

Fighting from Home

STUDIES IN CANADIAN MILITARY HISTORY

The Canadian War Museum, Canada's national museum of military history, has a three-fold mandate: to remember, to preserve, and to educate. It does so through an interlocking and mutually supporting combination of exhibitions, public programs, and electronic outreach. Military history, military historical scholarship, and the ways in which Canadians see and understand themselves have always been closely intertwined. Studies in Canadian Military History builds on a record of success in forging those links by regular and innovative contributions based on the best modern scholarship. Published by UBC Press in association with the Museum, the series especially encourages the work of new generations of scholars and the investigation of important gaps in the existing historiography, pursuits not always well served by traditional sources of academic support. The results produced feed immediately into future exhibitions, programs, and outreach efforts by the Canadian War Museum. It is a modest goal that they feed into a deeper understanding of our nation's common past as well.

- 1 John Griffith Armstrong, *The Halifax Explosion and the Royal Canadian Navy: Inquiry and Intrigue*
- 2 Andrew Richter, *Avoiding Armageddon: Canadian Military Strategy and Nuclear Weapons, 1950-63*
- 3 William Johnston, *A War of Patrols: Canadian Army Operations in Korea*
- 4 Julian Gwyn, *Frigates and Foremasts: The North American Squadron in Nova Scotia Waters, 1745-1815*
- 5 Jeffrey A. Keshen, *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers: Canada's Second World War*
- 6 Desmond Morton, *Fight or Pay: Soldiers' Families in the Great War*
- 7 Douglas E. Delaney, *The Soldiers' General: Bert Hoffmeister at War*
- 8 Michael Whitby, ed., *Commanding Canadians: The Second World War Diaries of A.F.C. Layard*
- 9 Martin Auger, *Prisoners of the Home Front: German POWs and "Enemy Aliens" in Southern Quebec, 1940-46*
- 10 Tim Cook, *Clio's Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars*
- 11 Serge Marc Durflinger, *Fighting from Home: The Second World War in Verdun, Quebec*

Fighting from Home
The Second World War in Verdun, Quebec

Serge Marc Durlinger



UBC Press · Vancouver · Toronto

© UBC Press 2006

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior written permission of the publisher, or, in Canada, in the case of photocopying or other reprographic copying, a licence from Access Copyright (Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency), www.accesscopyright.ca.

15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada on ancient-forest-free paper (100% post-consumer recycled) that is processed chlorine- and acid-free, with vegetable-based inks.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Durflinger, Serge Marc, 1961-

Fighting from home : the Second World War in Verdun, Quebec / Serge Marc Durflinger.

(Studies in Canadian military history, ISSN 1449-6251)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7748-1260-3

ISBN-10: 0-7748-1260-5

1. World War, 1939-1945 – Québec (Province) – Verdun. 2. Verdun (Quebec) – History – 20th century. I. Title. II. Series.

FC582.D87 2006

971.4'28

C2005-9069

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP), and of the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Aid to Scholarly Publications Programme, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Publication of this book has been financially supported by the Canadian War Museum.

The author and publisher acknowledge the financial assistance of the Research and Publications Committee of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ottawa.

Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens

Set in Minion and Helvetica Condensed by Artegraphica Design Co. Ltd.

Copyeditor: Sarah Wight

Proofreader: Tara Tovell

Cartographer: Eric Leinberger

Indexer: Noeline Bridge

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

604-822-5959 / Fax: 604-822-6083

www.ubcpress.ca

For Janine and Maxime et à la mémoire de ma mère, Béatrice Ste-Marie

The present war is everyone's war and every citizen is expected to do his share in bringing it to a successful conclusion.

– EDWARD WILSON, MAYOR OF VERDUN, 1940

I suppose you all heard over the air we were in France on the morning of the 19th. It is a morning I will never forget. I seen my buddies killed one after the other on all sides of me. We did what we went to do and that is the mane thing, and I can tell you all the men were tickled when they new where we were going, you never saw a happier bunch of men in all your life. There were quite a few boys from Verdun like myself and I am proude that some Verdun boys were in it.

– LANCE-CPL J. FLOOD, RCASC, ATTACHED 10TH
FIELD AMBULANCE, RCAMC, 20 AUGUST 1942,
IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE DIEPPE RAID

Contents

Maps, Tables, and Illustrations / viii

Preface / x

Acknowledgments / xiii

Abbreviations / xv

Introduction: Studying War at the Local Level / 3

1 Forging a Community / 7

2 Once More into the Breach / 21

3 City Hall Goes to War / 50

4 The People's Response / 78

5 Institutions and Industry / 107

6 Family and Social Dislocation / 136

7 The Political War / 169

8 Peace and Reconstruction / 191

Conclusion / 201

Notes / 206

Select Bibliography / 252

Index / 260

Maps, Tables, and Illustrations

MAPS

- 1 Verdun in its surroundings / 8
- 2 Verdun streets and locations / 35

TABLES

- 1.1 Ethnic origin of Verdunites, 1931 and 1941 / 15
- 2.1 Verdunites overseas by service and language, 1940-45 / 26
- 2.2 Verdunites overseas, percentage by service and language, 1940-45 / 26
- 2.3 Verdunites overseas, service distribution by language, 1940-45 / 27
- 2.4 Age and ethnic distribution of Verdun males, 1941 / 31
- 2.5 Population distribution of Verdun by electoral ward and by language / 36
- 2.6 Verdunites overseas by service, language, and place of residence, 1943 ward divisions / 39
- 4.1 Verdun Salvage Committee statistical summary, 1942-45 / 91
- 5.1 Verdun Red Cross, funds collected, 1939-44 / 112
- 5.2 Verdun Red Cross, items sent overseas, 1939-44 / 114
- 5.3 Employment at DIL-Verdun, 1941-43 / 131
- 6.1 Housing construction in Verdun, 1940-44 / 148
- 7.1 Verdun federal election results, 1940 / 175
- 7.2 Verdun provincial election results, 1944 / 184
- 7.3 Verdun federal election results, 1945 / 188

