

# Building the Army's Backbone

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## Introduction

*Success in war comes as the result of effective leadership at many levels. The lowest is that of the non-commissioned officer who carries half-a-dozen men forward to take out an enemy position ... Both the NCO and the statesman-general play essential parts, and it is perhaps a little hard that Corporal Jones should be forgotten, while Marlborough's name is in every textbook ... without the Joneses there could be no Marlboroughs.*

C.P. STACEY

LONG-ACCEPTED WISDOM maintains that non-commissioned officers (NCOs) form the backbone of any modern Western army. The logic underpinning this notion recognizes that, while commissioned officers tend to rotate regularly through unit and extra-unit postings, NCOs spend most of their careers on regimental duty, focused on training and operations. Within the unit, long-serving, veteran NCOs therefore safeguard tactical expertise, corporate memory, and general efficiency. These practised soldiers draw on their years of experience to maintain discipline among the rank and file, to serve as experts in the employment and maintenance of weaponry, to act as instructors, and, as tactical leaders in the field, to execute battle plans by leading the junior ranks in combat. But the well-reasoned notion that an effective army requires a corps of strong NCOs raises questions about how Canada built its Second World War army, because when the nation began to mobilize in 1939, a corps of long-serving NCOs with a bedrock of hard-won military expertise barely existed.<sup>1</sup> The war-time NCO corps had to grow out of the nation's tiny and badly equipped standing forces. In July 1939, Canada's regular force, known as the Permanent Active Militia, or permanent force, had only 4,261 soldiers of all ranks, nowhere near enough to supply all the NCOs needed for the wartime army.<sup>2</sup> A part-time force, the Non-Permanent Active Militia (NPAM), had NCOs who could be mobilized, but it had only 51,400 poorly trained, amateur soldiers of all ranks to draw from. Furthermore, when Canada declared war, its ground forces sorely lacked modern equipment, possessing only small stocks of mostly First World War-vintage weaponry. Even uniforms were in short supply.<sup>3</sup> Despite whatever enthusiasm they maintained, NCOs from Canada's peacetime military had little

or no expertise in fighting with modern weapons, let alone in teaching new soldiers how to use them.

Yet out of such humble beginnings grew a large and capable Canadian army. By March 1944, the active army had reached a peak strength of 495,804, which included an expeditionary contingent of five divisions and two independent armoured brigades for service in Europe, plus substantial home defence forces.<sup>4</sup> Historians have done a good job of counting the soldiers and formations that Canada put into the field, and of analyzing what they did in battle.<sup>5</sup> But they have yet to explain how Canada developed a corps of NCOs to train the rank and file and help the army win on the battlefield.

Prewar mobilization plans did account for the requirement to raise NCOs, as encapsulated in two key documents: Defence Scheme No. 3, a closely guarded blueprint that few saw; and the complementary but less specific *Mobilization Instructions for the Canadian Militia*, a document issued widely across the army in 1937. But historians have not scrutinized the NCO-related sections of these documents, nor investigated how NCO mobilization schemes were actually implemented. In fact, the literature does not even indicate whether or not a plan for raising an NCO corps existed before 1939, let alone how the army built its backbone after Canada joined the war. This book seeks to fill the historiographical gap by answering the question: how did the Canadian army develop its NCO corps during the Second World War? It argues that the wartime force used a two-track system consisting of *decentralized* training and development programs (run by units and their parent formations, the brigades and divisions) and *centralized* programs (overseen by the army) – a hybrid of regimental- and mass-army approaches. Decentralized training occurred as units and formations designed and ran programs for their own troops as schedules or operations allowed. These programs, intended to meet local needs, occurred in unit or formation lines and were temporary. Often only a single class, or serial, of a course ran, and seldom more than a few. Unsurprisingly, training and operational schedules often consumed unit and formation capacity to train their junior leaders, and decentralized programs alone could not produce the numbers required. Besides, someone needed to produce NCOs for the massive training and reinforcement systems the army raised. Therefore, the army operated centralized programs continuously at static training institutions, both in Canada and in Britain. Trainees had to leave their units temporarily and travel to these schools. The programs tended to be long-running, with schools conducting numerous serials of a course over months or years, and had high-level oversight from National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ) in Canada or Canadian Military Headquarters (CMHQ) in Britain. The centralized schools also played an

important role in providing advanced training to NCOs to give them additional specialist and instructional skills.

