

Halifax, Nova Scotia in World War II: An Allied Staging Area

By

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This essay was an outgrowth of a conference in Stuttgart, Germany in September 1989. The conference proceedings were published in 1991, and the following essay, translated into German, was my contribution¹. In essence, it sums up my research on wartime Halifax that eventually became my doctoral dissertation in 1994. NOTE: in the footnotes, for "NA" read Library and Archives Canada, and for "PANS" read Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management. –JW (March 2009)

Halifax, Nova Scotia, was founded in 1749 as a military outpost of the British empire. A rocky peninsula bounded on the east and north by a magnificent ice-free harbour, the city figured prominently in imperial strategic planning for more than a century. After the American Civil War, however, the British grew weary of maintaining the extensive military infrastructure of Halifax. Although the Citadel--an imposing hilltop fortress--and its surrounding outposts were manned by Canadians after 1906, the turn of the century brought few other changes: the urban population had grown by less than 7 per cent during the previous twenty years.²

The controversial decision in 1910 to create a Canadian Naval Service prompted speculation as to whether Ottawa would undertake improvements to the obsolete naval facilities at Halifax. British strategists--worried about the security of their Asian possessions--advised their colonial counterparts to concentrate naval strength on the Pacific coast.³ While the Canadians rejected this idea, political compromises nevertheless prevented either a strong commitment to spending for home defence or unqualified support of British naval policy. Thus born of an indifferent parent, the Royal Canadian Navy began life as little more than a glorified coast guard, with no higher purpose--if war came--than to be an obsequious appendage of the Royal Navy. At

¹ Marlene P. Hiller, Eberhard Jackel, and Jurgen Rohwer, eds., Städte im 2. Weltkrieg (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 1991).

2. Civic Planning Commission, The Master Plan for the City of Halifax (Halifax, 1945), p. 44.

3. Donald Creighton, Canada's First Century (Toronto, 1970), p. 117; see also Barry M. Gough, "The Royal Navy's Legacy to the Royal Canadian Navy in the Pacific, 1880-1914", in James A. Boutilier, The RCN in Retrospect, 1910-1968 (Vancouver, 1982), pp. 1-12.

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the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, Canada's sole capital ship on the east coast lay alongside the Halifax Dockyard, unmanned, out of commission and out of ammunition.⁴

Nevertheless, the First World War substantially restored the city's military importance, at least to the British. Halifax became the embarkation point for nearly 300,000 Canadian troops, an examination port for all neutral shipping outward-bound from North America, and a strategic coaling station for British dreadnoughts and cruisers. The value of exports passing through the port soared from \$15.7 million dollars to \$141.6 million in just four years;⁵ however, whatever fleeting economic benefit accrued from this wartime activity seemed insignificant after two ships collided in Halifax harbour on December 6, 1917. The "Mont Blanc", a munitions ship carrying 2,500 tons of explosives, caught fire and blew up, laying waste to nearly half the city. A one-square-mile area of the working class north end was completely obliterated--at least two thousand inhabitants perished. The homes of six thousand people were reduced "to flinders"; 1,630 buildings were totally destroyed and thousands more damaged to such an extent that 25,000 survivors were left without adequate shelter.⁶ Many of the 9,000 injured were disfigured or blinded by flying shards of glass and other debris. The next day, a severe blizzard descended on the stricken city, and to make matters worse, in 1918 an epidemic of influenza claimed many more victims housed in emergency, ramshackle shelters. The realization that modern warfare could wreak such havoc on an urban centre so distant from the front lines was a cruel lesson not soon forgotten.⁷ No man-made disaster of comparable proportions had ever befallen a North American city.⁸

4.Thomas H. Raddall, Warden of the North (London, 1950), p. 255.

5.Public Archives of Nova Scotia [PANS], MICRO: PLACES: HALIFAX STATISTICS, compiled by E.A. Saunders. (n.d.)

6.Raddall, pp. 266-272; Graham Metson, ed., The Halifax Explosion: December 6, 1917 (Toronto, 1978), p. 168.

7.On the Halifax Explosion, see S.H. Prince, Catastrophe and Social Change: based upon a sociological study of the Halifax Disaster (New York, 1920); A.W.H. Eaton, "The Great Tragedy of 1917" Americana vol. 15 no. 1 (1921), pp. 38-53; Michael J. Bird, The Town that Died (New York, 1963). See also Metson, op cit., Raddall, op. cit., pp. 266-72; Hugh MacLennan, Barometer Rising (Toronto, 1941); On the aftermath, see John C. Weaver, "Reconstruction of the Richmond District in Halifax: A Canadian Episode in Public Housing and Town Planning, 1918-1921", Plan Canada 16 (March 1976).

8.The Messines Ridge explosion six months before, which was held by some to be the largest man-made detonation up to that time,

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Convoys for merchant shipping had been reluctantly introduced in the spring of 1917, although troop transports--sometimes as many as forty--were sailing in convoy from Halifax since early 1915.⁹ Despite unfounded rumours of sabotage, the collision between a Norwegian tramp chartered for the Belgian relief effort, and a French munitions ship, was most likely an accident. It was an unavoidable hazard of the convoy system: the maneuvering of vessels at close quarters was particularly risky when they were manned by crews of many nationalities.

