandinavians). Most sailed to Europe in the autumn of 1917." Of these volunteers, 140 were killed in action.[4]

That said, Canada's Icelandic deployment in the early phases of the Second World War had its roots more in Iceland's perilous isolation and Britain's growing insecurity during the uncertain days of April and May 1940 than it did in centuries-old connections between Canada and Iceland. Hastily deployed to Reykjavik from Halifax in the summer of 1940 by a government eager to show its commitment to the expanding war, the Canadian officers and men of what was known as Z Force worked tirelessly with their British counterparts to defend Iceland against an expected German invasion. By having their boots on the volcanic ground of Iceland, the Canadians not only helped to secure that country, they also helped

[2] Sigurdur A. Magnusson, *Northern Sphinx: Iceland and the Icelander from Settlement to the Present* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 1977), 142. Also, see Margaret A. Mackay, "Vestur-Íslendingar: Icelanders of Manitoba," Hermann Pálsson Lecture, 2017, *Northern Studies* 50 (2019): 1-11.

[3] Approximately 250 settlers arrived at the southern end of this reserve on 21 October 1875. They initially called it *Nja Ísland* (New Iceland), later changing the name to Gimli. Ryan Eyford, "An Experiment in Immigrant Colonization: Canada and the Icelandic Reserve, 1875-1897" (PhD dissertation, University of Manitoba, 2010), *passim.*

[4] "Vikings of the First World War: Icelandic Canadians in Service," Manitoba Museum, accessed 16 October 2021, https://manitobamuseum.ca/archives/exhibition/vikings-of-the-first-world-war-icelandic-canadians-in-service.

prevent Germany from attacking Newfoundland and Canada's eastern seaboard. Over a ten-month period, the Canadians did their best in the face of significant challenges.

The German invasion ultimately never came. However, as this article will show, Canada's response to the Icelandic situation in the summer of 1940 illustrated an important role that Canada, led by commitment-reluctant Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, could play in the emerging trans-Atlantic coalition of the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada against the surging Axis powers. The Canadian military commitment to Iceland from June 1940 to April 1941 was itself a metaphoric stepping-stone in the long Allied struggle against the Axis powers in the North Atlantic to build what ultimately became by 1943-44 a secure strategic bridge for the deployment of the forces that liberated Europe. This brief chapter in Canada's war narrative, an event that gets little notice, deserves greater attention.[5]

ICELAND IN PLAY LIKE NEVER BEFORE

Despite gaining some degree of independence from Denmark right after the First World War, Iceland was still under Danish rule in the 1920s and 1930s as a constitutional monarchy, of which King

[5] References to Iceland in Canada's war literature tend to refer to events that happened after the Canadian troops left there in April 1941, such as convoys and air landings. For example, see Tim Cook, *The Necessary War* Volume One: *Canadians Fighting the Second World War, 1939-1943* (Toronto: Penguin, 2014), 295-96. Jack Pickersgill makes passing references in his book, *The Mackenzie King Record*, Volume I *1939-1944* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), 246. Jack Granatstein's *Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) mentions Iceland once in a very brief reference on page 187. C. P. Stacey's *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1970) is similarly parsimonious in its treatment of this deployment in a reference on page 32, as is his *The Canadian Army – 1939-1945: An Official Historical Summary* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1948), pages 24, 31 and 35. However, Stacey's first volume of the official history of the Second World War, *Six Years of War – The Army in Canada, Britain and the Pacific* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1957) offers greater detail on pages 45, 78-79 and 83-85. Much more recently, gaps in the historiography of this deployment have been further filled by *Wind, Gravel and Ice: Memoir of my Opa as a Canadian Soldier in Iceland during the Second World War*, self-published by Christina Chowaniec in 2021.

Christian X was the common monarch.[6] During this time, and with a population of only 120,000, Iceland had very limited military or naval capacity to protect itself from potential aggressors. Iceland, therefore, intended to seek shelter in the gathering storm of the late 1930s by staying neutral.[7] That did not work out, however. In the early morning of 9 April 1940, a Kriegsmarine warship entered Copenhagen harbour as part of Operation Weserübung, Germany's coordinated invasion of Denmark and Norway. The results were swift and decisive. And while there was resistance in Denmark to the Nazi invasion, Denmark fell quickly.[8] The loss of Denmark to Germany meant Iceland was alone and its leaders knew it. They had no army, navy or air force of their own and, with Denmark now under Nazi control, Icelanders had to find their own way forward.

Once Denmark fell, members of the parliament of Iceland, the Althing, unanimously passed a resolution declaring that their country had assumed legislative control over foreign affairs from King Christian.[9] Icelanders then immediately sought some degree of protection by appealing to the United States to establish bilateral diplomatic and financial relations. A series of telegrams in April between Icelandic Prime Minister Hermann Jonasson and American Secretary of State Cordell Hull worked out these requests and Iceland secured its own diplomatic legation in Washington within a few weeks.[10] Yet, with the Nazis now holding countries on the northwest edge of Europe—thus being that much closer to North Atlantic trade

[6] The Danish-Icelandic Act of Union passed in 1920 was to be valid until 1940, after which point legislatures in either country could call for a revision. The outbreak of war made this moot. Magnusson, *Northern Sphinx,* 135-36.

[7] Guðmundur Hálfdanarson, "'The Beloved War': the Second World War and the Icelandic National Narrative," in *Nordic Narratives of the Second World War*, eds. Henrik Stenius, Mirja Österberg and Johan Östling (Lund, Sweden: Nordic Academic Press, 2011), 79-81.

[8] Richard D. Hooker Jr. and Christopher Coglianese, "Operation Weserübung and the Origins of Joint Warfare," *Joint Force Quarterly* 1 (Summer 1993): 100-11.

[9] "Britain to Protect Iceland as Danish King Loses Power," *The Globe and Mail*, 10 April 1940.

[10] For example, in his telegram of 16 April 1940 to Jonasson, Hull wrote that establishing "direct and diplomatic relations" between the two countries "will be welcomed by my Government." Hull then suggested the Americans would open their own consular office in Reykjavik "as a first step in reciprocating direct relations between our two Governments." Telegram found in *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1940, General and Europe,* Volume II, 676, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1940v02/ch12subch1.

routes and to North America—Iceland was very much in play for many other countries. As Churchill wrote after the war, "whoever possesses Iceland holds a pistol firmly at England, America and Canada."[11] Greenland was also increasingly important, largely due to its valuable cryolite mine at Ivigtut and its ideal location as a base for weather stations and possible air bases.[12]

Churchill, in his position as First Lord of the Admiralty, informed his War Cabinet colleagues on the morning of 11 April 1940 "of steps being taken to occupy the Faroe Islands,"[13] thus signaling his desire to lock down parts of the North Atlantic in light of Germany's westward momentum. Royal Marines, transported by HMS *Suffolk*, landed on the Faroes on 13 April.[14] Later on 11 April, in a long speech in the House of Commons, Churchill made a firm commitment about Iceland: "no German will be allowed to set foot there with impunity."[15] These were bold ambitions indeed. Yet Britain had no specific plans for an Icelandic occupation in those fast-moving days following the German invasion of Norway and Denmark. Nor did they have any meaningful intelligence infrastructure in place to provide insights into what Hitler's war machine was planning next.[16] However, their assumption was that the Nazis could and would easily seize control of Iceland as a forward naval and air base to interdict convoys and thus choke off trans-Atlantic trade and potentially launch operations against the

[11] Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: The Grand Alliance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1950), 138. Churchill was quoting an unnamed source who had originated this line.