While the two-track system allowed the army to maximize NCO production, it had one notable downside: NCO training was anything but standardized across the force, and each junior leader's professional development path was unique. The senior leadership mitigated this weakness and fostered uniform development across the corps as a whole by circulating NCOs between the field units, where expertise grew fastest, and the reinforcement and training systems. While doing so was essential to ensure that well-trained reinforcements were ready to step up once the army started taking casualties, moving good NCOs out of field units for duty elsewhere sometimes caused tension within the system. After all, what was good for the NCO corps as a whole was not good for the field unit that saw some of its best NCO talent drain away. This tension flared when units had to give up strong NCOs for instructional duty in the training system, sometimes for longer than an agreed-on period and sometimes even without consent. Conversely, training authorities periodically protested that field units were withholding their good men. Complaints from both sides ultimately resulted from the reality that the rapidly growing army had only so many good NCOs to spread around.

In short, then, the army ran a wide range of NCO qualification courses and professional development initiatives that put individual soldiers on unique paths to professional growth, yet also formed a backbone of NCOs who collectively possessed the necessary leadership skills, tactical acumen, and instructional ability.

To be sure, the two-track approach was a clear departure from the army's usual method for producing NCOs. Before the war, the army had used a unit-based approach whereby commanding officers selected, trained, and promoted their NCOs while adhering to training standards laid down by NDHQ – not unlike the contemporary system of producing new NCOs with a standardized qualification course run at various locations. To advance up the NCO rank structure in today's professional force, junior NCOs must meet time-in-rank criteria and developmental milestones, and they must obtain certain advanced qualifications. But when the army went to war in 1939, such an ordered and rigid approach could not possibly generate all the NCOs needed for all the field units, reinforcement holding units, training schools, and administrative organizations that soon stood up. The two-track approach also differed from the centralized approach the wartime army eventually adopted for producing new officers, with an Officer Cadet Training Unit (OCTU) established in Britain by August 1940 and two centralized Officers Training Centres (OTCs)

up and running in Canada by the spring of 1941.<sup>6</sup> Centralized officer production worked because the army did not need to produce as many junior officers as it did NCOs.

Researching the development of the NCO corps has the potential to add new material and fresh insights to the history of Canada's Second World War army, and particularly, the people who served in it. This book follows recent scholarship that has made important contributions in the area of manpower. Thanks to Geoffrey Hayes's structural and cultural study of junior officers, *Crerar's Lieutenants: Inventing the Canadian Junior Army Officer, 1939–45*, we now know a great deal about how the army selected and trained its junior officers.<sup>7</sup> In *Strangers in Arms: Combat Motivation in the Canadian Army, 1943–1945*, Robert Engen reveals just what drove Canadian troops to fight so hard while they served in a volunteer army that did not coerce its men as the German and Russian armies did.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, he also establishes that infantry training below battalion level was indeed effective, despite impressions to the contrary. And Caroline D'Amours, whose research is the closest work to this inquiry, contributes an important evaluation of how the army trained junior NCOs for the infantry.<sup>9</sup> But to date, scholars have focused very little attention on the wartime NCO corps as a distinct entity. John English raises the point in *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign* and identifies the requirement for "investigation into the entire area of Canadian NCO training and employment."<sup>10</sup> This matters because, as historian Charles Stacey reminds us in the epigraph that opens this work, good NCOs form a vital part of any effective army. They lead men in battle, provide the direct day-to-day oversight of junior soldiers, maintain discipline, and champion the interests of the rank and file. They serve as the army's experts in the use and maintenance of weapons and technology. They provide the instructors who train soldiers in basic and specialist skills. They render mentorship and seasoned advice to junior officers, and replace them when they fall in battle. Simply put, understanding an army requires an appreciation of its NCOs, and yet, seven plus decades since the war ended, we still know little about how Canada produced its NCO corps for the Second World War. What is more, there are very few hints to take from the British model because no literature exists on how the British army developed its wartime NCO corps. In exploring this subject, then, this book aims to generate new knowledge in the field of Canadian army history and enrich our understanding of how the nation built a field force capable of fighting alongside, and against, some of the world's most formidable armies.