ILLUSTRATIONS

Following page 112

Edward Wilson, mayor of Verdun 1939-60. *Verdun Borough Archives*

Joseph Rienzo French, Verdun city manager, 1933-64. *Verdun Borough Archives*

Arthur Burgess, Verdun city clerk, 1929-62. *Verdun Borough Archives*

The “Verdun Gang” of the 1st Medium Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery, England, c. 1941. *Courtesy Joseph Way*

A family of soldiers from Second Avenue. *Courtesy Paul Moreau*

Flying Officer George Frederick Beurling, 1942. *Department of National Defence*

Homecoming celebration for George Beurling, 10 November 1942. *Department of National Defence*

- George Beurling speaking at his homecoming ceremony at the Verdun Auditorium, 10 November 1942. *Library and Archives Canada, PA-176977*
- Flight Lieutenant George Beurling meets highly decorated Alf Hamer, a sixty-nine-year-old British-born veteran of three previous wars. *Verdun Borough Archives*
- Display donated by Imperial Tobacco for the Mayor's Cigarette Fund in the lobby of the Fifth Avenue Theatre, May 1941. *Verdun Borough Archives*
- A "tag" worn by Verdunites having contributed to the Mayor's Cigarette Fund during special fund-raising campaigns. *Author's collection*
- A typical coupon for the extremely popular Mayor's Cigarette Fund as published in the *Guardian*. *Verdun Borough Archives*
- Lt-Cdr William Woods, Royal Canadian Naval Reserve, commanding officer of the antisubmarine frigate HMCS *Dunver*. *Verdun Borough Archives*
- The Verdun Salvage Committee collection and sorting depot on the waterfront behind the Verdun General Hospital, 16 June 1943. *Verdun Borough Archives*
- HMCS *Dunver* off the coast of Nova Scotia, 1943. *Department of National Defence*
- Poster for fundraising dance organized by the Women's Volunteer Reserve Corps in honour of the crew of HMCS *Dunver*. *Guardian (Verdun)*, 17 September 1943
- Harvard training aircraft installed next to Verdun's impressive First World War cenotaph in the city's east end. *Verdun Borough Archives*
- Advertisement for Victory Bonds. *Guardian (Verdun)*, 30 May 1941
- Miss R.B. Joan Adams, in the uniform of commandant, Women's Volunteer Reserve Corps, Verdun Branch, March 1941. *Courtesy Joan Adams*
- Women from Verdun's Red Cross chapter preparing material for dispatch overseas, 2 October 1943. *Verdun Borough Archives*
- Children selling candy apples and other sweets at the corner of Rielle and Verdun avenues, 20 September 1941, to aid the Queen's Canadian Fund. *Verdun Borough Archives*
- A typical wartime display in the lobby of a Verdun business, 2 February 1942. *Verdun Borough Archives*
- Grave marker from Brettville-sur-Laize Canadian War Cemetery, showing the final resting place of fallen Verdunite Gordon Hutton. *Author's collection*.

Preface

Verdun is an unusual and fascinating place. Someone should set a novel there – and I’m not suggesting this just because I was born and raised in Verdun. But sometimes truth is more interesting than fiction. To really understand the local culture and grasp the nuances of daily life in that city, you almost have to be a Verdunite. To get a measure of Verdun in the early 1940s, the following imaginative exercise might help: take about 70,000 working-class people of almost exclusively British or French ethnic origin, confine them in a rectangular area of about six square kilometres, oblige them to live on top of each other in nearly identical two- and three-storey tenement flats where everyone knows everyone else’s business, nearly surround the whole by a river and an aqueduct, and deprive the residents of a rail connection, an intercity bus depot, any hotels, nearly all forms of industry, or any licensed establishments. At this point you have created a rough uniformity of experience and an unmistakable sense of geographic distinctiveness. Finally, overlay the greatest military conflict the world has ever seen and observe what kind of responses and intracommunity dynamics develop. This is what this book is about.

In 1990 or so I purchased a splendid book from a remainder table in a well-known bookstore chain. Len Burrow and Émile Beaudoin’s *Unlucky Lady: The Life and Death of HMCS Athabaskan* describes the operational history and eventual sinking in 1944 of one of the Royal Canadian Navy’s most powerful fighting ships, the Tribal-class destroyer *Athabaskan*. At the end of the book the authors listed the names and hometowns of the ship’s crew who had survived and those who had perished. To my surprise, there were five or six Verdunites. Growing up in Verdun in the 1960s and 1970s, I knew that there were many First and Second World War veterans residing in the community. I lived for eleven years on the street named for one of Canada’s most famous wartime figures: George F. Beurling, the legendary fighter pilot, who was from Verdun. But it was in reading the names of a handful of Verdunites who had died in Canada’s war that I was suddenly seized with the desire to learn more about my hometown’s wartime history. What kind of place was Verdun in the 1940s, and who were the Verdunites? How many residents enlisted? How many became casualties? How did the community participate in the war effort, and how did it respond to the consequent loss of life? Did the war change Verdun? Within a year, I had quit my job as a technical editor with a defence contractor and enrolled in the doctoral program in history at McGill University.