[12] See Dawn Alexandrea Berry, "Cryolite, the Canadian aluminium industry and the American occupation of Greenland during the Second World War," *The Polar Journal* 2, 2 (2012): 219-35; Stacey, *Arms, Men and Government*, 367-70; Carl Christie, *Ocean Bridge: The History of RAF Ferry Command* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 123-46; and Nancy Fogelson, "Greenland: Strategic Base on a Northern Defence Line," *Journal of Military History* 53 (January 1989): 51-63.

[13] Martin Gilbert, *The Churchill War Papers: At the Admiralty,* Volume 1, *September 1939 – May 1940* (London: W. W. Norton, 1993), 1011.

[14] Gilbert, *The Churchill Papers,* Volume I, 1052.

[15] Gilbert, *The Churchill Papers,* Volume I, 1024.

[16] F. H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence on Strategy and Operations*, Volume One (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1979), 127-36.

Allies.[17] Iceland was a dangerous gap in the security of the British Isles—and by extension North America—that had to be filled.

On 28 April, Churchill instructed Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, the First Sea Lord, to prepare for an occupation of Iceland so as to give Britain "a base … for our flying boats and for oiling the ships of the Northern Patrol."[18] On 6 May, Churchill informed his War Cabinet colleagues that Britain "should occupy Iceland forthwith."[19] The War Cabinet minutes of 8 May record that "two cruisers (H.M. ships *Glasgow* and *Berwick*) and two destroyers had sailed for Iceland that morning … expected at Reykjavik at 5 a.m. on Friday, the 10th May." The warships carried a landing force of 42 officers and 775 other ranks of the Royal Marines.[20]

On time and without any diplomatic warning, the British naval force pulled into Reykjavik harbour in the early morning of 10 May.[21] The first Marines set foot on land at 06:20 to a rather bizarre welcome. A small crowd of Icelanders, alerted by the rare sights and sounds of a Walrus aircraft flying overhead, stood peacefully on the dockside. The British consul politely asked an Icelandic police officer for assistance in allowing the arriving Marines to make way. "Would you mind … getting the crowd to stand back a bit, so that the soldiers can get off the destroyer?" The response was short and affirmative. "Certainly," the officer said.[22] The British simply carried on, with some Icelanders watching with "neither excitement or apprehension" while others were relieved that the incoming occupiers were British

[17] For a review of German naval plans for Iceland and trans-Atlantic operations, see Evan Wilson and Ruth Shapiro, "German Perspectives on the U-Boat War, 1939-1941," *Journal of Military History* 85, 2 (2021): 369-98.

[18] Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: The Gathering Storm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 687. Writing after the war, Churchill said "to avoid confusion with Iceland, I had directed that Iceland was always to be written by the British authorities as Iceland (C). This was indeed a necessary precaution." Churchill, *The Grand Alliance*, 447.

[19] Gilbert, *The Churchill War Papers,* Volume I, 1202.

[20] Gilbert, *The Churchill War Papers,* Volume I, 1223.

[21] The British told neither the Americans nor the Icelanders about this impending occupation and research for this article suggests the Canadians were also not told. Months later, however, British military authorities regretted not asking for permission to land. Bittner, *The Lion and the White Falcon,* 49; and "CASF [Canadian Active Service Force] Rushes Defenses Against Iceland Attack," *The Globe and Mail*, 31 August 1940.

[22] Egill Bjarnason, *How Iceland Changed the World: The Big History of a Small Island* (New York: Penguin, 2021), 136.

Brigadier Lammie in Iceland with British troops of the 1/7th West Yorks, 1940. [© IWM H 3864, Imperial War Museum]

and not German. Nearby, and having also been alerted to the British arrival by the overhead Walrus, the German consul in the Icelandic capital burned his records in a bathtub.[23]

Almost immediately upon landing, Colonel Robert Sturges moved the Royal Marines under his command across Iceland to help prevent expected airborne German attacks in disparate locations. This included sending some men as far away as Akureyri, almost 400 kilometres northeast of Reykjavik. The challenges of being so spread out, however, were quickly evident: Sturges needed more men. One week later, on 17 May, 4,000 British troops of the 147th Infantry Brigade, commanded by Brigadier George Lammie, arrived to take over for the Marines who had been called back to Britain to shore up home defences.[24] Yet even with greater numbers, Lammie felt he could not possibly secure Iceland from potential—if not highly likely—German incursion and control. He therefore called for additional support to maintain the occupation and deny Germany the ability to

[23] Bittner, *The Lion and the White Falcon*, 43.
[24] Bittner, *The Lion and the White Falcon*, 40-47.

land on the island by air or sea.[25] But who would help? And how fast could they arrive?

CHURCHILL SEEKS CANADIAN SUPPORT

Churchill, by now the prime minister, urgently needed help to shore up the British foothold in Iceland while at the same time he was preparing for a likely German invasion of Britain. In looking across the Atlantic he knew President Franklin D. Roosevelt understood the challenges posed by a westward-moving German navy and air force. Roosevelt had made this point very clearly in telling Congress on 16 May 1940 that "[f]rom the fiords of Greenland it is four hours by air to Newfoundland; five hours to Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and to the Province of Quebec; and only six hours to New England."[26] Roosevelt, though, was not in position to take any military action concerning Iceland, constrained as he was by strong isolationist sentiment in the Congress that reflected a large segment of American public opinion.[27] This situation changed significantly in the summer of 1941 when Roosevelt, whose struggle against isolationist opinion had been bolstered by Britain's defeat of the Luftwaffe's bombing campaign and Churchill's defiant rejection of Axis peace feelers, sent what became more than 40,000 Americans to occupy Iceland for the balance of the war.[28] But in May of 1940, with France falling and many Americans believing British defeat was inevitable, US military aid was a distant apparition.

Churchill had to look elsewhere for help. In so doing, the cold calculus of the situation was clear. Losing Iceland to Hitler would heavily jeopardise the trans-Atlantic trade routes vital to keeping Britain in the war. By extension, losing Iceland could mean losing the war. Churchill needed to proactively take control of that tiny but strategically important part of the North Atlantic. He could not

[25] Bittner, *The Lion and the White Falcon*, 58.
[26] Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Message to Congress on Appropriations for National Defense," 16 May 1940, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/message-congress-appropriations-for-national-defense-1.
[27] Michael T. Corgan, "Franklin D. Roosevelt and the American Occupation of Iceland," *Naval War College Review* 45, 4 (Autumn 1992): 36-37.
[28] Corgan, "Franklin D. Roosevelt and the American Occupation of Iceland," 37-45.

turn to his own over-stretched troops but he could turn to Canada, a country theretofore unburdened by the war's ravages.