Any discussion of the wartime NCO corps requires an appreciation for the army's rank structure for non-commissioned soldiers. The Canadian structure

for NCOs conformed to the British model. [Table I.1](#) shows the army's non-commissioned ranks and their typical associated positions in an infantry battalion.<sup>11</sup> Corporals commanded ten-man sections. With higher rank came more subordinates and greater responsibility.<sup>12</sup> A sergeant was responsible for all non-commissioned soldiers, or "other ranks," in a platoon, which was formed of up to thirty-five men (that is, three sections plus a platoon headquarters element).<sup>13</sup> A company sergeant major (CSM) oversaw all other ranks in a company (generically comprising three platoons), which included about 117 soldiers. And a regimental sergeant major (RSM), the senior non-commissioned officer in a battalion (generically comprising four rifle companies, a support company, and several specialist platoons), had about 740 subordinates. Only a corporal had full command over his troops, however, because officers commanded all elements from the level of platoon and above. A sergeant took command of his platoon only when the platoon commander was absent or fell in battle, and less often, a CSM took command of a company when its commissioned leadership was absent or fallen. An RSM very rarely, if ever, took command of a battalion.

[Table I.1](#)

**Canadian non-commissioned ranks and associated positions in infantry units**

Rank	Associated position
Private	Section member
Private (appointed lance corporal)	Section second-in-command
Corporal	Section commander
Corporal (appointed lance sergeant)	Performed duties of a sergeant
Sergeant	Platoon second-in-command
Staff sergeant	Company quartermaster sergeant (CQMS)
Warrant officer class 3 *	Platoon sergeant major (PSM)
Warrant officer class 2	Company sergeant major (CSM)
Warrant officer class 1	Regimental sergeant major (RSM)

Source: Data from Canada, Department of National Defence, *The King's Regulations and Orders for the Canadian Militia*, 1939. For a detailed list of the positions associated with each rank, in units of all type, see [pp. 47–49](#).

\* Shortly before the war, the Canadian army followed British practice and introduced the rank of warrant officer (WO) class 3 to allow non-commissioned ranks to command a proportion of the platoons in each infantry battalion. The practice quickly proved undesirable, and by 1940 both the British and Canadian forces stopped appointing WO Class 3s to command platoons. Many who held the rank went on to earn commissions, but others continued to hold it for several years. C.P. Stacey, *Six Years of War: The Army in Canada, Britain and the Pacific*, 128 and 237.

Before proceeding further, a comment on terminology is necessary. In the Second World War Canadian army, as in the British and other dominion forces, the term *non-commissioned officer* officially referred to corporals, sergeants, and staff sergeants, and the *appointments* of lance corporal and lance sergeant. Technically, warrant officers constituted a distinct non-commissioned class, higher than NCOs.<sup>14</sup> However, people frequently referred to the two groups collectively, albeit colloquially, as NCOs, partly because they made up a single structure for non-commissioned ranks, and partly because they had the same overarching responsibilities: maintaining discipline, administering the rank and file, advising the officer corps on morale and other soldiers' issues, providing tactical leadership in battle, mentoring junior officers, and so on. This book uses the term *NCO* in its broader form to include all grades from lance corporal to warrant officer class 1. This inclusiveness hardly offends convention. Second World War soldiers at all levels very often used the term to describe personnel from lance corporal to warrant officer class 1, just as soldiers today commonly use the term to describe all ranks from corporal to chief warrant officer. Also, where appropriate, this book uses the terms *junior NCO* (for lance corporals and corporals), *senior NCO* (for sergeants to warrant officers class 1), and *warrant officer* (for warrant officers class 3 to 1).

### **The NCO Production Problem**

The problem of raising NCOs became increasingly burdensome and complex as a result of shifts in the strategic situation as the war progressed. When Canada first mobilized, the army raised two divisions, which necessitated generating about 16,000 NCOs for a force of about 64,000. Many came from the prewar permanent force and NPAM already trained, or at least partially trained, which reduced the burden of producing NCOs out of new soldiers. In the late spring of 1940, when, in the wake of the disastrous Anglo-French campaign in France and Belgium, Ottawa authorized the formation of two more divisions and the assembly of a corps in Britain, the army grew to about 178,000. This necessitated increasing the NCO cadre to about 43,000. In January 1941, the government added an armoured division. And when Japan entered the war and home defence seemed urgent, NDHQ organized three additional divisions, the 6th, 7th, and 8th, each comprising three brigades.<sup>15</sup> In fact, every year from 1940 to 1943, the government authorized increases to the army. And as the NCO corps grew, fewer men from the prewar army were available to help fill out the numbers, which meant having to produce NCOs out of soldiers who were new to the military. Furthermore, a bigger army needed a bigger training system, which in turn increased the NCO requirement as training units clamoured for more



instructors. For instance, in the fiscal year 1942–43, the number of basic training camps alone rose from twenty-eight to forty, creating an NCO shortage.<sup>16</sup> In March 1944, the First Canadian Army of two corps (comprising three infantry and two armoured divisions, plus two independent armoured brigades), plus the home defence force in Canada, had reached nearly half a million men. The whole army required an estimated 110,660 NCOs – a sevenfold expansion since the original two-division force was raised in 1939. The NCO production issue continued after the Normandy invasion, as high infantry casualties brought challenges when it came to furnishing replacements. [Table I.2](#) summarizes how strategic milestones over the course of the war progressively increased the problem.