Before the war, as many as 100,000 immigrants per year disembarked at the crumbling wharves along Water Street. Most would never see the Atlantic Ocean again--they were bound for hardscrabble Prairie farms or urban ethnic enclaves in Central Canada. While other Canadian cities grew at astronomical rates between 1901 and 1911--Calgary at 1,000 per cent, Hamilton and Ottawa, 50 per cent, the population of Halifax increased by just ten per cent.¹⁰ Even so, the east benefited from the national economic boom of that decade, and after the Conservatives won the federal election in 1911 under Halifax lawyer Robert Borden, the federal government announced ambitious plans to expand facilities of the Intercolonial Railway at the port of Halifax, with new piers, transit sheds, railway yards, a modern station and hotel. The outbreak of war in 1914 caused delays, but most of the infrastructure was completed within ten years.¹¹

The 1920's were relatively lean years for the port of Halifax. Even though it was the

employed 450 tons of ammonal--only one-fifth the quantity set off in the Halifax disaster. C.F. Horne, ed., Source Records of the Great War Vol. 5 (n.p., 1923), p. 207. There were two non-nuclear explosions during the Second World War of comparable magnitude to the Halifax Explosion; both occurred in 1944. In April, the "Fort Stikine" out of Liverpool caught fire in the harbour at Bombay, India. This vessel carried a varied cargo of arms, aircraft and bombs, including 1,200 tons of explosive. Two earth-shattering blasts a half-hour apart wrecked "a huge area of [the] docks...reduced ships to scrap metal, killed or injured thousands and rendered countless others homeless..." W.H. Mitchell and L.A. Simpson, The Oceans, the Forts and the Parks (Liverpool, 1966), pp. 52-53. On November 27, "between 3,500 and 4,000 tons of high explosive went off ninety feet under Staffordshire" in Central England. Because the munitions dump was so far underground and located in a rural area, only sixty-eight people were killed. Rumours of sabotage abounded, but the exact cause of the blast was never determined. Byron Rogers, "Britain's Biggest Bang", The Weekend Guardian March 11-12, 1989.

9. Gilbert N. Tucker, The Naval Service of Canada, Vol. II: Activities on Shore during the Second World War (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1952), p. 337. M. Stuart Hunt, Nova Scotia's Part in the Great War (Halifax, 1920), pp. 243-244, 306-310.

10. Robert Craig Brown and Ramsay Cook, Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed (Toronto, 1974), p. 99.

11. Raddall, pp. 247-49.

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nation's busiest port in 1919 (thanks largely to troopships laden with 220,000 returning soldiers), changes in government policy had stemmed the prewar tide of European immigrants.¹² One of the few economic opportunities--smuggling rum from St. Pierre et Miquelon to the "Boston states" -- attracted the young and the unscrupulous.¹³ Persistent lobbying by Maritime politicians reminded the federal government of its commitment to upgrading the east coast "winter ports," and Halifax finally received a grain elevator, cold storage plant and other facilities promised many years before.¹⁴ Because its urban economy included few major industries (an oil refinery, sugar refinery, shipyard, ropeworks, and a candy factory), the impact of the Great Depression was less severe on Halifax than cities in Central and Western Canada. Of greater significance to the long term economic development of Halifax was its role as a "national port", administered by federally-appointed managers and discouraged from engaging in outright competition with other ports such as Saint John, Montreal and Portland, Maine. Too often patronage appointments and political expediency in the distribution of capital works encouraged a custodial mindset among port administrators.¹⁵ Further centralization of federal port authority in 1936 elicited protests from the Halifax business community that "remote control" was eroding local autonomy.¹⁶ Although the appointment of a Haligonian to the position of Port Manager allayed fears somewhat, the suspicion lingered that only "a partial vision of greatness as a national port" would ever be realized.¹⁷

12. Donald Avery, 'Dangerous Foreigners': European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932 (Toronto, 1979), p. 96.

13. Charles Ritchie, An Appetite for Life (Toronto, 1977), p. 60.

14. Raddall, p. 279; Ernest R. Forbes, The Maritime Rights Movement, 1919-1927 (Montreal, 1979), pp. 54-55, 63.

15. Geoffrey R. McIntyre, "A Comparative Analysis of Federal Port Policy in the United States and Canada", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, New York University 1978, pp. 70, 72-73. Two-thirds of harbour facilities at Halifax were under the direct control of Canadian National Railways, a Crown Corporation; while the port of Saint John, Halifax's perennial rival, was operated jointly by the city and a privately-owned corporation, Canadian Pacific Railway.

16. Commercial News 16 (May, 1936), p. 3. See also the persistent editorial refrain in the Halifax Mail, 20-27 March 1936.

17. D.C. Harvey, "From the Citadel", Port and Province (September, 1937), p. 29. The influence of Montreal was surely behind the creation of the National Harbours Board, speculated the Halifax Mail on 27 March 1936.

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Foreign interest in the port of Halifax seemed to intensify in the late 1930's, though not for commercial reasons. One day in 1937, observers watched in fascination as the German dirigible "Hindenburg" paused overhead one day to take photographs of the Dockyard, harbour and dilapidated Citadel before continuing on to New Jersey.¹⁸ The gathering of sensitive information could take many forms: in mid-August 1939, the German Consul General to Canada inquired of the British High Commissioner, Sir Gerald Campbell, whether he might borrow the Commissioner's maps "because he had just received orders from Berlin to make a tour of the Maritime Provinces".¹⁹ In the event, the Consul General cancelled his trip, but it is doubtful whether he could have provided his superiors with anything they did not already know. Military intelligence in November 1939 reported that German shortwave radio broadcasts had announced the number of ships departing in convoy from Halifax.²⁰

Ironically, at the same time Campbell was conversing with the German consul, he was also informing the Canadian government that the Royal Navy had requested the use of Halifax for its America and West Indies Squadron, then based on Bermuda.²¹ When Canada declared war on 10 September, Halifax was for all intents and purposes a Royal Navy port. It would remain so until the Third Battle Squadron withdrew in the fall of 1941, whereupon the United States Navy assumed nominal control of naval operations on the Atlantic seaboard. It was not until mid-1943 that the Royal Canadian Navy "assumed responsibility for the protection and control of shipping in the North West Atlantic."²²

18.Raddall, p. 284.

19.Sir Gerald Campbell, Of True Experience (New York, 1947), p. 95.

20.NA RG24 vol. 11,043 file 21-2-1 (vol. 1), "Intelligence reports - general 1939-45", Mead to Reid, 10 November 1939. The Canadian contribution to the Battle of the Atlantic is told in Marc Milner, North Atlantic Run (Toronto, 1985). On the Halifax naval base, see Tucker, Chapter 5, pp. 105-146, and on merchant shipping and the organization of convoys out of eastern Canadian ports, including Halifax, see ibid., Chapters 12 and 13, pp. 336-401.