CANADA DEPLOYS TO ICELAND

Events of 10 May changed the equation. Having not met during the entire Norwegian crisis, King's War Cabinet Committee finally met on 10 May, as the German offensive against France began. Among their decisions, they agreed to expedite the dispatch of Canada's Second Infantry Division to Britain and they invited the British government to suggest what measures Canada could make to assist in an increasingly urgent situation in Europe.[29] Just over one week later, Lord Caldecote, Secretary of State for the Dominions, wrote Vincent Massey, Canada's High Commissioner in London, to request that Canada "provide and maintain" a garrison in Iceland "with troops other than those required for the field force." That is, other than the First and Second Divisions.[30]

On 22 May, Canada's War Cabinet approved plans to send a brigade to garrison Iceland with the British.[31] King's diary, written hours after presiding over this decision, suggests that such a deployment to a remote island was itself a distant thought: "Decided a number of important matters in the way of additional assistance to British at this time – including sending Forestry Battalion as well as railway construction engineers and transport, which I wanted to have done many weeks ago. Also a battalion to Iceland. Troops to West Indies."[32] The following morning, though, he made sure London knew about his commitment. In telegramming Massey, King asked that he "communicate immediately" that Canada would organise a deployment to Iceland "without delay."[33] On 25 May, Churchill, grappling to deal with a rapidly deteriorating situation in France,[34]

[29] Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, 32.
[30] Massey to King, 19 May 1940, *Documents in External Relations, 1939-1941,* Part 1, Vol. 7, ed. David R. Murray (Ottawa: Department of External Affairs, 1974), 767.
[31] Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, 32.
[32] *The Diaries of William Mackenzie King*, 22 May 1940. Digitised version found online at www.bac-lac.gc.ca.
[33] King to Massey, 23 May 1940, *Documents in External Relations*, *1939-1941*, 769.
[34] John Lukacs, *Five Days in London: May 1940* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 82-103.

Brigadier Page in Iceland, handing out cigarettes courtesy of the Overseas League Tobacco Fund. [© IWM H 3182, Imperial War Museum]

sent a short and emotive letter of thanks to King. "I should like you to know," he wrote, "how greatly impressed and touched my colleagues and I have been by the great response which Canada is making to the urgent needs of the present situation in respect of naval, army and air assistance alike."[35] Britain needed a fillip of some sort and Canada's offer to help in Iceland was just that.

Officials in Ottawa and London negotiated details of the Icelandic deployment during a three-week, trans-Atlantic dialogue that worked out such things as the size and cost of the deployment and who would pay for what.[36] Of note, the British said they urgently needed an infantry battalion to reinforce the British brigade already on the ground in Iceland. As official historian C. P. Stacey writes, "the only battalions in Canada in condition for immediate dispatch were those of the 2nd Division. It was decided accordingly to send one of these."[37] On 4 June, Brigadier Lionel F. Page, a veteran of Vimy Ridge as the

[35] Martin Gilbert, *The Churchill War Papers: Never Surrender,* Volume 2, *May 1940 – December 1940* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 145.
[36] For example, see King to Massey, 4 June 1940, *Documents in External Relations, 1939-1941*, 775-76.
[37] Stacey, *Six Years of War*, 83.

commanding officer of the 50th Battalion,[38] was ordered to report to Ottawa immediately. He arrived twenty-four hours later "and was told that he had been appointed to command a Canadian force that was being sent to Iceland to assist the British in the occupation of the island."[39] Events moved apace from there. On 10 June 1940, the same day as Defence Minister Norman Rogers died in a plane crash,[40] Page, along with a small brigade staff of what was now designated Z Force and the Toronto-based Royal Regiment of Canada (RRC), set out for Reykjavik from Halifax on HMS *Empress of Australia*.[41] They arrived six days later after a crossing that was "without incident" save for some "seasickness in rough seas."[42]

Back in Ottawa, meanwhile, King knew that sending young healthy Canadian men to Iceland, far away from events rapidly unfolding in France, could appear to be a diversion of vital resources at a crucial time. In his speech to the House of Commons on 18 June, during which he also announced the National Resources Mobilisation Act, King tried to assuage any such concerns about Iceland by saying "I need hardly point out the strategic importance not only to the security of the north Atlantic sea lanes but to the defence of this continent of maintaining control of Iceland."[43] An article the following morning in *The Globe and Mail* explained that "[f]or the enemy, it [Iceland] would be valuable either in the encirclement of the United Kingdom, as a base for attacks on trans-Atlantic shipping,

[38] Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci and Mike Bechthold, eds., *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, (Waterloo: Laurier Centre for Military and Strategic Studies and Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), Appendix 1, 325.

[39] Personal diary of Brigadier Page, 4-5 June 1940, as cited in J. C. Newlands, Army Headquarters Reports, 1948-1959, Report No. 33 "'Z Force" in Iceland: An account of the dispatch of Canadian Troops to Iceland and their subsequent operations there," 16 December 1949, 3, https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/military-history/history-heritage/official-military-history-lineages/reports/army-headquarters-1948-1959/z-force-iceland.html. Page rose to the rank of major-general before dying of illness in Canada on 26 August 1944. See J. L. Granatstein, *The Generals: The Canadian Army's Senior Commanders in the Second World War* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993), 7.

[40] Arnold Heeney, *The Things that Are Caesar's: The Memoirs of a Canadian Public Servant* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 59-60.

[41] The Z Force label followed in the footsteps of X Force, the short-lived Canadian plan to occupy Greenland developed shortly after Denmark fell. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Government*, 367-68.

[42] Newlands, "'Z' Force in Iceland," 3.

[43] *House of Commons Debates, 19th Parliament, 1st Session: Vol. 1*, 18 June 1940.

or as a stepping-stone to North America."[44] The deployment to Iceland aligned with Canada's expanding commitment to defending Newfoundland from potential German aggression and thus the threat that such aggression would pose to Canada.[45] Over the coming months and years, this expansion would see Canada, Britain and the US work together in Newfoundland, coordinating naval and air forces to defend the merchant ship convoys that sustained Britain against increasingly intense German submarine attack.[46]

Shortly after Page and his men landed in Iceland, France fell and Canada became Britain's ranking ally.[47] The British Isles were threatened as never before by the powerful German forces just across the English Channel and in the North Atlantic where German air and naval forces were now able to operate in greater strength from their new bases in France and Norway.[48] The British wanted Canada to play a larger role in covering the northern approaches to the UK by further strengthening the garrison in Iceland and in short order. A telegram on 20 June from the Canadian High Commission in London to Ottawa reported that the War Office wanted the entire 2nd Division "less such units as would not be required for garrison duty" to be shipped to Iceland as soon as able, thereby releasing the British brigade already in Iceland to go home to defend the United Kingdom.[49] The same telegram went on to suggest that the 2nd Division in Iceland could be relieved in due course by the 3rd Division, allowing the former to go to England to form the Canadian Corps which King had announced on

[44] "Canadians Guarding Iceland Against Threat of Attacks," *The Globe and Mail*, 19 June 1940.

[45] Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, 35. On 24 August 1939, O. D. Skelton, King's highly influential Under Secretary of State, explicitly alerted him to the importance of Newfoundland to Canada's defence. See "Memorandum of ODS, 'Canadian War Policy', 24 August 1939," in *O.D. Skelton: The Work of the World, 1923-1941*, ed. Norman Hillmer (Toronto: McGill Queen's University Press and Champlain Society, 2013), 435.