While researching these questions for the doctoral thesis on which this book is based, and in finalizing the present manuscript, I learned much about my hometown during the war. But I realized early on that I was also learning a great deal about myself, my past, and that of my family. Historical investigation enabled me to place my own formative years firmly within a broader chronological and geographical context. Many of the names, places, events, and issues of the 1940s that I encountered in my explorations persisted into the 1970s and beyond. An unexpected benefit of seeking to explain Verdun to others in a scholarly historical work has been the enhanced meaning of the streets, buildings, public spaces, institutions, and people of my community. For me, no walk down Wellington Street, the city's main thoroughfare, can be separated from the ghosts that are everywhere now plainly visible to me. They tell an important and inspired story in which the community's Second World War experiences figure prominently.

Notwithstanding the sad losses and lasting bereavement that struck the city, the years of the Second World War were, in many respects, Verdun's halcyon days. Perhaps they were also Canada's. Verdunites faced the challenges of war while seizing its opportunities. This book is their story.

THE AVAILABILITY OF SOURCES has influenced the scope and shape of this study. Most of the archival sources are of Verdun origin, most were in English, and most were generated by or maintained at city hall. The municipal archives are a rich repository of meticulously kept records of local wartime organizations as well as of much important material related to the local war effort. This collection yielded the essential correspondence, memoranda, reports, minutes of meetings held by various wartime bodies, and other material on which the core of this study is based. The records of such local institutions as schools, churches, and community organizations, however, were a different matter: few remain. The municipal council minutes were very helpful but, as is the case with most such material, sparse. Various record groups at Library and Archives Canada, especially those of the Departments of National Defence (RG 24), Munitions and Supply (RG 28), and National War Services (RG 44) were valuable for specific topics. These complement local sources and help place wartime Verdun in its national context.

Verdun's two wartime weekly newspapers provide a bonanza of detailed local information, full of flavour for the era, and rife with political opinion and social commentary. They were especially useful in helping connect the dots and fill in some gaps in the official records. The fervently patriotic, conservative, and even dour *Guardian*, available in bound copies at the Verdun Cultural Centre, served Verdun's English-speaking community and reflected many "old country" views. Ever a civic booster, it also regularly paid homage to Verdun's working-class character. Virtually everything to do with the war in Verdun was reported in the *Guardian*: a multitude of fundraising activities, enlistments and casualties, air-raided

precaution news, war-related economic and social conditions, municipal involvement in the war effort, local community groups' responses, and religious views. In fact, the *Guardian* helped galvanize Verdunites' domestic war effort. A close reading of every edition between January 1939 and mid-1946 yielded valuable results. In February 1942, the *Guardian* claimed a circulation of 18,200.

The bilingual (though mainly French) *Messenger/Le Messenger* had a circulation of 15,000 during the war and also served readers in neighbouring districts of Montreal, such as Ville Émard and Point St Charles. This weekly was demonstrably less robust in its reporting on local war activities than was its competitor. Nevertheless, it regularly detailed events of local wartime significance, published details on enlistees, and diligently reported casualties. Unlike the *Guardian*, the *Messenger* proudly cited French-speaking Verdunites' war service, in and out of uniform. Unfortunately, a postwar fire destroyed extant copies prior to January 1943, and this has left some important gaps in the record of Verdun's war from the French Canadian perspective.

Both of these weeklies provided a comprehensive chronicle of events and acted as superb sources from which to glean the texture of local social culture. The vagaries of community public opinion and the specific details of many events are often to be found only in local newspapers. In addition, the Montreal press, especially the *Montreal Daily Star* and *La Presse*, offered details concerning wartime Verdun. These sources at times also added a metropolitan context for events taking place in Verdun.

Perhaps two dozen Verdunites were interviewed for this study, though not all their voices are heard in the narrative that follows. Curiously, despite Verdun's astounding enlistment record during the war, tracking down local veterans was not always easy in the 1990s and later. Not only had natural attrition taken its toll, but during the politically turbulent and economically distressed 1970s and 1980s, large numbers of aging Verdunites had moved to other communities. Oral history is also frequently easier to obtain than to use effectively. Here, it helps reflect Verdun's wartime mood. Some Verdunites' recollections led to other intriguing leads and, in general, provided helpful background information, cleared up misunderstandings, and nuanced some information obtained elsewhere.

Acknowledgments

This study suggests that Verdun was a closely knit and proud community during the Second World War and that these characteristics help explain the city's experiences at that turbulent time. More than half a century later Verdunites remain proud of their wartime history, and many have contributed to this work. The following people facilitated and encouraged my research for the doctoral dissertation on which this book is based: Patrice Byloos, archivist, Borough of Verdun, Lois-Ann Clouthier, chief librarian, Borough of Verdun, and Benoit Arcand, Salle Canadienne, Verdun Cultural Centre. Patrice was of enormous help in tracking down photos for this publication. The men and women of the Verdun Branch (No. 4) of the Royal Canadian Legion were also unfailingly helpful and enthusiastic. Many other Verdunites working on behalf of community or parish organizations also welcomed my inquiries for information.