21.C.P. Stacey, Arms, Men and Governments (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1970), p. 10.

22.See W.G.D. Lund, "The Royal Canadian Navy's Quest for Autonomy in the North West Atlantic: 1941-43", in James A. Boutilier, ed., RCN in Retrospect (Vancouver, 1982), pp. 138-157.

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With the coming of war, Halifax's peacetime liabilities once again became valuable assets. The close proximity to the sea route between the eastern seaboard of the United States and Great Britain made Halifax an ideal base for escorts, a perfect convoy-assembly point, and a convenient embarkation port for overseas-bound troops. Nearly 150 troop convoys sailed from Halifax over the course of the war--including several trips by the huge liners "Queen Mary" and "Queen Elizabeth". The first merchant convoy left Halifax six days after Canada declared war.²³ Following on the pattern established during the First World War, convoy sailings initially took place every eight days. Being several hundred miles closer to Europe meant fewer perilous days and nights at sea for convoys, and, moreover, compensated for the inefficiency of vessels travelling together. A convoy must proceed at a reduced rate to accommodate the slowest vessels, to keep in formation during heavy weather, and because concentrated ship movements tend to overload port facilities at both the source and destination. For these and other reasons, it has been estimated that "every two ships in convoy cost the equivalent in shipping delays of nearly one whole vessel".²⁴

In terms of available facilities, four factors contributed to the preeminence of Halifax as a convoy-assembly port: 1) its sheltered anchorage capable of accommodating 145 oceangoing vessels, (twice the extent of its nearest rival, Vancouver); 2) the presence of a petroleum refinery and huge storage tanks across the harbour at Imperoyal. By the end of 1944, oil stocks there would be four times larger than reserves at Montreal.²⁵ Nearly half the total cargo tonnage handled at Halifax during the last three years of war was petroleum crude and fuel.²⁶

Thanks to the building programme started a decade before and completed in 1934, which had included the construction of a 2,000-foot quay wall, Halifax was the only eastern Canadian

23. Gilbert N. Tucker, The Naval Service of Canada, Vol. II: Activities on Shore during the Second World War (Ottawa, 1952), pp. 119, 370.

24. Tucker, p. 339.

25. Tucker, APPENDIX IX, p. 537.

26. Canada. National Harbours Board, Annual Report 1944, 1946.

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port capable of handling with ease the largest commercial liners and Royal Navy warships.

The movement of troops through the port of Halifax was facilitated by extensive marshalling yards of the Canadian National Railways, as well as the huge immigration shed adjacent to Piers 20-22. But troop traffic tended to be much heavier than the peacetime influx of new arrivals, owing to the increased capacity of passenger liners converted for war duty. In addition, the traffic flow was in the opposite direction; whereas immigrants usually boarded the first available westbound train out of Halifax, troops awaiting embarkation orders had to be quartered in the city for unspecified lengths of time. As a result, hotel accommodation was woefully inadequate to meet the wartime demand. Troop movements also imposed innumerable delays in other waterfront loading operations, often tying up freight traffic on rail lines for days at a time.²⁷

After the fall of France, Halifax naval shore establishments struggled to keep pace with manning, training, accommodation, recreation and administrative responsibilities related to the expansion from a peacetime force of about 2,000 to nearly 100,000 by 1945.²⁸ Many technical problems and political intrigues developed as a result of the relative isolation of Naval Service Headquarters--located at Ottawa, a thousand miles inland--from operational command in Halifax. These difficulties contributed to an overall lowering of efficiency of the Royal Canadian Navy.²⁹ In the early stages of the war, manning policy formulated in Ottawa and applied at Halifax was roundly criticized by officer for "undermining the effectiveness of his command, endangering the lives of seamen, and ruining the reputation of the service".³⁰ Rapid expansion produced a host of troubles with regard to naval personnel ashore: one of many similar reports found "a general deterioration in discipline more or less condoned by Senior Officers" in Halifax. Among the

27.Tucker, p. 345.

28.Tucker, pp. 7, 478.

29.David Zimmerman, The Great Naval Battle of Ottawa (Toronto, 1989), pp. 58, 117-120, 164-165.

30.Marc Milner

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causes enumerated were the accelerated basic training programme to meet the demands of new ship construction, the informal routine aboard small ships, which bred a casual attitude among the lower ranks and junior officers that infuriated their superiors, and the limited resources of the Shore Patrol.³¹

In addition, there was poor co-ordination between the three services in Halifax, in order to make the best use of limited recreational facilities. The Royal Canadian Air Force operated a base at Eastern Passage across the harbour, and the RCAF also occupied an embarkation depot on the peninsula, handling British Commonwealth pilots who had completed their training in Canada and were headed overseas. The Army personnel stationed in Halifax were relatively few in comparison with the other services; their duties were confined mainly to manning coastal defence batteries, range-finders, signal stations and anti-aircraft searchlights and guns.³² More work seems to have been performed preparing the Citadel for the Royal Visit of 1939 than any subsequent wartime improvements. The south magazine inside the fort began the war as a wet canteen, but was converted to an anti-aircraft operations room in September 1943.³³

Perhaps the most important function of the port was as a repair and maintenance base. Bad weather proved to be the mariner's most feared enemy--much worse than the U-boat--demanding constant vigilance and putting intolerable demands on repair facilities at North Atlantic ports. As the war advanced, pressing needs at British and American bases and competition for labour and materials from new ship construction intensified the demands on Halifax as vessels sought layovers and repair time there after being turned down at other facilities.³⁴ In addition, installing defensive apparatus and armament so merchant ships could protect themselves against enemy attack was an ongoing challenge due to ever-present

31.PANS MG2 Angus L. Macdonald papers, F883/30, Connolly to C.N.S., 3 July 1944.