Throughout the war, the army's senior leadership understood the problem and responded appropriately by taking the two-track approach to creating NCOs just described. Decentralized programs were the default choice, given the army's regimental traditions and peacetime promotion policies. In fact, from the war's outset, commanding officers were responsible for developing and promoting their own NCOs.<sup>17</sup> Units ran their own NCO training when they could, and formations helped occasionally by running NCO programs for their units.<sup>18</sup> Brigades ran courses, and eventually, so did all five overseas divisions. A few courses even ran at the corps level. The decentralized approach was practical in that it allowed units and formations to tailor NCO training to local needs, especially in the theatres of operations. However, the NCO production problem – one of volume and standardization – was too big to be resolved by decentralized training alone. Thus, the military leadership gradually introduced several centralized NCO training programs. In Canada, training centres ran NCO courses using syllabuses that NDHQ controlled, while a school dedicated to NCO qualification training ran at Mégantic, Quebec. In Britain, the Canadian Training School (CTS), an institution that provided different types of training for soldiers from across the overseas army, ran NCO qualification and refresher courses. NCOs who trained at these army-run schools brought army-standard ways of doing things back to their units and to the decentralized training programs. Neither decentralized nor centralized approaches dominated across the NCO corps. The army expanded much too quickly to allow for any standard professional development path.

The two-track approach had its flaws. Training programs varied from place to place. After all, a unit in Italy taking advantage of a pause in the fighting to train replacement NCOs provided instruction that looked markedly different from that at a well-established training centre back in Canada that had the time to run longer courses. However, while individual NCOs followed different

Table I.2

Growth of the NCO corps

Army*	Estimated NCO corps**	Date	Milestone
63,476	15,710	End-December 1939	First stage of mobilization complete, with two divisions raised
		May 1940	Government decides to raise two more divisions and form a corps in Britain
177,810	42,910	End-December 1940	
		28 January 1941	Government approves Army Program for 1941: expansion to three infantry divisions, an armoured division, and an army tank brigade
274,813	63,000	End-December 1941	
		6 January 1942	Government approves Army Program for 1942: expansion to a two-corps army
425,377	98,920	End-December 1942	
		11 March 1943	Government approves the Army Program for 1943: brings up to full strength two armoured divisions and all corps and army troops
494,545	111,710	End-December 1943	
495,073	110,660	End-June 1944	Campaigns underway in Italy and Northwest Europe

\* C.P. Stacey, *Six Years of War: The Army in Canada, Britain and the Pacific*, 522, Appendix A (Strengths and Casualties). The army reached its peak strength on 22 March 1944, with 495,804 all ranks. Stacey corrects several errors to Appendix A in *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939–1945*, 34.

\*\* This data is based on the calculation that the other ranks (ORs) numbered about 94 percent of all ranks in the army. This column also accounts for the growing size of the overseas army and of the total army. The data assumes that of the ORs in the Canadian Army Overseas, 18 percent were NCOs, as opposed to 27 percent of the ORs in Canada. This is based on E.L.M. Burns's statement, in *Manpower in the Canadian Army, 1939–1945*, that these proportions existed by January 1944 (p. 99). The proportion in Canada was higher because administration and training establishments required more clerical and technical staff, and more instructors.

developmental paths, the senior leadership cultivated even development of the NCO corps as a whole by implementing programs that spread talent and the latest expertise across the army. This meant circulating strong NCOs between the field units overseas, the reinforcement system in Britain, and the training system in Canada. Over time, authorities organized several talent-sharing programs. These included taking field unit soldiers in Britain, carefully selected for their skills and instructional aptitude, and sending them back to Canada for temporary instructional duty. As will be shown, the demand in Canada for a constant flow of excellent instructors from overseas put stress on the supply, as the army had only so much talent to spread around. Similarly, Canada-based NCOs travelled across the Atlantic to spend a few months with field units in Britain. And to ensure that the reinforcement stream had its fair share of good NCOs available to replace casualties, the army overseas also rotated NCOs between field and reinforcement units. Finally, once the army started fighting, it sent NCOs from Italy, and later Northwest Europe, back to Britain to share their battle experience with those in the reinforcement stream. Doing all this necessitated convincing field unit commanders that it was in their long-term interests to accept the short-term pain of giving up some of their best NCOs to instruct in the reinforcement and training systems, but the cross-pollination project for distributing NCO expertise generally worked.