Dozens of men and women took the time to meet with me or wrote or telephoned me in response to solicitations for research assistance. The late Miss R.B. Joan Adams of Williamsburg, Ontario, was exceedingly generous with her time and shared her valuable collection of press clippings and correspondence relating to wartime Verdun. I am indebted to Gordon Galbraith of Brockville, Ontario, for introducing me to Miss Adams, as well as for other valuable assistance. Charles Elliott of Verdun put me in contact with many people who offered their memories and memorabilia. Mary Peate of Williston, Vermont, was always encouraging and helpful. Stewart Carson of Verdun made available his remarkable scrapbook of Verdunites at war. Paul Moreau of Lasalle, Quebec, provided many useful documents and photographs. William Weintraub of Westmount, Quebec, lent me his photographs and memories. Many other people were also kind enough to help.

I would especially like to acknowledge the assistance provided by Canada's veterans of the Second World War. Over a dozen former crew members of HMCS *Dunver* responded in writing to my inquiries about wartime life aboard "Verdun's Own Frigate." Other former crewmen were good enough to telephone me. I would like to express special thanks to the late Walter Finlay of Terrebonne, Quebec. The late Joseph Way of Mascouche, Quebec, a naval veteran and "dyed-in-the-wool" Verdunite, was helpful in many ways and took a great personal interest in this project. Some local veterans and members of the community agreed to be interviewed for this study, and some of their recollections appear throughout the narrative. I thank them all.

Professor Carman Miller of McGill University supervised the original dissertation and helped sharpen its focus. From 1998 to 2003 I worked as an historian at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa and had the privilege of working with some of Canada's finest military historians. I remain immensely grateful for the friendship and professional counsel of Jack Granatstein, Roger Sarty, Dean Oliver, Laura Brandon, Cameron Pulsifer, Tim Cook, Peter MacLeod, Martin Auger, and my other colleagues at the museum. Few academics have had the luxury of working with such a stellar group of specialized scholars in a non-university environment. I never worked harder than during the years of Jack Granatstein's tenure as head of the museum (1998-2000). But these were among the most exhilarating moments of my career thus far, and I thank him specially for this. For their advice and help in various ways I would also like to thank Professor Terry Copp, of the Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies, Wilfrid Laurier University, Professor Desmond Morton of McGill University, Professor Marc Milner of the University of New Brunswick, Professor Jeffrey Keshen, my colleague at the University of Ottawa, and Dr Serge Bernier, Director, Directorate of History and Heritage, Department of National Defence. John Parry, one of Canada's finest editors of historical texts, edited the original thesis and improved the manuscript immeasurably. It is a pleasure to acknowledge the outstanding support and professionalism of all at UBC Press who expertly guided me through the publication cycle: Emily Andrew, Camilla Blakeley, and Sarah Wight, a skilled copy editor. Eric Leinberger produced some fine maps. I would like to thank Dr Dean Oliver, Director, Historical Research and Exhibit Development, Canadian War Museum, for agreeing to support this publication as part of UBC Press's excellent Studies in Canadian Military History series.

On a personal level, all members of my family supported my decision to pursue a higher education and, subsequently, to focus on the community in which they have lived for some eighty years. My mother, the late Béatrice Ste-Marie, provided unflagging encouragement throughout this project and has helped me to achieve its realization. My uncle, the late Arthur Ste-Marie, may have been responsible for igniting within me the flame of interest in our community's past.

My wife, Janine Stingel, a brilliant historian of Canada, has been the source of wisdom, helpful criticism, and good advice. I am grateful for her understanding, caring, and love; they have made all seem so much brighter. Finally, I wish to acknowledge our wonderful son, Maxime, not quite two years old at the time of publication. He's helped give meaning to all that I do.

Abbreviations

ARP	air-raid precautions
CCA	Canadian Corps Association
CCF	Co-operative Commonwealth Federation
CDC	Civilian Defence Committee
CECV	Commission des Écoles Catholiques de Verdun
CPC	Civilian Protection Committee
CWA	Child Welfare Association
CWAC	Canadian Women's Army Corps
DIL	Defence Industries Limited
DMS	Department of Munitions and Supply
DND	Department of National Defence
DNWS	Department of National War Services
ESA	Emergency Shelter Administration
HMCS	His Majesty's Canadian Ship
HMS	His Majesty's Ship
IODE	Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire
MCF	Mayor's Cigarette Fund for Verdun Soldiers Overseas
MD 4	Military District 4
MSWL	Montreal Soldiers' Wives' League
NHA	National Housing Act
NOIC	Naval-Officer-in-Charge
NPAM	Non-Permanent Active Militia
NRMA	National Resources Mobilization Act
NSHQ	Naval Service Headquarters
RAF	Royal Air Force
RCA	Royal Canadian Artillery
RCAF	Royal Canadian Air Force
RCAF-WD	Royal Canadian Air Force – Women's Division
RCAMC	Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps
RCASC	Royal Canadian Army Service Corps
RCE	Royal Canadian Engineers
RCN	Royal Canadian Navy
RCNR	Royal Canadian Naval Reserve