32.Halifax Mail-Star, 14 August 1951, 16 November 1961.

33.Brenda Dunn "The Halifax Citadel, 1906-51: The Canadian Period", Parks Canada Manuscript Report No. 284 (1977), pp. 18-19. The south magazine was a versatile structure; later it would serve as an art gallery and tea room.

34.Tucker, p. 141.

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shortages of skilled labour and delays in acquiring the necessary equipment. Deperming and degaussing procedures, installation of anti-torpedo nets, anti-acoustic torpedo decoys (CAT), paravane gear and radar, were just a few of the tasks so affected. Naval vessels were no less preoccupied with repairs and alterations; the official history of the Royal Canadian Navy noted that "the refit and repair of warships continued to be the major problem faced by east-coast bases until the end of the war".³⁵ Even as merchant vessels badly in need of repair were clogging berths in Halifax harbour, corvettes were being diverted to other ports in North America or Great Britain to receive urgent servicing.

The wartime social structure of Halifax, although based primarily upon occupational status and economic class, also possessed nativist and racial overtones. The 1941 Census of Canada shows a population overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon, Scottish and Irish (82%) in ethnic origin, with 9% French-Canadian, 4% Dutch, 1.3% Afro-Canadian, 1.3% German and the balance of Italian and Scandinavian descent.³⁶ Religious affiliations predictably favoured Protestant denominations (58%), followed by Roman Catholics (41%). Jews made up 1% of the population, although they, like blacks, were under-represented in the census. Afro-Canadians were the most visible and disadvantaged minority in Halifax: discrimination existed in terms of education, employment opportunities and housing. The war had little positive socio-economic impact on the black community, other than providing additional jobs in stevedoring and cartage. But the wartime influx also hastened the onset of urbanization and types of employment did not favour the semi-skilled worker. The most common occupation among black working males was a sleeping car porter. The community of Africville, a black shantytown at the northern tip of the Halifax peninsula, knew that its days were numbered when civic planners began discussing issues like "zoning" and "land use" of undeveloped areas within city limits. In September 1943, a naval

35. Tucker, p. 145.

36. Wilson and McIntosh, p. 103. A postwar survey of population distribution of Afro-Canadians living on the Halifax peninsula noted that Jews and blacks were traditionally undercounted in the census, and that the probable number of Afro-Canadian citizens was closer to 2 per cent. Institute of Public Affairs, Dalhousie University, The Condition of the Negroes of Halifax City, Nova Scotia (Halifax, 1962), pp. 1, 4-5.

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medical officer at H.M.C.S. "Stadacona" submitted a memorandum strongly urging that a housing project be provided for naval personnel "on the basis of expected post war complement". "Space is available", the officer added, "in the area now known as Africville".³⁷ And what was to become of the 400 inhabitants of the century-old settlement that was already there? The doctor makes no mention of this small detail.

Service-civilian relations, which were strained at best, showed pronounced nativist tendencies. Landlords (and not a few landladies) refused rental accommodation to servicemen and their families on a regular basis.³⁸ Storekeepers favoured one service over the others in the distribution of rationed goods or with special prices.³⁹ The enmity of certain elements of the civilian population towards the navy almost certainly contributed to the rampage of service personnel on V-E Day.⁴⁰ Much of this behavior--on both sides--may be attributed to the intense competition for scarce resources among a highly-charged populace in a severely overcrowded community.

One example of the poor state of navy-civilian relations must suffice: in May, 1944, the Officer Commanding at H.M.C.S. Stadacona, the primary Royal Canadian Navy establishment in Halifax, received a letter from a private citizen expressing the opinion that naval personnel were "unreliable, irresponsible and tricky individuals". The Halifax resident complained that landladies and landlords were being "victimized and blackmailed" by service people who, once ensconced in an apartment or flat, seemed only too eager to "involve the landlord in difficulties with the Rentals Board on some...concocted grievance". The writer suggested that the Navy undertake measures to avoid referring such disputes to the Rentals Board, in order that "unfavourable

37.NA RG24 vol. 11,105 file 52-3-2 (vol. 1) Memorandum: "Halifax Housing", Surgeon Captain D.W. Johnstone VR, 21 September 1943.

38.Dianne J. Taylor, There's No Wife Like It (Victoria, 1975), p. 116.

39.Kay Piersdorff, "Anybody here from the West?" Nova Scotia Historical Review vol. 5 no. 1 (1985), p. 9.

40.See, for example, William H. Pugsley, Saints, Devils and Ordinary Seamen (Toronto, 1945), p. 100; W.H. Pugsley, Sailor Remember (Toronto, 1948), p. 77; Taylor, p. 122.

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publicity and deceitful activities of unethical personnel can be controlled at the source".

Replying to these charges, a naval officer wrote that naval personnel "for whom service accommodation is not available and who must live ashore are in precisely the same position as civilian residents of Halifax and it is not considered possible to curtail their private freedom of action in any way...[therefore] I am unable to take action against a group of men who, I am sure, the great majority of Halifax residents fully appreciate have given up comfortable homes and positions in order to be of service to their country."⁴¹ This exchange exemplified the frustrations felt on both sides of wartime overcrowding in the city.

In the decade before the Second World War the population of Halifax city remained virtually unchanged at about 60,000. The 1941 Census of Canada reported a total of 70,488 in Halifax City (i.e. peninsula), but this excluded servicemen and merchant seamen.⁴² No one really knows precisely how many people came to Halifax during the war--the estimates run as high as 130,000--but a house-by-house census conducted early in 1944 reported 95,459 inhabitants.⁴³ It was estimated that nearly 20,000 civilians had arrived after September 1939, and servicemen and women in barracks numbered more than 13,000.