### **Filling the Knowledge Gap**

Taking stock of the main deficiencies in our understanding of NCO development brings into relief how little we actually know about the topic and delineates the size and shape of the knowledge gap. For one thing, the role of the prewar forces in building the wartime NCO corps requires investigation. Many soldiers from the permanent force and the NPAM certainly volunteered for active duty. Particularly in the war's opening weeks, the peacetime army provided thousands of soldiers for service overseas. These peacetime forces maintained a nucleus of NCOs that proved invaluable for building a big wartime field army of five-plus divisions. The army's official historian for the Second World War, C.P. Stacey, certainly believed so. In *Six Years of War*, he recognizes that even if the prewar permanent force was too small to provide an expeditionary force (let alone a counter-assault force to protect Canada from raids), and even if the NPAM reservists lacked the training and equipment of the most modern military forces, the two elements at least "constituted a useful and indeed essential foundation upon which, over a period of months, an army could be built."<sup>19</sup> In fact, he explains, almost half of the 58,337 personnel who joined the active army in September 1939 were either already serving in the permanent

force or NPAM, or had done so in the past.<sup>20</sup> He also states that all the officers and warrant officers in the units mobilized in 1939 came from the prewar military forces. Furthermore, over the course of the war, soldiers from the permanent force and the NPAM made up a significant portion of the army's commissioned and non-commissioned leaders. However, Stacey does not indicate what that portion was, and no historian since has investigated just how many of the wartime army's NCOs came from the permanent force and NPAM.<sup>21</sup> What is more, given the prewar military's small size and the scale of the expansion, the proportion of soldiers coming from the permanent force and the NPAM gradually declined in the years that it took to build the army. In short, the extent to which these prewar forces furnished NCOs for active service abroad remains unclear.

Furthermore, given the limited supply of potential active-duty NCOs from the permanent force and the NPAM, the army clearly had to turn some of its civilian volunteers into NCOs quickly. Much of the wartime NCO corps must have comprised citizen-soldiers who had no military experience when they enlisted. In fact, by the end of 1941, the NCO corps was probably larger than the entire prewar permanent force and NPAM combined.<sup>22</sup> The extent to which raw civilians eventually filled out the NCO corps requires explanation. So, too, does how the army turned factory workers and farmers into junior leaders and the "backbone" of the army.

Except for Caroline D'Amours's work on infantry junior NCO reinforcements, the secondary literature says almost nothing about NCO training. What kind of qualification training did NCOs receive? Who conducted it? How did it evolve? And to what extent did the army maintain uniform training standards across the force? These questions require attention, as do others about how the army prepared NCOs for the vitally important task of instructing other soldiers and how authorities handled the ongoing professional development of those who had completed formal qualification training. And how long did it take to turn a civilian into a decent NCO? After all, NCOs epitomize experience and tactical expertise, qualities that cannot be developed overnight. But the army had to form quickly, and no one knew how long they had to produce junior leaders.

While conscription is a well-studied aspect of Canadian Second World War history, the effect of the policy on the NCO corps has yet to receive much scholarly attention. In June 1940, when Canada implemented conscription for home service under the National Resources Mobilization Act (NRMA), the army suddenly needed more NCOs to train and lead the citizens compelled to

serve.<sup>23</sup> In *Zombie Army: The Canadian Army and Conscription in the Second World War*, Daniel Byers discusses how the army dealt with the requirement.<sup>24</sup> He shows that authorities relied heavily on the NPAM, which had a supply of NCOs who did not meet the age or physical criteria for active service overseas but who could help train recruits.<sup>25</sup> Most of these reservists proved enthusiastic instructors. Byers also explains that to produce NCOs for the three home defence divisions the army eventually raised, and to free general service NCOs for duty overseas, authorities resorted to promoting many conscript privates to NCO rank. By April 1944, most of the NCOs in the 13th Canadian Infantry Brigade, a formation that sent troops overseas later that year, were conscripts.<sup>26</sup> These are important findings, but we still do not know how many conscripts with NCO rank, if any, ultimately served abroad. In addition, we know that many conscripts eventually “went active” – over 58,400 of the 157,841 men compelled to serve at home later volunteered for operational duty overseas.<sup>27</sup> How many of them became NCOs in the active army remains unknown. This work addresses these gaps by investigating whether any conscripts of NCO rank proceeded overseas for active service, and how many general service NCOs began as conscripts.