RCNVR	Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve
UN	Union Nationale
VCSC	Verdun Catholic School Commission
VE Day	Victory-in-Europe Day
VHS	Verdun High School
VJ Day	Victory-over-Japan Day
VSC	Verdun Salvage Committee
VWSC	Verdun War Savings Committee
WPTB	Wartime Prices and Trade Board
WRCNS	Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service
WVRC	Women's Volunteer Reserve Corps
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

Fighting from Home

Introduction: Studying War at the Local Level

In *Victory 1945: Canadians from War to Peace*, published in 1995, Canada's two leading military historians, Desmond Morton and J.L. Granatstein, wrote, "There is as yet no good published study of life in wartime Canada." Since then, Jeffrey Keshen has produced a wide-ranging overview of Canada's home-front war with particular emphasis on the conflict's moral and societal consequences. Magda Fahrni has made a detailed study of families in late-war and postwar Montreal.¹ But the field remains extremely fertile for historians. Even Keshen's fine study was just the start of what is hoped to be an abundance of publishing on Canada's domestic war experience. The present work contributes to this developing field by closely examining wartime conditions in a single Canadian community, one that, to a large extent, can serve as a microcosm of the wider national experience. Verdun, Quebec, is an urban, working-class, mixed-language community adjacent to Montreal.² This book reveals how Verdun and Verdunites were affected by Canada's participation in the Second World War and assesses the city's military, civilian, and industrial contributions to the national war effort.

Verdun offers an ideal setting for exploring the consequences of the war at the municipal, institutional, neighbourhood, and individual levels. According to the 1941 Dominion census, Verdun had more than 67,000 residents, making it the third-largest city in Quebec and the thirteenth-largest in Canada. The city's labour force consisted mainly of industrial and clerical workers, most of whom worked in Montreal. Verdun's population was 58 percent English speaking and 42 percent French speaking, and only 4 percent of Verdunites were of neither French nor British ancestry. Nearly one-third of Verdun's English speakers were born in the British Isles, most having immigrated to Canada in the 1920s, many as children. The male heads of families tended to be skilled or semiskilled workers, frequently with trade union backgrounds, which gave the city a nucleus of British working-class political culture and social identity. Even Verdun's wartime mayor, Edward Wilson, was British born. Verdun's high-profile British presence defined the city and made it something of an anomaly in Quebec. It also made Verdun uncommonly patriotic in the defence of British, and therefore Canadian, interests. Verdun boasted the highest voluntary enlistment rate in Canada for a municipality of its size: no less than 6,400 and probably some 7,000 Verdunites served in the Second World War.

Verdun's population, geography, ethnicity, language, religion, economy, class structure, and sense of tradition gave it a unique wartime character. Verdunites of both language groups exhibited an exceptional sense of community identification and civic pride. The city's wartime mood and its social dynamics shaped and were affected by this powerful feeling of local identity. Still, some of the particularities of wartime life in the city, such as salvage collections or Red Cross work, followed national trends. Closely studying these commonalities helps provide insight into the wider Canadian home-front experience.

This work therefore adopts a community approach to the examination of Canada's Second World War experience. This new interpretive model for both wartime social history and community studies complements existing national studies.³ Policies affecting such diverse wartime subjects as compulsory military service, the role of the state, and electoral politics have been examined by historians in national terms.⁴ But just as local history is sometimes criticized for lacking a broader context, so national studies may neglect local conditions and communities. How, for example, did Verdunites, their social organizations, and their municipal administration react to the National Resources Mobilization Act of 1940, to the perceived need to institute air-raid precaution measures, or to the 1942 conscription plebiscite? This volume offers a grassroots analysis of wartime Canada, interpreting the effects of national events and policies at a local level. It addresses the meaning of the war for individual Canadians in one community while offering interpretations that have some national applicability. Many important aspects of the war on the home front receive detailed treatment here, such as the organization and operation of local patriotic groups, the conduct of Victory Loan campaigns, and the implementation of civil protection arrangements.⁵

Many Canadian municipal biographies are poor analytical tools. In 1979 Gilbert A. Stelter and Alan Artibise, two of Canada's most prolific urban historians, noted that urban histories have traditionally been either "antiquarian venture[s] with genealogical overtones or historical boosterism."⁶ Detailing the minutiae of local existence without interpreting its significance through a broader context results in fragmentary history. In the words of another urban historian, perhaps the most useful micro approach is "to work from the general to the particular and back to the general again."⁷ Municipal history ought to link national processes to the people. This work is about people, located in one place, reacting in a variety of ways to the exigencies of their Second World War experiences. It is about the sort of place that Verdun was in the years 1939 to 1945 and about the sort of place that Canada was.

In portraying Verdun's war, this work must respond to certain basic questions. How and to what degree did Verdunites participate in war-related activities on the home front? Which Verdunites enlisted and why did the city boast so high an enlistment rate? How did the war effort affect family life, social relations, and

political behaviour? To what extent did the municipal government cooperate with federal authorities in the prosecution of the war? Were Verdun's social cleavages overcome during the war, the result of a shared "national experience,"⁸ or were existing divisions shelved for the duration? Or did social conflict manifest itself more sharply in wartime Verdun?