The total peninsular population in 1944--excluding military personnel in barracks--would not be surpassed for thirty years, a remarkable fact considering the marked changes in housing and land use that had taken place over that period.⁴⁴ The figure for residents in civilian accommodation (19,195) included 3,500 servicemen on Lodging and Compensation ("Lodge & Comp") allowance. Just four months before, there had been 7,500 naval personnel living outside barracks in civilian accommodation, but as an emergency measure the RCN had taken over the

41.National Archives of Canada (Ottawa) [NA] RG24 (D 10) vol. 11,105 file 52-3-2 vol. 1, Wild to Officer Commanding, H.M.C.S. "Stadacona", 27 May 1944; A/Captain E.L. Armstrong to Wild, 5 June 1944.

42.D.B. Wilson and W.A. McIntosh, A Survey of the Public Health Services of the City of Halifax, (Halifax, 1942), p. 3.

43.NA, RG 2/18 Vol. 9 file H-13 "Census Returns - Halifax, Dartmouth", 17 July 1944.

44.City of Halifax Planning Department, "Population Statistics: Past, Present and Future," (February, 1975), Fig. 5, Distribution of the Estimated Present Population by Census Tract. The peninsula total in 1975 was 81,974; in 1944, it was 82,018.

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Air Force embarkation depot at Windsor Park.

The overwhelming demand for housing came primarily from three sources: 1) young men and women from smaller Maritime communities seeking employment, either in clerical office work or waterfront-related manual labour; 2) wives, girlfriends and families of naval servicemen who insisted--despite repeated warnings about the scarcity of housing--on moving to Halifax; and 3) naval personnel who could not be accommodated in barracks. Living in Halifax for many of these temporary residents meant being exposed for the first time to overcrowding, deteriorated housing and inadequate sanitation.

The housing shortage forced families to occupy quarters deemed "unfit for human habitation" before the war; dwellings condemned by municipal authority continued to be occupied because there was nowhere for the people to go.⁴⁵ Moreover, conditions were so variegated across the peninsula that resentment, social tensions and frustration were bound to occur among many, particularly those who could now afford decent housing but could not get it, or those who were accustomed to better or more spacious accommodation. No one would argue that everyone who came to Halifax during the Second World War was forced to live in substandard housing, yet it is difficult to deny that the effects of the fierce wartime demand for rental accommodation and the shortage of good quality shelter prevented most from acquiring the type of housing they felt they deserved.

In 1941 the federal government created a Crown Corporation, Wartime Housing Limited, to provide rental housing for workers in war industry--in Halifax this meant civilians employed at service installations, the Halifax Shipyards, and the Clark Ruse aircraft repair plant. By the end of 1943, Wartime Housing Limited had erected more than 1000 small bungalows in Halifax at a cost of approximately \$3600 per unit--but refused to build any more until late in the war when houses for returning veterans suddenly became a high priority. Four-room dwellings rented for \$25 and \$27.50 per month, six-room houses commanded \$32.

45. Halifax Daily Star, 7 March 1942.

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Initially, the "pre-fabricated" dwellings were intended to be dismantled when the war ended--but the tremendous need for such housing compelled the government to change its plans. In 1950, the city of Halifax purchased nearly 800 WHL dwellings from Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation for \$1000 each, including lots. Most were sold off to the previous tenants, who were required as a condition of sale to excavate a basement, build foundation walls, and put up a permanent fireplace. These "temporary" dwellings--most of which are still occupied today--have proven to be one of the most successful and enduring housing designs in Canada.⁴⁶

Workers in war industries not only benefitted from government housing policy; they were also paid well. Many of their unions began to bargain collectively for the first time during the war, gaining wage increases and better working conditions with the assistance of War Labour Boards. Indeed, the only disadvantage to being an industrial war worker seems to have been restrictions on their lateral mobility--i.e., freedom to move from one company or locale to another. Workers in non-essential occupations not closely supervised by the government were generally at the mercy of their employers. They were not as protected from wartime inflation because employers were reluctant to raise wages above prewar levels unless compelled to do so. Most workers fended for themselves when obtaining housing as well--only a lucky few employed at the Dockyard, the Shipyards and other essential industries succeeded in obtaining one of the government-built pre-fabricated houses.

The one thousand WHL dwellings were sufficient to accommodate less than one fifth the estimated wartime influx.⁴⁷ Despite rent controls imposed in late 1941, landlords devised various means of charging what the market would bear. Most tenants who were being overcharged

46. John I. McVittie, A Redevelopment Study of Halifax, Nova Scotia Supplementary Volume, (Halifax, 1957), pp. 9-10; D.B. Wilson and W.A. McIntosh, A Survey of the Public Health Services of the City of Halifax, Nova Scotia (Halifax, 1942), p. 60. Central [now Canada] Mortgage and Housing Corporation supplanted Wartime Housing Limited after the war. Between 1941 and 1947, WHL/CMHC built a total of 31,192 units in major Canadian cities. Catherine Jill Wade, "Wartime Housing Limited, 1941-1947: Canadian Housing Policy at the Crossroads" unpublished M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1984, p. 94.

47. Halifax Junior Board of Trade, The Scope of the Housing Problem in Halifax (October, 1943), p. 13.

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accepted their fate rather than risk losing an apartment.⁴⁸ Worse still, many "mercenary tenants" sub-let rooms to desperate individuals and families, either with or without the consent of landlords.⁴⁹

The composition of Halifax labour during the Second World War mirrored national trends in one important respect: the participation of women. The government turned to women as a convenient reserve labour pool after the armed forces or war-related industry had absorbed most able-bodied male civilians by mid-1941.⁵⁰ But aiding the war effort was a mixed blessing for the majority of Halifax women, since most of the available jobs were low-paying service sector positions in government offices and military administration, teaching in schools, domestic service in hotels and restaurants, and retail sales clerks.