There also remains the matter of how the army maintained the NCO corps’ strength once sustained operations began in July 1943. The army eventually took high casualties in both of its major theatres of operation, and 22,917 Canadian soldiers died while on active service.<sup>28</sup> By the early fall of 1944, high casualties left units, particularly in the infantry, seriously undermanned, with battalions, companies, and platoons often going into battle at half-strength.<sup>29</sup> How did the army deal with NCO losses? The existing scholarship gives us only impressions. Some replacements must have come forward in the reinforcement stream, although the secondary literature notes that units resisted taking inexperienced reinforcement NCOs.<sup>30</sup> But commanding officers had few options. Units could either accept NCOs from the reinforcement stream or promote from within their depleted ranks. The extent to which units exercised these options and the apparent impression that reinforcement NCOs were often lacking experience both merit investigation.

This book pursues several lines of inquiry. First, it investigates NCO promotion policies to determine how the army governed advancement in non-commissioned rank. The army required a system that ensured that the most able reached the highest rank, yet had enough flexibility to allow for rapid promotions when casualties drained NCO cadres. Prewar promotion regulations and qualification standards shed light on the quality of the permanent

force and NPAM soldiers who formed the foundation of the wartime NCO corps. Of course, wartime policies regarding NCO development require examination and are considered as well. This includes investigating who controlled promotions, probationary periods for the newly promoted, and what units could do with those who failed to live up to expectations.

Additionally, NCO development *practices* deserve consideration: how the army ran its schools, and with how much throughput. NCO training was of course not static. It had to evolve as the army transformed from a tiny, outdated peacetime outfit into a modern field force designed and equipped to fight alongside British forces against Hitler's best. In other words, the training had to stay current with the army's latest weapons and tactics. Who ran NCO training mattered as well. Most military historians know that it takes NCOs to train NCOs, but how exactly the army produced instructional cadres remains poorly understood, so this book examines how authorities sourced trainers. Raising and maintaining enough trainers with the necessary expertise proved a stubborn problem, and the army faced serious challenges in reconciling the need for experienced NCOs in the field units, in the reinforcement system in Britain, in the training system back in Canada, and in the home defence forces. In fact, military authorities in Ottawa continuously beseeched the overseas army to send experienced instructors back to Canada. The overseas army did what it could, but there were never quite enough to meet demands. This tension is examined, along with the programs that were implemented to foster NCO professional development across the army and ensure that the new knowledge and skills building up in the field units disseminated all the way through the reinforcement and training systems in Britain and Canada. Eventually, spreading combat experience was part of this, and the text also looks at programs that the army implemented to send battle-hardened NCOs back to Britain to help train the soldiers still preparing to deploy.

To investigate these issues, research for this book included a survey of soldiers' service records, using a sample group large enough to identify general trends. These files reveal who had experience in the permanent force and/or the NPAM, what courses soldiers attended, how quickly men rose through the ranks, and who joined fighting units as reinforcements. The files also contain information that, when aggregated and analyzed, uncovers the social fabric of the NCO corps: the ages, provinces of origin, education, prewar employment, first languages spoken, rural or urban residency, and religions of the men. Individual service records also reveal the proportion of NCOs who attended particular courses, how long soldiers spent at each rank, whether or not some bypassed certain ranks, and the proportion receiving rank reductions.