[46] Richard Goette, "The Command and Control of Canadian and American Maritime Air Power in the Northwest Atlantic," *Canadian Military History* 26, 2 (2017): 1-27. For more on Allied coordination in the North Atlantic in the post-war period, see Isabel Campbell, "A Tale of Submarine Sightings and a Golden Goose: American-British-Canadian Intelligence Sharing in the Early Cold War," *Journal of Military History* 85, 4 (October 2021): 980-1003.

[47] Granatstein, *Canada's Army,* 186.

[48] Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, 167.

[49] Massey telegram to King, 20 June 1940, *Documents in External Relations, 1939-1941*, 802.

20 May. Officials in Ottawa pushed back, believing their established commitment to Iceland was not only suitable for the situation but that "public opinion would not readily be reconciled to our forces being permanently in garrison abroad."[50] The Canadians also wanted the 2nd Division to be fully concentrated in England as soon as the battalion sent to Iceland could be relieved.

Differing views in Ottawa and London led to some confusion as to the size of Canada's commitment to Iceland. In a memo dated 7 July to Anthony Eden, the British Secretary of State for War, Churchill expressed his surprise at comments made to them on the previous day by Major-General Andrew McNaughton, General Officer Commanding of 1st Canadian Division:

> You shared my astonishment yesterday at the statement made to us by General McNaughton that the whole of the 2nd Canadian Division was destined for Iceland. It would surely be a very great mistake to allow these fine troops to be employed in so distant a theatre. Apparently the first three battalions have already gone there. No one was told anything about this. We require two Canadian Divisions to work as a Corps as soon as possible.[51]

Three battalions did in fact go to Iceland, but the entire 2nd Division did not. And while McNaughton's comments to Eden and Churchill may have contributed to this confusion, his proposed solution to solving the Icelandic question was prescient. In the same conversation with Eden and Churchill about the 2nd Division, McNaughton suggested that the proper solution was "to induce USA to occupy the island."[52] In July 1941, that is exactly what happened.[53]

Z FORCE ON THE GROUND

On the hard surface of Iceland, well beyond the varnished halls of political power, it was up to Page and his team to work with

[50] Stacey, *Six Years of War*, 83-85.
[51] Gilbert, *The Churchill War Papers: Never Surrender*, 488.
[52] Stacey, *Six Years of War*, 85, asterisk footnote.
[53] Byron Fairchild, *Command Decisions: Decision to Land United States Forces in Iceland, 1941* (Washington: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1990), *passim*.

Canadian troops unloading trucks and stores on arrival in Iceland. [© IWM H 3141, Imperial War Museum]

the British in securing the island as well as they possibly could. Things started off poorly, however. Reykjavik's small harbour was ill-equipped to receive large ships with substantial loads, posing massive challenges for British and Canadians alike. It took sixteen days to fully unload one of the incoming Canadian ships, causing a substantial drain on manpower who could have otherwise been training and getting to know the lay of the Icelandic land.[54] Making matters worse, hasty bulk loading of the ships back in Canada left many military trucks behind on the docks in Halifax. Likewise, 50,000 grenades were shipped without fuses, the men were given boots that wore out easily on Iceland's hard-rock surface and there was a severe lack of rain jackets.[55] Similar supply challenges would plague the Canadians for most of their time in Iceland.

Once on the ground, Z Force, which was an independent command from the British occupying force, set up camp just outside of Reykjavik and Page quickly began surveying the surrounding

[54] Fairchild, *Command Decisions*, 23.
[55] *Cents ans d'histoire d'un Régiment Canadian-francais: Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal, 1869-1969* (Montreal: Éditions du Jour, 1971), 97-102.

areas. Within forty-eight hours he believed Iceland's rocky terrain was "very favourable to machine gun defence tactics" and thus requested "a rather high proportion of this type of unit." His request was granted, with Page hearing on 20 June that two more Canadian battalions, including one machine gun unit, would arrive in early July.[56] The prospect of additional troops allowed Page and Lammie to plan for an expanded Canadian presence across Iceland. They decided the RRC would move to Kaldadarnes, approximately sixty kilometres southeast of Reykjavik, where some of them would help the Royal Air Force (RAF) build an air force station. Meanwhile, the incoming rifle battalion would set up in the Hafnarfjördhur area ten kilometres south of the capital. The machine gun battalion, in turn, would try to cover both Kaldadarnes and Reykjavik by way of British-supplied motor transport. The Canadians, like the British, were to be dispersed across a wide area, leading Page to agree with Lammie's suggestion that Z Force should communicate with their British counterparts "in all cases of emergency."[57]

Z Force was joined on 7 July by members of the Fusiliers Mont-Royal (FMR) and the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa (Machine Gun) (Camerons). The Camerons' war diary from the same day painted a vivid picture of the foreign land that would be their home for several months. "Reykjavik presented a city unlike any Canadian city," the diarist wrote. "The view from the boat reminded one of many coloured shoe boxes set around and on a hill."[58] Seeing Iceland from the side of that same incoming ship was somewhat more harrowing. Years after the war, in describing how he juggled his kit bag and bagpipes while climbing down a Jacob's Ladder, Cameron Highlander Graham Brown said, "it's a wonder some of us didn't fall into the sea."[59]

[56] Newlands, "'Z' Force in Iceland," 5-6.
[57] Newlands, "'Z' Force in Iceland," 6-7.
[58] War Diary, Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa, 7 July 1940, RG 24, volume 15024, Library and Archives Canada [LAC].
[59] Interview with Graham Brown, 3 June 1999, as transcribed by Gloria A. Morrison, in Gloria A. Morrison, "The Voices of Those Who Served: The Early War Years and the Men of the 1st Battalion, Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa (MG)" (MA thesis, University of Ottawa, 2001), 111.

Troops move into trenches near an Icelandic farm, August 1940. [© IWM H 3344, Imperial War Museum]

DISPERSED ACROSS ICELAND

By 11 July, seventeen different Canadian units were spread over more than eight locations across the country. A steady stream of operational orders moved members of Z Force around even more over the coming months, their destinations dictated by evolving needs and available resources. Page thus continued to face a "disperse or concentrate" dilemma in trying to sort out how and where to focus his finite resources. As the Z Force war diary noted, Page resolved "to try to do both tasks as well as he could, with what force he had available."[60] To that end, RRC spent two weeks completing defences and testing water pipes as possible tank obstacles northeast of Reyjkavik. The Camerons were ordered to complete construction of machine gun emplacements and to carry "out trials of communications between battalion headquarters and the detached companies."[61] The FMR,

[60] Newlands, "'Z' Force in Iceland," 5.
[61] Newlands, "'Z' Force in Iceland," 14.

meanwhile, helped build the Kaldadarnes airport and a network of trenches.[62]

Two additional operational orders over the coming months illustrate the evolving nature of this deployment. Issued on 14 August, Operation Order No. 7 of Z Force Headquarters, conveyed to Southern Sector, called for defensive planning "based on the retention of forward defended localities backed up by a mobile striking force." The localities were defined as the coastline. "These, together with the Kaldadarnes aerodrome, and the line of the Olfusa river from Alviddhra to Audsholt, were to be defended at all costs." Just over a month later, Operation Order No. 9, issued on 27 September, detailed changes to sector areas and commanders and assigned a new role to Z Force itself. From that point on, sectors were to be "known as North-Eastern (Akureyri) Sector, the Central Sector, the South-Western (Reykjavik) Sector, and the Western (Borgarnes) Sector."[63]