Divisions existed in Verdun between French- and English-speaking residents, although a prevailing sense of local identity and the need for social accommodation helped shape the common and generally united responses of many Verdunites to the war. They cooperated, even when they might have disagreed. The lack of overt and significant linguistic disharmony on war-related issues challenges somewhat the accepted historical orthodoxy on French Canada's muted participation in the war. While much more work needs to be done on the subject of Quebec and the Second World War, Verdun's story offers insights into the organized and individual responses of an urban, working-class segment of the French-speaking population. Many in this group seemed to participate in the war effort from a sense of local identity. In turn, mass participation across ethnic and linguistic lines in, for example, fundraising ventures in support of Verdunites on active service became a defining part of the city's wartime identity. The actions of residents overseas were also directly relevant to the community's self-perceptions. One Verdun native, fighter pilot George F. Beurling, achieved international prominence in 1942 for his exploits in the skies over Malta. His fame thrilled his hometown and helped focus Verdunites' sense of their community's significant military contributions. Thus this study explains Verdunites' energetic collective response to the war in terms of ethnicity, demography, class structure, and sense of community pride, which was itself intensified by citizens' identification with Verdun's impressive war record.

This work is an example of the "new" military history practised in Canada within the last generation. More traditional operational histories are being supplemented by social, economic, administrative, and political histories. Social-military and operational-military history each require some understanding of the other. The battle front helps define the home front, and vice-versa.⁹ Accordingly, the present study situates domestic social-military history within a broader wartime context.

Few existing Canadian studies focus specifically on Second World War municipal experiences. Jay White's fine 1994 doctoral dissertation examines Halifax's wartime infrastructural and physical development, but only obliquely the Haligonians themselves. White realized that Halifax was the logical place to start, especially for his kind of specialized research. Yet some parts of his study, such as those pertaining to housing and labour, have broader national implications.¹⁰ Since Halifax was on the naval front lines during the war, however, it is not a fully effective model for other Canadian cities. The present work proposes to satisfy some of the broader requirements of such a study and to serve as an example for

comparisons with other Canadian urban centres. Most Canadian municipal histories or community studies devote little space to the years of the Second World War. Similarly, only a few Canadian military or social-military histories focus on the efforts of individual communities during the war. I hope that this book, by attempting to fill this vacuum partially, can suggest ways in which such research can illuminate individual and collective community responses to war.

1

Forging a Community

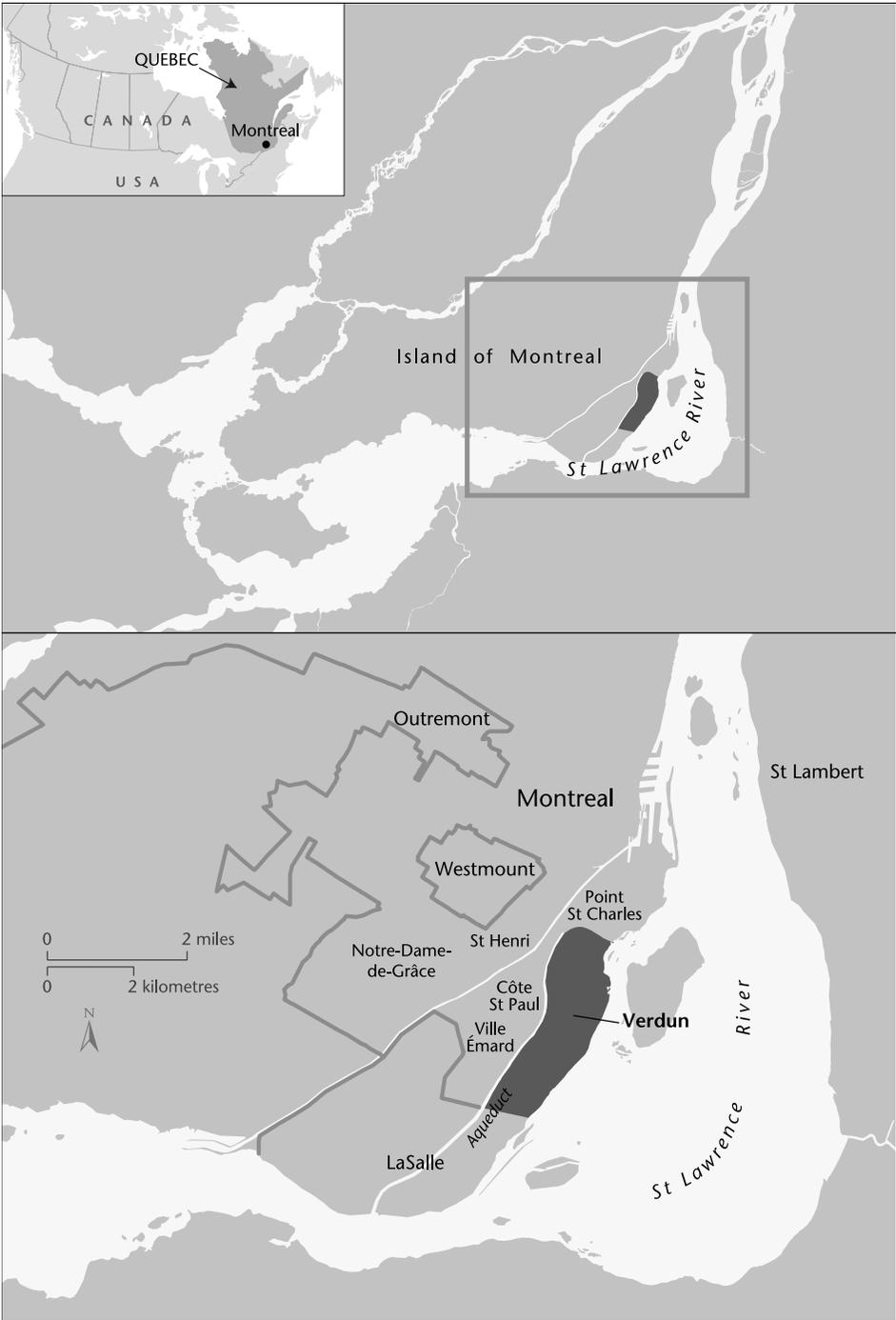
Verdun entered the Second World War as a municipality with a distinct character whose working-class inhabitants shared a strong community identity. The city's nineteenth-century isolation, its impressive record during the First World War, and the common experiences of its residents during the Depression cemented its self-perception as a unique place, of which Verdunites were proud. These characteristics facilitated Verdun's strong and united wartime social and military responses. This chapter sketches the development of the city up to the outbreak of war in September 1939.