By necessity, the scope of the study must be limited. NCO development practices varied somewhat by corps of arms. For example, learning how to instruct on the 25-pounder gun (for artillerymen) was different from learning how to teach marksmanship for the Lee-Enfield No.4 rifle (for infantrymen). Examining particular practices across all military occupations would be a massive undertaking, with separate investigations for each of the fighting arms (infantry, artillery, armour, engineer) and each of the supporting corps (intelligence, signals, service, ordnance, medical, dental, pay, postal, forestry, provost). To attempt to do so within a single volume would necessitate narrow examinations of each military occupation, only to produce conclusions with limited relevance to the greater question of how the wartime army produced the NCO corps. Research therefore focused on the army's largest corps of arms, the infantry. Fundamental to combat power on land, the infantry served as the army's "sledgehammer," and no battle could be won if infantrymen did not secure their objectives.<sup>31</sup> Of course other corps played essential roles, but they ultimately acted in a supporting capacity for the infantry, which was the only arm that decided battles by holding ground. Moreover, the infantry suffered, overwhelmingly, the highest casualties, and consequently experienced the most stress in maintaining a corps of NCOs. Looking closely at the infantry corps – as the only arm to be instrumental in every important army battle and the one that experienced the most stress in keeping its ranks filled as the reinforcement pool shrank – thus has the advantage of producing strong conclusions. The disadvantage is that these conclusions do not account for training idiosyncrasies in other arms of service. To some extent, this book pertains more to the infantry than to the army as a whole, but the army's wartime NCO development policies, and many of the related courses and practices examined here, nevertheless applied to all arms of service. Policies on promotion, for example, were army wide, and the centralized NCO courses trained soldiers from across the arms and services. Only some parts of this text are particular to the infantry: the profile of the army's infantry senior NCOs in [Chapter 1](#); explanations of the army's expectations of its infantry NCOs in [Chapter 3](#); and descriptions of NCO training run by infantry units and brigades in [Chapter 5](#).

The sample group of individual service files examined for this book consists of the records of infantry senior NCOs – sergeants to warrant officers class 1 – who died on active service in the 1st and 3rd Canadian Infantry Divisions and the 4th Canadian Armoured Division, and in one specialized unit, the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion. This group includes 388 individual service records, enough to form a good representation of the infantry corps, with soldiers from both major theatres (the Mediterranean and Northwest Europe) and both