Women employed in war industry earned good wages, but most of those jobs were in Central Canada. Indeed, National Selective Service, the federal government agency regulating supplies of labour, transferred an estimated 15,000 young single women from the Maritimes and the Prairies to centres of war production in Ontario and Quebec during the winter of 1942-43.⁵¹ Many women responded wholeheartedly to the patriotic appeals to lend a hand in the war effort, but not everyone sought employment for the same reasons. In Halifax a significant number of women were service wives who came to the city to be nearer their husbands. Some were childless, others were not—but virtually all experienced similar difficulties in locating adequate and reasonably-priced housing, and operating frugal households while food rationing and increased competition for limited community services drove up black (and grey) market prices.⁵²

48.NA RG 24 vol. 11,105 file 52-3-2 vol. 1, "The Housing Situation in Halifax", 21 March 1942.

49.Wilson and McIntosh, p. 58.

50.Ruth Roach Pierson, Canadian Women and the Second World War, Canadian Historical Association Booklet No. 37 (Ottawa, 1983), p. 8.

51.ibid., p. 9.

52.An example of a "black market" transaction would be the illegal sale of marked gasoline for use in a private automobile, whereas a "grey market" deal would involve a retailer holding a rationed item or commodity for a valued customer, in return for a tidy mark-up on the regulated price. The former entails an illegal sale of (probably) stolen goods; the latter would be a legitimate transaction were it not for the premium paid "under the counter".

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Because the labour shortage in the service sector was so acute by mid-1943 that employers were willing to hire workers without any previous training, some women took jobs that probably would not have attracted them otherwise. One consequence of this trend was that female workers were not as likely to pressure employers for better wages and working conditions as their higher-paid counterparts in war industry. Besides, jobs were so plentiful that an unsatisfied worker could easily trade one position for another.⁵³

Pure patriotism was thus coloured by a combination of opportunism and need that raised the numbers of wage-earning women in the Halifax area. Although the creation of women's branches of the armed forces and lucrative employment in war industry attracted many women, intense propaganda, peer pressure and official validation of part-time work in 1943 were required to entice others.⁵⁴

Another factor--bureaucratic inertia--in awarding promotions and pay raises drove many competent workers, male and female, away from government employ in search of better opportunities.⁵⁵ To the extent that National Selective Service regulations would permit the mobility of skilled labour, the net result of this trend was a steady out-migration of workers from the Halifax area. Industrial workers also followed this trend: literally hundreds of shipyard workers obtained permits to leave Halifax when a major strike halted production in August 1944.⁵⁶

Other than skilled occupations related to the military and shipbuilding, the war boom in Halifax was characterized by a plentiful supply of service sector jobs--both in government and private firms. Some local employers complained that the government pay-packets were too fat--thus driving up the going rate for the same occupation at private firms. For example, one such

53.Dianne J. Taylor, There's No Wife Like It (Victoria, 1985), p. 107.

54.Pierson, Canadian Women, p. 11.

55.NA RG27 vol. 990 file 2-3-8 (pt. 2), Mingo to Rutledge, 24 September 1943.

56.Halifax Herald, 8, 9 August 1944.

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employer wrote to the Minister of Defence for Naval Services, Angus L. Macdonald, in June 1942, voicing concerns about the high wages being paid to seamstresses in the Halifax Dockyard. Joseph Murphy employed seamstresses at two-thirds the \$22 per week rate paid by the Dockyard, and he wanted the government rates changed. Macdonald referred the matter to the Minister of Labour, Humphrey Mitchell, who replied that "it [was] hard to justify a rate of \$12.00 to \$15.00 a week for girls, even though Mr. Murphy feels they would be satisfied to work for such wages".

In a city where the prevailing rate for a small apartment was approximately \$30.00 per month, such wages did not begin to approximate a living wage. The Labour Minister commented that he was sure that Macdonald did not support interfering in the work which was being done "in the Halifax Dockyards [sic] even though it meant that a private employer had to suffer".⁵⁷ Mitchell could barely conceal his astonishment at having to deal with such a trivial matter.

The demand for clerical workers was always high in wartime Halifax, but the same was true for the hundreds of menial jobs servicing the huge transient population that passed through the city. Even though hotels, restaurants, cafes, hostels, laundries, cinemas, dance halls, and retail stores all enjoyed unprecedented business, employees in those establishments--waitresses, maids, kitchen help, ushers, sales clerks--shared little in the general prosperity because of the high cost of food and housing. Since the province of Nova Scotia was considered to be an economically depressed region, federal fiscal policy did not acknowledge the true nature of the Halifax urban economy.

The most salient feature of the wartime economy in Halifax was clearly its near-total dedication to shipping: the RCN was by far the city's biggest employer. But soon labour problems interfered with efficient waterfront operations, attracting the attention of the British, and then Ottawa. Before 1939, the hiring of dock labour was controlled by the shipping and stevedoring companies. Men congregated on the docks every morning, and usually did not know from one

57.PANS MG2, Angus L. Macdonald papers, file F883/7, Mitchell to Macdonald, 2 July 1942.

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day to the next whether they would be employed. Few could make a living year-round strictly from stevedoring--mainly because of the longstanding usage of Halifax's ice-free harbour as a winter alternative to Montreal, which left port facilities under-utilized and under-staffed.

At the outbreak of war, a relatively small number of full-time longshoremen manned the Halifax docks. Due to the seasonal nature of peacetime shipping cycles (busier in the winter than the summer), many dockworkers spent their summers in another occupation – in fishing, farming or construction, for example. Beginning in late 1940, however, the scheduling of convoys began to be affected by the inefficient management of dock labour under the peacetime system. In January 1941, the sole union representing dock workers agreed to admit about 200 "temporary" card-carrying members--sufficient to handle the heavy winter traffic--provided that these temporary workers would have no right to union benefits, and that they would be discharged in April.

Almost immediately it became apparent that round-the-clock operations were going to be necessary. An Order-in-Council (P.C. 1706, 10 March 1941) allowed for hiring as many temporary "card-men" as would be required to handle the extra shifts.⁵⁸ This augmented workforce met routine demands, however manpower shortages still plagued longshoring operations during periods of peak activity. For example, an average of 220,000 tons per month was loaded during 1941, but the monthly totals varied from a low of 110,000 tons to 352,000. For the 6-month winter season from November 1940 to April 1941, the monthly average was 268,000 tons, while the median figure from May to October 1941 was about 162,000 tons.