Isolation: Early History to 1914

Verdun is located along the shore of the St Lawrence River on the southwestern side of the Island of Montreal, a few kilometres northeast of the Lachine Rapids and only several kilometres above the site of Montreal's original settlement. In 1671, Major Zacharie Dupuis, acting commander of the garrison at Montreal and a well-known colonist, received a notable fief of 320 acres along this shoreline, which he named "Verdun" in honour of Saverdun, his birthplace in southwestern France. His fief included much of the territory of present-day Verdun.¹ Despite some sporadic settlement in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Verdun that Dupuis knew grew very little until the nineteenth century.

As the land was low-lying, marshy, and easily flooded in spring, the area was slow to develop. In 1825 there were probably no more than fifty families occupying this riverside location.² The completion of the Lachine Canal that year effectively cut off the southwestern bulge of the Island of Montreal. This area later became, from west to east, Lasalle, Verdun (which does not touch the canal), and the Montreal neighbourhoods of Ville Émard, Côte St Paul, and Point St Charles. On 1 January 1875 the village of La Rivière St Pierre came into being, named for a stream running through its territory. The approximately 200 inhabitants changed its name to Verdun the next year, and the town subsequently adopted 1876 as the year of its founding.³

In the mid-nineteenth century, Montreal's increasing water requirements had prompted the digging of an aqueduct stretching from the St Lawrence at the western extremity of what became Lasalle and ending near what became the northwestern limits of Verdun, not far from the Lachine Canal. Completed in 1856, this aqueduct forms the northwestern boundary of Verdun, roughly parallel to the St



MAP 1 Verdun in its surroundings

Lawrence, which forms its southeastern limit. Ville Émard and Côte St Paul developed on the north side of the aqueduct as non-contiguous neighbours of Verdun. The “tailrace,” a water runoff ditch almost ten metres wide, extended in a straight line from the aqueduct’s waterworks station in northeastern Verdun directly to the St Lawrence River, 1½ kilometres away. Consequently, at its incorporation in 1876, Verdun was hemmed in by water along most of its periphery. Fields, farms, and woods stretched to the west. Alongside the tailrace, railway tracks and steep embankments created an additional physical boundary with Point St Charles.

Despite Verdun’s proximity to Montreal, a lasting sense of remoteness and detachment developed. Verdun grew southwestwards as a residential and farming community. In 1901 the population had increased to 1,898. By that time Montreal’s expansionist civic politicians and some members of its business community were regularly calling for Verdun’s annexation. Other small neighbouring municipalities were also targets, and many succumbed to financial pressures. But annexation had little appeal in Verdun so long as the village provided services and kept its municipal debt manageable.⁴

To maintain its much-valued tranquillity, Verdun’s municipal council, as a matter of policy since the founding of the village, refused to grant permits for the building of licensed establishments, hotels, or any industrial concerns, including tanneries, distilleries, slaughterhouses, or any other installations potentially causing foul odours, noise, and other nuisances.⁵ Many of Verdun’s small farms (often owned by successful Montreal entrepreneurs) were eventually broken down into smaller lots, a trend fuelled by local realty speculation at the turn of the century. The individual lots, especially in eastern and east-central Verdun, were then sold for housing construction to accommodate developers as well as the thousands of potential tenants streaming into the Montreal area as a result of increasing urbanization and immigration.⁶

Verdun became a town in 1907 and grew rapidly, attaining 6,000 inhabitants that year. Early twentieth-century residential construction transformed Verdun from a rural outpost into a community of wage-earning families. Most of the new dwellings were modest two- and three-storey buildings, each with four to six rented flats. They went up in the east end, radiating out from the intersection of Wellington Street and Church Avenue – the city’s commercial centre. Shops and banks were also part of the construction boom, usually occupying the ground floor of residential buildings. Symbolic of Verdun’s growing stature, a new city hall, also housing the police and fire departments, was built in 1908 on Church Avenue above Wellington Street. In 1911 the Dominion census showed 11,629 residents. While the ethnic balance was closely split between French and English speakers, in the next few years the English-speaking proportion increased as hundreds of British immigrant families sought cheap accommodation. In 1912 Verdun was incorporated as a city.⁷