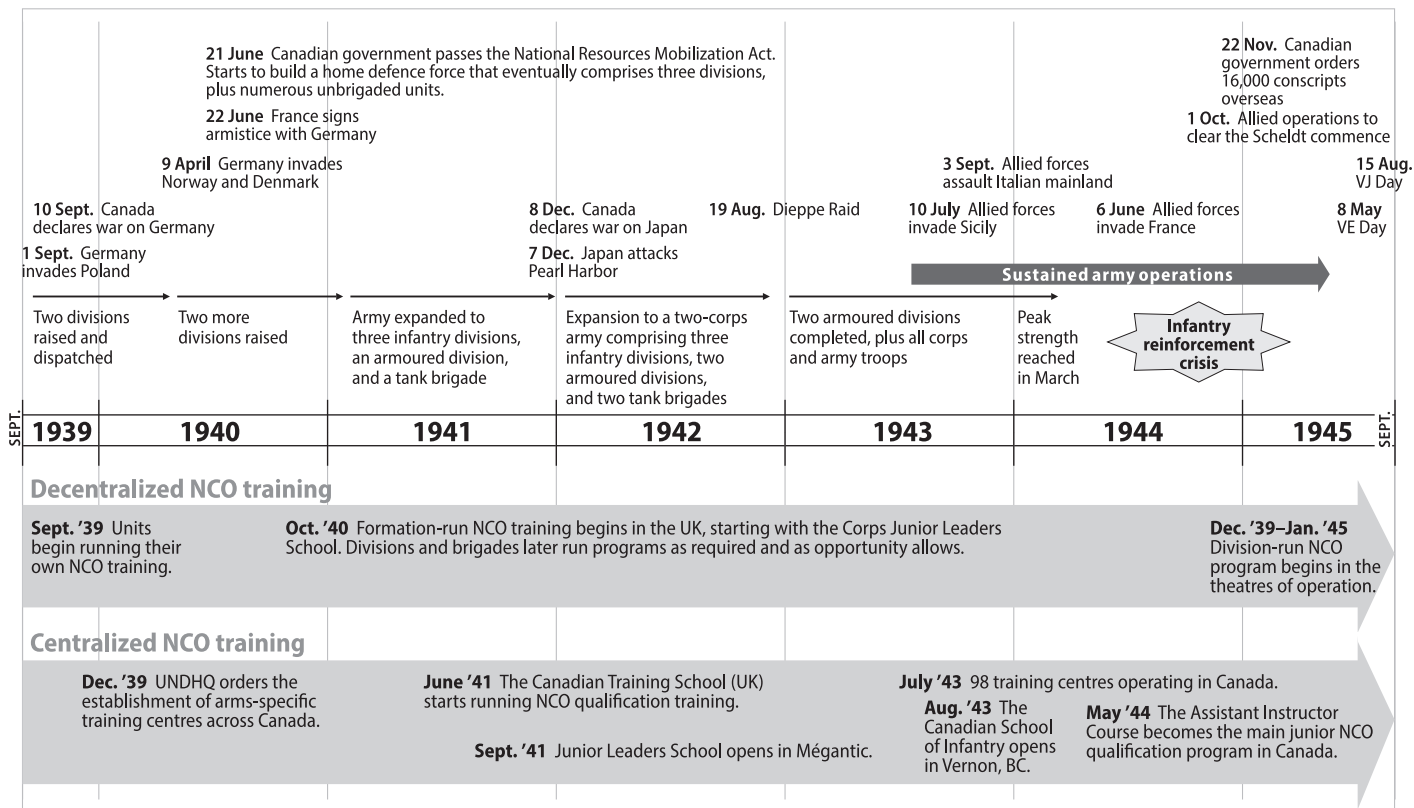


Figure I.1 Strategic milestones and key NCO-development programs.



division types (infantry and armoured). In short, statistics compiled from these files provide empirical evidence to buttress a wider explanation of how the army developed NCOs.

Finally, in answering *how* the NCO corps was developed, this book does not assess *how well* the programs worked. It makes the assumption that the NCO corps was capable in battle, based on the army's overall good performance, which historians in the last two decades or so have demonstrated thoroughly.<sup>32</sup> Surely, the creditable battlefield performance of Canadian ground forces in Italy and Northwest Europe owed much to a sturdy backbone of NCOs.<sup>33</sup> Besides, evaluating any NCO training program's effectiveness would require the selection of assessment criteria, a dubious undertaking at best, plus a great deal of subjective judgment.

TO INVESTIGATE THE two-track approach to NCO development and the programs that spread NCO expertise across the force, the text is organized thematically. [Chapter 1](#) profiles the wartime corps of infantry senior NCOs, based on information gathered from individual service records, to establish the composition of the corps empirically. It assesses demographic characteristics, the proportion of soldiers from the permanent force and NPAM, the training that NCOs received, and how long the army took to turn a civilian into an infantry sergeant. [Chapter 2](#) builds on this picture by describing the demands the army placed on its NCOs, a necessary exposition for demonstrating the high degree of skill infantry NCOs required, which in turn complicated the NCO production problem. [Chapter 3](#) examines NCO development in the prewar army to assess the quality of the peacetime soldiers who became the foundation of the wartime NCO corps. This chapter also investigates the mobilization plans that affected NCO development when war came. [Chapter 4](#) analyzes the wartime policies that governed NCO development. Then, to describe how the army implemented these policies, [Chapter 5](#) discusses the decentralized NCO training programs that infantry units and formations ran. [Chapters 6](#) and [7](#) examine the centralized programs that operated in Canada and Britain, respectively, for NCOs from across the arms and services. Finally, [Chapter 8](#) explains the army's efforts to disseminate continuously developing NCO expertise, which grew fastest in the field units, across the entire force, so that the training and reinforcement systems could turn out sufficiently prepared soldiers to replace casualties.

This thematic approach to describing NCO development programs necessitates returning to the same periods in different chapters, but the alternative, a chronological approach, would have involved revisiting certain themes in

various chapters and repeatedly picking up the story for each theme where it left off previously. Even then, each chapter would still move up and down the timeline in describing the different NCO development programs. Nevertheless, chronology is important. [Figure I.1](#) maps out the strategic milestones affecting the army's growth and the major developments in the army's NCO production system.

This book intends to demonstrate how the army's two-track approach for training NCOs, coupled with programs that distributed NCO expertise across the force, made for a flexible system that authorities used to build and sustain a corps of NCOs for Canada's ambitiously large army. The system had to be adaptable. When the war began, no one knew how soon Canadian troops would start fighting, or how much time the army had to produce all the corporals and sergeants who would lead the rank and file in battle, and who would teach the troops passing through the training system. And as the war progressed, with new weapons arriving and new tactics evolving, NCO training grew increasingly complex and had to adapt continuously. The two-track approach had the flexibility to deal with these challenges, allowing units and formations to train NCOs to local conditions and requirements, while the centralized courses used carefully controlled syllabuses to turn out a steady stream of NCOs for units and for the training and reinforcement systems.

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