Ensuring the presence of a stable workforce to accommodate such drastic fluctuations in demand seemed to be a practical impossibility. Moreover, other war-related factors exacerbated congestion on the waterfront: competition for berths from warships, the secrecy and short notice that characterized ship arrivals and departures, the additional burden on rail and docking facilities when large troop movements were undertaken. There were also routine interruptions due to

58.NA RG35 series 7 vol. 21 file 15 "Control of Loading Operations at the Port of Halifax" (n.d.), pp. 1-2.

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security alerts, bad weather, in-harbour collisions, rescuing vessels damaged by enemy action, moving munitions ships through the crowded harbour, and so on. These conditions impinged to varying degrees on the efficiency of shiploading, demonstrating that the recurring bottlenecks at Halifax were not solely caused by labour shortages.

By the summer of 1942, shiploading operations continued to be hampered by frequent delays. U-boat activity in the Gulf of St. Lawrence resulted in the closure of Quebec and Montreal to overseas shipping, leaving the Maritime ports of Saint John, New Brunswick, and Halifax with the impossible task of assuming much of the St. Lawrence River traffic on top of their regular duties. In its best month of 1943, Montreal loaded 244,000 deadweight tons of cargo, a mere third of its potential capacity, whereas Halifax handled 376,000 tons of cargo bound for Allied ports in June.⁵⁹

The British Ministry of War Transport, which oversaw 85 per cent of the ship movements in and out of Halifax, anticipated a doubling of tonnage using the port, and expressed concern about whether Halifax could accommodate such an increase.⁶⁰ The Ministry controlled what cargoes would be handled and when the job would begin, but it also wanted to know how many hours or shifts each operation would require, and to predict when the job would be completed.⁶¹ This was necessary in order to co-ordinate and schedule the movement of ships in convoy. The British were well aware of the complexity of coordinating ship movements in congested harbours, having grappled with this problem for more than a year.⁶²

A report to the federal Department of Labour in February 1942 recommended that a central hiring agency oversee the allocation of dock labour, and that workers be organized into

59. See Gilbert N. Tucker, The Naval Service of Canada: Activities on Shore During the Second World War Vol. II (Ottawa, 1952), pp.391-395.

60.NA RG35 series 7, vol. 21 file 15, p. 2.

61.NA RG66 vol. 5 file Hi-5 pt. 1 "Report of Ship Loading Operations in the Port of Halifax" by Vincent C. MacDonald, K.C. [MacDonald Report], 12 February 1942, p. 3.

62.For an account of the tremendous difficulties in British ports organization in the early years of the war, see C.B.A. Behrens, Merchant Shipping and the Demands of War (H.M.S.O.: London, 1955), pp. 126-46.

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permanent gangs with assigned bosses.⁶³ Eventually, a large dormitory-like building known as the Manning Pool was erected near the docks, opening on 1 March 1943. A standing supply of longshoremen was thus on hand at all times, and gangs were dispatched from the Manning Pool as they were needed. Despite the reorganization of the labour supply, shiploading operations remained in the firm control of the MWT. Halifax shipping and stevedoring firms were thus unable to implement hiring strategies or predict reliably when and where their services would be required. To some Canadian officials, British control was a "happy circumstance",⁶⁴ probably because the Ministry now assumed responsibility for trying to offset seasonal and periodic fluctuations in port traffic. But the lack of co-ordination between the shiploading authority, a foreign agency, and related activities such as ship-repairing and construction, manning policy, the training of longshoremen, and maintenance of harbour facilities, prevented the implementation of "a supreme transport command".⁶⁵ As a result, shiploading at Halifax never operated as efficiently as it could have.

Despite the fact that Halifax residents were regularly touched by the tragic loss of the men in ships that did not come back, that enemy action probed the outer limits of Halifax's sophisticated defences, and the deadly handiwork of U-boats was a common sight in the harbour. Wartime Halifax shared many of the experiences of other cities much closer to the conflict--food and fuel rationing, air raid precautions and blackouts, reiterative propaganda in the press, radio and cinema, public health concerns, restrictions on civilian travel and job mobility.

But somehow, in Halifax the home front became a war not of arms and death and destruction, but rather a war of nerves and a war of words--between rival government departments, between competing services, between Haligonians and outsiders, between the Halifax naval establishment and NSHQ, between the federal government and the civic

63. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

65. Tucker, pp. 358-59.

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administration, between local businessmen and war industry--with all sides absolutely resolute in the rightness of their cause. It almost became a function of territorial skirmishing in an urban environment that seemed to be "shrinking" by the month. The issue of housing--the cost of housing, the quality of housing, the lack of housing--seemed to overshadow all other grievances. It created intolerable conditions that no one seemed capable or willing to alleviate. The war had been a kind of sociological Trojan horse that insidiously eroded the quaint facade of polite Halifax society. Because of the war, all of Canada was made aware of how thirty years of neglect had turned the housing stock of Halifax from a typical nineteenth-century port town into a shabby antiquity.

On September 8, 1943, the matter of housing congestion at Halifax was brought before the Federal Cabinet War Committee by Minister of Finance, J. L. Ilsley. At the next meeting of the Committee, two weeks later, the Wartime Administrator of Canadian Atlantic Ports, Mr. E. L. Cousins, was appointed "emergency controller" of the port of Halifax. Cousins was instructed to conduct his own inquiry into the housing crisis, and advise the Cabinet War Committee of his recommendations.⁶⁶ In November, Mr. Cousins reported back to the Committee that a national publicity campaign might deter any further in-migration to Halifax, and that the removal of RCAF personnel to Army camps at Debert and Windsor, Nova Scotia, would relieve some of the existing over-crowding.⁶⁷ The RCAF embarkation depot at Windsor Park in the north end of Halifax was promptly taken over by the Royal Canadian Navy, who had moved in three thousand naval personnel by the end of January, 1944.