ONGOING SUPPLY WOES

The constraints of Reykjavik's harbour, leading to British demands that their ships be unloaded in the Icelandic capital and the waiting Canadian ships be sent off to be unloaded in Britain, exacerbated Z Force's ongoing supply challenges.[64] Housing conditions were no better. Members of Z Force were meant to live in Yukon-style cabins. Due to a chronic lack of supplies, however, many men were still sleeping in tents by September, with fellow Canadians bunking in Nissen huts provided by the Icelanders themselves.[65] Some of Page's men only moved out of their tents days before disembarking for

[62] Caroline D'Amours, "Training for Operation Jubilee: Tactics and Training in the Fusiliers Mont-Royal and the Dieppe Raid, 1939-1942," *Canadian Military History* 22, 4 (2015): 6.
[63] Newlands, "'Z' Force in Iceland," 17.
[64] Newlands, "'Z' Force in Iceland," 20-23.
[65] Marcelle Cinq-Mars, "Canadians and the military occupation of Iceland (1940-1941): from squalls to the 'black death'," Library and Archives Canada Blog, 5 November 2020, https://thediscoverblog.com/2020/11/05/canadians-and-the-military-occupation-of-iceland-1940-1941-from-squalls-to-the-black-death/.

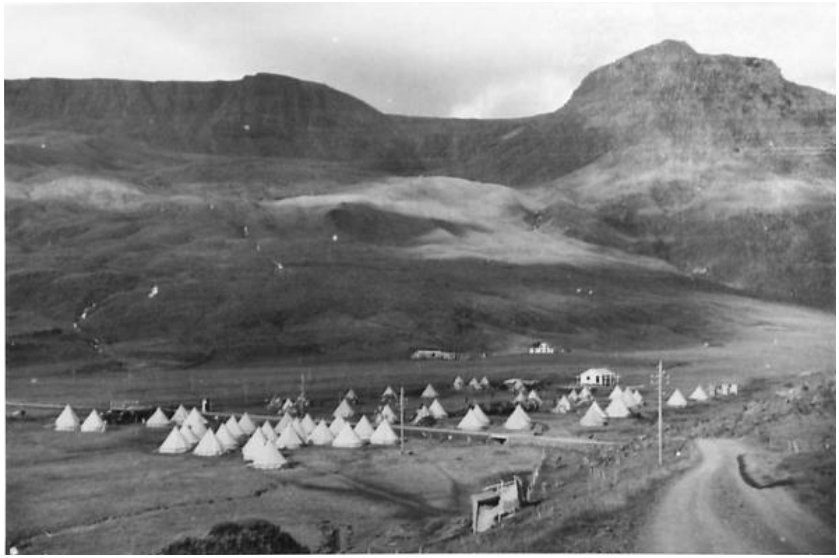
Panorama of two Cameron Highlanders tent camps, 1940. [© IWM H 3871, Imperial War Museum]

England at the end of October.[66] The Icelandic language also tested the Canadians as few, if any, of them could speak the local language. The Royal Canadian Legion tried to help by giving Page's men an Icelandic phrasebook but the book was all but useless as it "dwelt at length with such topics as railways (which are unknown in Iceland)." What's more, Page's official interpreter "could speak and understand Icelandic (after a fashion) but could not read it or write it, at least at first."[67]

Logistics and language were not the only challenges facing the Canadians dispatched to Iceland. Sheer boredom was a growing problem. The men were moved around a lot and were given plenty of tasks. But the fact was there was no military action of any note for the duration of the deployment for the RRC and FMR, although the Camerons, who stayed on until April 1941, spotted an overhead

[66] C. P. Stacey, Canadian Military Headquarters Reports, 1940-1948, Report No. 4 "Visit to Bordon Camp: Brigadier Page's reminiscences of Iceland, etc. The War and the English Countryside," 10 January 1941, https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/military-history/history-heritage/official-military-history-lineages/reports/military-headquarters-1940-1948/borden-camp-reminiscences-iceland-english-countryside.html.

[67] Stacey, "Visit to Bordon Camp."



Panorama of two Cameron Highlanders tent camps, 1940. [© IWM H 3870, Imperial War Museum]

German plane on 9 February 1941 in what was described as "a few lively moments."[68] Likewise, a few Camerons thought Germans were invading one evening, with one soldier firing his gun at an approaching boat. Turns out it was some surprised—and rather angry—British troops on a boat that had been blown off course by high winds.[69] Indeed, horrendous weather was an ongoing challenge. Virtually every entry of Page's laconically written diary starts with terse words about terrible local wind and rain conditions. On 11 September 1940, for instance, Page wrote "[r]ain and a gale," followed by a brief description of "terrific gales that nearly blew our car off the road."[70] One week later, a "sub-arctic hurricane" destroyed twenty tents and blew the roof off the kitchen.[71]

[68] Newlands, "'Z' Force in Iceland," 19.
[69] Robert Champoux, "Invasion scare in Iceland," Veterans Affairs Canada, video interview transcript, accessed 19 October 2021, https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/video-gallery/video/7526/rec.
[70] Journal of Major-General Lionel F. Page, 1940-1943, RG 24, volume 20411, file 958.001 (D1), LAC.
[71] "Highland Unit in Iceland Battles Sub-Arctic Storm," *Hamilton Spectator*, 18 September 1940.

Private Lucien Paiement was one of six Canadians who died in Iceland. He is buried in Reykjavik (Fossvogur) Cemetery. [Canadian Virtual War Memorial, Veterans Affairs Canada]

A combination of growing boredom and prolonged foul weather led to many cases of colds and flu.[72] It was also a factor in causing some mental health issues. Fred Hicks, a Cameron Highlander veteran of the Icelandic deployment, candidly remarked years later on the toll that the conditions took on many of his colleagues: "They'd go stark raving mad. We had a couple of them go wonky."[73] At least thirty-three men were sent home as they were deemed not physically or mentally fit to serve.[74] Page wrote in his diary on 29 July that he "visited hospital to see lunatic. Must get him away."[75] Many nerves were frayed, sometimes causing accidents. On 6 August, a member of the FMR on duty at a watching station on the south coast was shot and slightly wounded by what military investigators subsequently called a "case of nerves."[76] Tragically, some of his comrades were not so lucky. Six Canadians died during this deployment. Of these, three were Camerons, two from FMR and one from the Royal Canadian

[72] *Cents ans d'histoire d'un Régiment Canadian-francais*, 101.
[73] Interview by Gloria A. Morrison, Gloria A. Morrison, "The Voices of Those Who Served," 139.
[74] Morrison, "The Voices of Those Who Served," 140.
[75] Journal of Page, 29 July 1940, RG 24, volume 20411, file 958.001 (D1), LAC.
[76] Newlands, "'Z' Force in Iceland," 15.