The Cabinet War Committee also empowered Cousins to make a survey of the population and housing in Halifax, the purpose being twofold: to determine how much rooming

66.National Archives of Canada [NA], Cabinet War Committee Minutes, Reel C-4875, 8 September, 22 September, 29 September, 10 November 1943; Cabinet War Committee Schedule of Decisions, Reel C-4874, 10 November 1943.

67.Both these measures were implemented; Cousins would later attribute the apparent easing of congestion in Halifax to the "media blitz." See PANS RG 35-102 (36C.83) "Draft Memorandum in Connection with the Census and Building Survey of Halifax and Dartmouth" (undated) p. 3. The final report was a slightly revised version of the aforementioned document, and was dated 17 July 1944; see PAC RG 2/18 Vol. 9 file H-13 "Census Returns- Halifax, Dartmouth." The Air Force's "Y" Embarkation Depot was in fact moved to Lachine, P.Q. as of 12 December 1943, according to PAC CWC Schedule of Decisions, Reel C-4874, 10 November 1943.

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accommodation existed in the city, and how many residents could be designated "non-essential" to the war effort, and thus might be ordered to leave. The survey was conducted in late February-early March, 1944 by the Halifax Civil Defence Corps.⁶⁸ A series of questions was included in the survey on behalf of Civic Planning Commission, which was preparing a "Master Plan" for postwar Halifax.⁶⁹ City officials wanted to know how many temporary residents intended to remain in the area after the war; whether and where they were interested in purchasing their own home; and whether respondents who answered in the affirmative planned to pay for their house on a monthly basis.

The results of the housing survey were submitted to the Cabinet War Committee in July, 1944, and chief among its findings was the surprising fact that "less than one per thousand of the population were not employed in essential war work." The report also disclosed that "a considerable number of unoccupied rooms [were] available for rent in the City at the time the Survey was made, and this number has been increased during the past few months." Cousins claimed that the nationwide publicity campaign to discourage people from coming to Halifax, which had included a National Film Board newsreel, announcements on C.B.C. radio, and press releases, was having a positive effect. Unfortunately, these measures came two years too late; conditions were no worse in 1944 than they had been in early 1942 when both naval and municipal officials first called for the removal of service families from Halifax.⁷⁰

Cousins also informed the Cabinet War Committee that "...the Halifax-Dartmouth area could advantageously use a further 1000 houses, to rent from \$30.00 to \$35.00 per month." But C. D. Howe, perhaps the most powerful wartime Cabinet minister, was determined that the

68.NA, Cabinet War Committee Minutes, Reel C-4875, 17 November 1943.

69.The Postwar Planning Committee was created in November, 1943 to oversee "an orderly transition from wartime to peacetime conditions." Subsequently, the Committee became the "Halifax Rehabilitation Committee," and finally the "Civic Planning Commission." Its report, published in November, 1945, called the Cousins survey "invaluable." Public Archives of Nova Scotia [PANS] RG 35-102 Series 40, City Planning Board, The Master Plan for the City of Halifax (Halifax, 1945), pp. 1, 6, 10.

70.NA RG24 Vol. 11,105 file 52-3-2 (vol. 1), "The Housing Situation in Halifax", 21 March 1942; Ontario Archives MU 4156 John Fisher papers file "This Is Canada Too" CBC Radio broadcast, 20 December 1942.

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government's housing agency, Wartime Housing Limited, would make no more inroads into local real estate markets as long as temporary residents could be "shoehorned" into transient accommodation. The Department of Munitions and Supply felt responsible for local housing needs only insofar as it related to accommodating civilian workers in war industry.

Thus, even though one might argue that the Wartime Housing projects on the peninsula were precursors of the extensive residential suburban developments of the 1950s, it would be misleading to infer that the federal housing policy was directly concerned with urban residential development. Its involvement was brought on by the peculiar circumstances of war; and, judging from the rapidity with which Wartime Housing Limited was dismantled after the war, Ottawa's wartime intervention into the housing market was exceedingly unpalatable.⁷¹ Still, the federal government indirectly guided postwar urban development in the Halifax area by building housing projects for RCAF and RCN service families in Dartmouth. These suburbs contributed to the booming growth of that cross-harbour community in the 1950s, and also helped convince federal authorities that a harbour bridge--long awaited by area residents--should become a reality.⁷²

Another notable example of direct federal sponsorship was the Westmount Subdivision, developed by the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation in 1948. Located in the northwest quadrant of the peninsula, this project was supposedly based on Ebenezer Howard's Garden City model--separation of vehicular and pedestrian traffic being its most distinctive feature--but the design probably owed more to Henry Wright and Clarence Stein's widely-recognized plan for Radburn, New Jersey (1929).⁷³

Today, Halifax bears little resemblance to its wartime countenance--by 1971 it had become a sprawling "metropolitan area" with a population three times its prewar total. Two

71. See Jill Wade, "Wartime Housing Limited, 1941-1947: Canadian Housing Policy at the Crossroads," Urban History Review 15 No. 1 (June 1986), pp. 53-56.

72. See Hugh Conrad, "Sudden Explosion of Dartmouth City, A Rival to Halifax," Atlantic Advocate 58 (January, 1968), pp. 18-22, 24.

73. See Mel Scott, American City Planning since 1890 (Los Angeles, 1969), pp. 259-260.

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bridges spanned the harbour, and automobiles now clog the narrow downtown streets. While a few pockets of run-down row housing still exist, the city followed the national trend in the 1960's by clearing out slum areas and erecting public housing. By 1971, 65 per cent of the private dwellings in the Halifax area had been built after 1945. This is comparable to the 1971 percentage of postwar housing in Toronto (69%), arguably the most dynamic Canadian city.⁷⁴

74.D. Michael Ray, Canadian Urban Trends vol. 1: National Perspective (Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services Canada, 1976) Table A1.1, pp. 31, 34.