Dinner time on the Grótta Peninsula near Reykjavik. [© IWM H 3136, Imperial War Museum]

Corps of Signals.[77] At least two of these were accidental drownings and one may have been suicide.[78]

Dealing with drudgery and bad weather led some men to hit the bottle hard. Heavy drinking by some Canadian troops had become such an issue that Routine Order No. 6, issued on 20 July 1940, warned "all Ranks" that Black Death, a very strong form of Icelandic alcohol, "may be very sudden in its effects. Personnel found in possession of this spirit or knowingly drinking it will be severely punished."[79] Those seeking more salubrious pursuits played sports to help pass the time. Playing soccer against the British was particularly popular, even if the Canadians usually lost. Other amusements included horseback

[77] The six Canadians who died in Iceland, in chronological order of death, are as follows: Private Lucien Paiement (FMR), died 1 October 1940, age 17; Signalman Gordon Latter (Royal Canadian Corps of Signals), died 5 October 1940, age 22; Corporal Adrian Slevan (FMR), died 16 October 1940, age not listed; Lance Corporal Kenneth Monaghan (Camerons), died 11 December 1940, age not listed; Warrant Officer Andrew Currie (Camerons), died 3 January 1941, age 34; and Corporal Edward Langman (Camerons), died 7 March 1941, age 27. See Commonwealth War Graves Commission website, www.cwgc.org.

[78] Author's conversation with Dr. Jeff Noakes, 6 May 2017.

[79] RRC, "Routine Order No. 6," 20 July 1940, RG 24, volume 15, file 225, LAC.

riding, climbing, swimming and going to the movies.[80] Letters from home also helped, with the first mailbag arriving from Halifax on 3 July.[81] Likewise, a small daily paper called *War News*, with reporting supplied by the Reykjavik Broadcasting Station and billing itself as "the first and only English paper in Iceland," circulated among Canadian soldiers to help keep spirits up.[82] Page did what he could to keep things positive. On 6 September, for example, he wrote to the Commanding Officer of the FMR to thank him and his men for the "very excellent work the drivers of your unit have performed" during their "long hours on the road," during which time the "excellent spirit they [the drivers] showed, was very much appreciated."[83]

FORGING CONNECTIONS

Undaunted by the considerable logistical, linguistic and climatic challenges they faced, Canadian troops kept close watch, along with the British, over land, sea and air for German attacks. Throughout it all, the Canadians learned to work together as a formation. On 4 September, for instance, troops of the RRC and pilots of the RAF's No. 98 Squadron did a series of exercises together, after the perpetually bad weather had abated, to see how ground troops could communicate with overhead planes. They tested "various methods of communication from ground to air, including wireless … and drills for the defence of convoys against air attack were practiced."[84] The Canadians, in conjunction with the British, prepared detailed evacuation plans in the event of a German invasion, as well as undertook countless reconnaissance missions across the island.[85] They also built tank traps, machine gun emplacements, coast-watching stations, aerodromes and landing fields that lasted for many years. The ability of the Canadians to adapt and learn during their time in

[80] "Canucks in Iceland Prepare Warm Welcome for Germans," *The Globe and Mail*, 8 August 1940.
[81] C. D. Sayles, "Z Force: Canadian Army in Iceland, 1940-1941," *BNA Topics* 57, 3 (2000):10-14.
[82] The edition from 30 July 1940 was reprinted in *The Globe and Mail* exactly one month later.
[83] Letter from Brig. Page to LCol P. Grenier, Officer Commanding, Fusiliers de Mont-Royal, 10 October 1940, RG 24, volume 15225, file 14, LAC.
[84] Newlands, "'Z' Force goes to Iceland," 25.
[85] Newlands, "'Z' Force goes to Iceland," 7-20.

Canadian soldiers in Hveragerdi in the summer of 1940. [National Museum of Iceland KL-1107]

Iceland did not go unnoticed. Major-General Henry Curtis, General Officer Commanding of the British Alabaster Force troops in Iceland who had arrived on 27 June to take over from Lammie,[86] sent Page an upbeat sending-off note on 30 October as many of the Canadians were leaving for England. In his note, Curtis said "the establishment of your force on land, the construction of defences and training have all been carried out with characteristic Canadian energy and thoroughness …. [I]t is our fervent hope to find ourselves alongside "Z" Force during the final advance to Victory."[87] Likewise, once the last Camerons had pulled out of Iceland in April 1941, Curtis wrote the British War Office saying that British forces "always felt it an honour to have the Canadians alongside them."[88]

The Canadians were also successful in building good relations with the locals, which was particularly important as they were living in very close quarters to the Icelanders. In the case of the FMR, the 124 soldiers living in Hveragerði employed locals to

[86] Newlands, "'Z' Force goes to Iceland," 7. In this report, Newlands incorrectly spells the name as "Curtiss."
[87] Letter of Major-General Curtis, Commander, Alabaster Force, to Brigadier Page, "Z" Force, 30 October 1940, RG 24, volume 10209, file 31, LAC.
[88] "Canadians Now in England, British Troops Hold Iceland," *The Globe and Mail*, 10 May 1941.

Canadian officers with "a fine Newfoundland dog." [© IWM H 3144, Imperial War Museum]

wash their kits and the Canadians often bought fish and chips in the basement of a nearby building.[89] The view of the mayor of Heimaey, an island off the west coast, is another case in point. In October, as the RRC were preparing to leave Heimaey, the mayor expressed his thanks for their conduct in a letter to Curtis: "It was with somewhat mixed feelings we greeted the soldiers of the British Empire when they arrived to the Western Isles some time ago, and I trust you will understand that from our point of view. Now, when they are leaving, I feel becoming to express my high regard for the correct and gentlemen-like behaviour of the soldiers under the able leadership of Lieut. C. Wilkinson. We could not ask for better men and better officers."[90] As ambivalent as the initial meetings may have been in some cases, Canadians were not altogether foreign to

[89] Njörður Sigurðsson, "Canadian soldiers in Hveragerði in the summer of 1940," *Krumminn*, 6 June 2020, https://krumminn.is/kanadiskir-hermenn-i-hveragerdi-sumarid-1940/. This article was sent to the author in an email from Sigurðsson on 26 February 2022. The source is in Icelandic and has been translated with Google Translate.

[90] Newlands, "'Z' Force in Iceland," 29.

the Icelanders. Page reported that on two occasions he "encountered residents of Iceland who had fought in the Canadian forces in the last war."[91] Even still, there was a core of Icelanders who despised the occupation of their island during the war.[92]

The Z Force deployment was not an unvarnished success considering the opportunity costs of the time they spent there. Could the Canadians sent to Iceland have been better used elsewhere? In writing about wartime training by the FMR, Caroline D'Amours argues that this Iceland interlude was a distraction from learning the basics. Their time in Iceland, she states, "interrupted the rhythm of individual training between July and October 1940." As a result, when the FMR arrived in England in November 1940, "none of them could boast that they had completely mastered the basic skills normally taught in a maximum time period of 12 weeks," a deficit D'Amours says cannot be blamed entirely on the "harried mobilization" to Iceland. [93] Given the brief, boring and blustery time the men of the FMR spent in Iceland, this is a legitimate perspective. However, they learned how to survive in challenging conditions, collaborate as a team, establish lines of defences and work with others in fellow combatant countries.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR LONGER-TERM IMPACT

By helping to secure Iceland, Canadians were instrumental in laying down the foundations for a significant and strategic Allied presence around Iceland for the rest of the war and beyond.[94] And they knew it. On 19 April 1941, ten days after the Camerons were told to start packing up to leave, an admiral in the Royal Canadian Navy wrote a memo outlining the value of Iceland to convoys: "We have chosen our battleground for the summer in the North Western Approaches where, with the help of Iceland, we can bring the maximum possible

[91] Stacey, "Visit to Bordon Camp."
[92] Laurie K. Bertram, *The Viking Immigrants: Icelandic North Americans* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 124.
[93] D'Amours, "Training for Operation Jubilee," 22.
[94] Iceland was one of twelve original signatories to the North Atlantic Treaty, signed on 4 April 1949. See Escott Reid, *Time of Fear and Hope: The Making of the North Atlantic Treaty, 1947-49* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), 42-46.

surface and air escort into play."[95] That battleground saw countless confrontations between Allied shipping and German U-boats over the coming years. As the admiral predicted, the expanding Allied presence on and around Iceland was a critical factor in several hard-fought successes during that time. But the icy waters around Iceland were also a graveyard for many men. On 24 May 1941, only three men of a crew of 1,418 survived when HMS *Hood*, which often anchored in Hvalfjördhur harbour north of Reykjavik, was sunk by the *Bismarck* and the *Prinz Eugen* during its ill-fated eastward dash across the Denmark Straight towards Iceland.[96] More than three years later, in October 1944, HMCS *Skeena* was lost in a strong gale while anchored not far off Iceland. Local Icelanders played heroic efforts in saving the crew, although fifteen sailors lost their lives.[97]

Using the wind-swept Hvalfjördhur harbour as a relay point for anti-submarine escorts, the Royal Navy pushed its convoy coverage in the spring of 1941 to roughly 35 degrees west. However, as Marc Milner writes, that still "left a gap westward to the limits of local Canadian escort from Halifax and Sydney, which reached to the Grand Banks."[98] The Newfoundland Escort Force, created in July of that year by the Royal Canadian Navy, helped fill that gap by coordinating escort duties with the Royal Navy and sharing facilities at Hvalfjördhur.[99] Henceforth, Iceland played a central role for mid-

[95] W. A. B. Douglas, Roger Sarty, Michael Whitby, with Robert H. Caldwell, William Johnston and William G. P. Rawling, *No Higher Purpose: The Official Operational History of the Royal Canadian Navy in the Second World War, 1939-1943*, Vol. II, Part 1 (St. Catharines: Vanwell Publishing, 2002), 180. The name of the admiral is not mentioned in this reference.

[96] All three men were first shipped to Reykjavik for their initial recovery, then off to Britain for further recovery and investigations into the sinking. "Tilburn, Robert Ernest (Oral history)," IWM 11746, produced 4 December 1990, Oral History Interviews, Imperial War Museum, https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80011489.

[97] W. A. B. Douglas, Roger Sarty, Michael Whitby, with Robert H. Caldwell, William Johnston and William G. P. Rawling, *A Blue Water Navy: The Official Operational History of the Royal Canadian Navy in the Second World War, 1943-1945*, Vol. II, Part 2 (St. Catharines: Vanwell Publishing, 2007), 384-87.

[98] Marc Milner, "The Newfoundland Escort Force: Navy, Part 29," *Legion Magazine*, 3 October 2008.

[99] W. G. D. Lund, "The Royal Canadian Navy's Quest for Autonomy in the North West Atlantic," in *RCN in Retrospect, 1910-1968*, ed. James Boutilier, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982), 138-58; and Marc Milner, *North Atlantic Run: The Royal Canadian Navy and the Battle for the Convoys* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 41-43.

ocean escorts for convoys shipping men and materiel between North America and Britain, as well as for Arctic-bound convoys leaving Hvalfjördhur and Reykjavik with critical supplies for the Soviet Union along what became known as the "Murmansk Run."[100] The strategic value of Iceland was also keenly evident in terms of Allied air power. Canadian-built aerodromes were valuable for many years and for many reasons. By July 1942, the RAF operated ten Liberator planes out of Reykjavik to provide better protection for trans-Atlantic convoys traveling through the air gap.[101] The value of this Iceland-based, gap-diminishing capacity increased over the coming years.[102] From 1941 onwards, these bases were frequently used as a stopping-off location for trans-Atlantic flights, particularly for new planes being flown from North America to Europe by Ferry Command pilots. One personal account highlighted Iceland's value as a stepping stone: "The type of ship & the weather determines the route you take. I'll take the Iceland trip if possible. It is broken up over 3 days and the hops are fairly short."[103]

Using those aerodromes built by fellow Canadians early in the war, Royal Canadian Air Force Squadron No. 162, temporarily assigned to RAF Coastal Command, arrived in Reykjavik in early 1944. By the start of February, a total of 424 airmen of 162 Squadron had arrived in Iceland and they moved between Iceland and Scotland until the end of the war. Members of 162 Squadron were credited with destroying six German U-boats during their time in Iceland and Scotland and they were sent back to Canada in July 1945.[104] As Marcelle Cinq-Mars, Senior Archivist at Library and Archives Canada, writes, this ability to land and re-fuel in Iceland "underscored the strategic value of Iceland for Allied Forces."[105]

[100] Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: The Hinge of Fate* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1951), 228-47.
[101] Richard Goette, "Britain and the Delay in Closing the Mid-Atlantic 'Air Gap' During the Battle of the Atlantic," *The Northern Mariner* 15, 4 (October 2005): 30.
[102] Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*: *Closing the Ring* (London: Cassell & Co, Ltd., 1952), 6-9.
[103] Christie, *Ocean Bridge,* 188.
[104] W. A. B. Douglas, *The Creation of A National Air Force: The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force,* Volume II (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 581-610, 665.
[105] Cinq-Mars, "Canadians and the military occupation of Iceland (1940-1941)".

PISTOL WAS NEVER AIMED AT ICELAND

Germans never invaded Iceland in the end and they never bombed Reykjavik.[106] In other words, the Nazis did not actually point their proverbial pistol at England, America and Canada from Iceland. Nor did they seriously consider invading Iceland, even if the strategic opportunities it represented were clear and tempting. This accords with the view—and the hope—in Ottawa on the day Norway and Denmark fell in April 1940 that it would be difficult for Germany to hold Iceland.[107]

There was a brief period in early summer 1940 when the Germans discussed the possibility of taking Iceland. According to captured German naval plans, the Commander-in-Chief of the Kriegsmarine, Admiral Erich Raeder, was told on the afternoon of 12 June that the invasion of Iceland was under consideration at the very highest levels and was to be given the cover name *Ikarus*. The idea of seizing Iceland likely originated with Hitler himself without any previous discussion with the Kriegsmarine. A deputy chief of the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht told his American interrogators after the war that Hitler "wanted to prevent anyone else from coming there; in second place, he also wanted to use Iceland as an air base for the protection of our submarines operating in that area."[108] Raeder understood the arguments in favour of a German invasion of Iceland as a counter-stroke to a British blockade, the risks of which presented "a continuous and unbearable threat to German safety. It must be broken ONCE AND FOR ALL."[109] To that end, his senior planners suggested that "Iceland should be annexed and the Icelandic area should be exploited as a naval and air base."[110]

[106] Upwards of 230 Icelanders died during the war, mostly from cargo ship and fishing accidents. See Gudni Th. Johannesson, *The History of Iceland* (Oxford: Greenwood Press, 2013), 107.

[107] Hours after Denmark fell, Canadian officials in Ottawa believed the Germans would be hard-pressed to control Iceland. See "Won't Send Canadians Yet to Fight on Norse Front," *Toronto Daily Star*, 9 April 1940.

[108] Bittner, *The Lion and the White Falcon*, 50.

[109] Jak Showell (foreword), *Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs, 1939-1945* (London: Greenhill, 1990), 20 June 1940, annex 2: Views of the Naval Staff on the Policy of Bases, 65, as cited in Bittner, *The Lion and the White Falcon*, 53. Capital letters found in the original.

[110] "Minutes of the Conference of the Commander in Chief, Navy, with the Führer on 20 June 1940 at Wolfsschlucht, Annex 2, 'Views of the Seekriegsleitung on the Policy Bases'," accessed 17 October 2021, https://www.kbismarck.com/fuhrer-conference-20-6-40.html.

On balance, though, Raeder felt Iceland was a 'bridge too far' despite the allure of using the island to attack trans-Atlantic trade and, quite possibly, North America itself. His concerns with Hitler's Icelandic ambitions were clear in the translated Kriegsmarine war diary of 12 June, the same day he was told about Hitler's plans: "The risks involved in conveying troops across a sea area dominated by the enemy are incompatible with any results to be expected from the occupation."[111] Just over a week later, in a meeting with Hitler, Raeder said "it is impossible to maintain continuous supplies. The entire Navy will have to be used for operation '*Ikarus*'."[112] In other words, German leaders in Berlin were deciding privately not to go to Iceland at almost the exact same time King was speaking publicly in Ottawa about the urgent need to send Canadians to Iceland to defend it. Raeder reiterated his view in a subsequent meeting with Hitler on 26 September 1940, during which Hitler agreed that "islands taken by the Luftwaffe in surprise attacks can be held only by troops and materiel transported with the assistance of the Navy."[113] For their part, the German air force planners felt it was virtually impossible to build airfields in Iceland, not to mention the heavy constraints on their resources posed by the ongoing air raids over Britain.[114] Realising they did not have capacity to take Iceland, the Germans dropped the idea. *Ikarus* never got off the ground.

Had the Germans arrived *en masse* in Iceland during those tense days of May and June 1940, they may have had a good chance of taking it. Roger Rowley, a Canadian officer who served in Iceland, certainly felt that way, as he laid out in an interview given in 2000: "All they had to do was kill a few fellas before they got into the mountains. And take Reykjavik and Akureyi and a couple of other

[111] "The United States in Iceland, 1941-1942 – Appendix: A German Invasion of Iceland?", *Marine Corps Historical Reference Pamphlet* (Historical Division, U.S. Marine Corps, 1970), 20-21.

[112] Showell, *Fuehrer Conferences,* 110-12.

[113] "Report of the Commander in Chief, Navy, to the Führer on 26 September 1940, at 1700, Annex 2," accessed 17 October 2021, https://www.kbismarck.com/fuhrer-conference-20-6-40.html.

[114] F. H. Hinsley, *Hitler's Strategy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 65-67; and Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War: 1939-1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2008) 139-45.

places and the war was over."[115] Meanwhile, the men of the FMR took a humorous approach in believing how they could fend off the Germans. According to the battalion's official history, they were often heard saying "Si les Allemands viennent on pourra toujours les égratinger!"[116] Fortunately for Z Force and others, the Canadians never had to contend with such a fate while in Iceland.

A FINAL TALLY

In the end, a total of 2,653 Canadians—76 officers and 2,577 men—served in Iceland between June 1940 and April 1941.[117] The peak number dwindled significantly as of 31 October when the RRC and the FMR left Iceland to rejoin the 2nd Division in Britain. The Camerons pulled out of Reykjavik harbour on 28 April 1941, arriving three days later in Greenock, Scotland. Their war diarist, no doubt weary from his challenging Icelandic sojourn, reported that the men "enjoyed the sight of trees which they hadn't seen for ten months and as long as daylight lasted, faces were pressed to the train windows as they drank in the scenery of the new country."[118]

Canada's initial Iceland deployment was over and the six men who never came home from it are buried in Iceland: five in the Reykjavik (Fossvogur) Cemetery and one in the Reydargjordur Cemetery in eastern Iceland. A further forty-two Canadians—twenty-six from the Royal Canadian Air Force, two from the Royal Canadian Navy and fourteen from the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve—all of

[115] Interview on 20 June 2000 with Roger Rowley, Cameron Highlanders, Morrison, "The Voices of Those Who Served," 125. Rowley, deployed to Iceland as a Captain, rose to the rank of major-general before retiring in 1968. He died on 14 February 2007. See his obituary in *The Ottawa Citizen*, 19 February 2007. See also Randall Wakelam and Howard G. Coombs, eds., *Report of the Officer Development Board: Maj-Gen Roger Rowley and the Education of the Canadian Forces* (Waterloo: LCMSDS Press of Wilfrid Laurier University, 2010); and Peter Kasurak, "Major-General Roger Rowley and the Failure of Military Reform, 1958-1969," *Canadian Military History* 29, 2 (2020), 1-30.

[116] Morrison, "The Voices of Those Who Served," 98.

[117] Donald F. Bittner, "Canadian Militia Mobilization and Deployment for War: The Iceland Experience of 1940," *Armed Forces and Society* 18, 3 (Spring 1992): 345.

[118] War Diary, Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa, 1-2 May 1941, RG 24, volume 15024, LAC.

whom died in or near Iceland after the last Cameron pulled out in April 1941, are also buried in Reykjavik.[119]

All three regiments represented in Z Force went on to play key roles in other theatres. Members of the RRC and FMR stormed the beaches of Dieppe in August 1942, but at very high costs indeed.[120] The FMR suffered the highest number of fatal and non-fatal casualties of officers and men—a total of 584—of any single unit in that ill-fated action. Meanwhile, the RRC, with a total of 556 casualties, suffered the highest number of fatalities (227) of any unit.[121] In Normandy less than two years later, the Camerons, as divisional troops attached to the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, provided suppressing fire support and heavy mortars with their Vickers machine guns on D-Day as the Canadians moved inland.[122]

The Canadian presence in Iceland—variously manifest on land, on water and in the air—added considerable strategic value over time to the larger war effort. And it began with the initial, ill-equipped but well-intentioned military deployment in the summer of 1940—an important chapter in a 1,000-year-old, trans-Atlantic story.

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[119] Figures from Commonwealth War Graves Commission, www.cwgc.org.
[120] David O'Keefe, *One Day in August* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2014), 376-402.
[121] Numbers calculated by author based on figures found in Stacey, *Six Years of War*, 398.
[122] Terry Copp, *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 53-69. On D-Day itself, one Cameron died and three others were injured. See Stacey, *Victory Campaign,* Appendix B, 650.