Verdun had no railway station, no canal access, nor, before the 1920s, much public transit. The main egress routes were along Wellington Street into Point St Charles and across a bridge spanning the aqueduct at Church Avenue, which led to Côte St Paul. Public transit linking Verdun with Montreal was augmented in 1926 by bus service along Verdun Avenue to Montreal's Atwater Avenue, across the bridge spanning the Lachine Canal there, and up Atwater to Ste Catherine Street. This route took a mere nineteen minutes at rush hour.⁸ Lasalle Boulevard, which wound its way along the riverbank, linked southwestern Verdun to Lasalle. Landing from the river provided the only other significant access to the municipality.⁹ But the river also posed problems. Even before 1900 civic officials had recognized that development and expansion depended on the prevention of annual spring flooding. In 1895, work on the first riverside dyke began. It proved a burden for the small municipality, which struggled for thirty years to overcome the rising waters and to finance the project.

In a 1933 study of Verdun and Point St Charles, Mary Davidson noted each community's sense of isolation: "both areas remained impregnated with small-town attitudes until the post[-1918] period of development. This past tradition of isolation still persists."¹⁰ Davidson's work also emphasizes the deep-rooted sense of local pride in Verdun, which spurred community spirit and helped foster neighbourhood contacts and local institutions; self-sufficiency also helped Verdun to prosper.

The First World War: A Proud Record

The years 1914-19 were pivotal for Verdun. The city experienced spectacular growth, among the highest in Canada, attaining perhaps 21,000 inhabitants by the end of 1918 and over 24,000 a year later.¹¹ Perhaps the onset of war had even greater meaning for Verdunites than for many other Canadians, since so many residents were recent British immigrants.¹² Verdunites recorded startlingly high enlistment rates. Most postwar press estimates put the number of Verdunites in uniform during the First World War at between 3,000 and 4,000 – up to 20 percent of the entire population.¹³ In 1940 the Verdun branch of the Canadian Legion estimated that 2,500 Verdunites served overseas during the First World War while "a conservative estimate" of 500 others remained on duty in Canada.¹⁴ This seems a more measured assessment.

Patriotism could also prove profitable. In February 1916, the British Munitions Company, a "national factory" (forerunner to the Crown corporations of the Second World War), asked Verdun for permission to erect a munitions plant to produce time fuses loaded with powder and fitted to 18-pounder artillery shells.¹⁵ Anxious to participate in the war effort and to attract investment, the city allowed the company – Verdun's first significant industry – to build on a large vacant lot on the city limits bordering Point St Charles.¹⁶ It obliged British Munitions to

employ, as much as possible given the requirements for specialized workers, “Verdun labour in preference to outside labour.”¹⁷ A later press account estimated that some 4,000 people, most of them women and many of them locals, had worked at the plant up to November 1918.¹⁸ Verdun thus reaped its share of the nationwide industrial boom.

Although it brought employment to Verdun, the war also imposed a social burden. In April 1919, Mayor J.A.A. Leclair recalled the stresses of the war. He told city council that Verdun “has had to struggle against difficult financial, moral and social situations created through the state of war.”¹⁹ In addition to the bereavement caused by hundreds of local casualties, the war led to hardship for many of their dependants.

Meanwhile, the burning wartime issue of conscription had elicited little debate in Verdun city council. The mayor and eight aldermen, including five English speakers from April 1917 on, did not oppose the idea, and no documentary evidence exists that the French-speaking members disapproved. In January 1917 the council unanimously sanctioned federal identity cards for national service registration and vowed to ensure that Verdun residents completed and returned them to the proper authorities.²⁰ Notwithstanding its national prominence, conscription never reappeared in council minutes. Yet when two federal ministers, Charles Doherty and C.C. Ballantyne, spoke at city hall in defence of the Military Service Act, they were shouted down with cries of “Vive Laurier!” The ministers left the building under police protection, while fighting broke out in the gathering crowd.²¹ Conscription divided Verdunites, like the country itself, along linguistic and political lines.

Two postwar events solidified the memory of the city’s First World War patriotism and helped shape responses in the period 1939-45. First, the Prince of Wales visited Verdun on 30 October 1919 during his Canadian tour. He allowed city hall to fly his personal standard in recognition of Verdun’s having had the highest per capita enlistment rate of any city in the British Empire. This feat, and the prince’s visit, generated considerable local pride and was often remarked upon in the interwar period, for example in local newspaper articles, political speeches, correspondence from city hall, and at the local branch of the Great War Veterans’ Association, later the Canadian Legion. English speakers usually explained the high participation by invoking the city’s desire to serve the Empire. A high percentage of enlistees were, in fact, British born.

Second, on 5 October 1924 the city unveiled its First World War cenotaph in a small but prominent park located at the intersection of Lasalle Boulevard and Wellington Street, near the northeastern city limits. Entitled simply “Vimy,” the monument was cast in bronze by the well-known Montreal sculptor Coeur de Lion McCarthy, who also cast the famous First World War memorial statue for Montreal’s Windsor Station, copies of which can be found in Vancouver’s and

Toronto's main train stations.²² The unveiling was an important event. The former commander of the Canadian Corps, Gen Sir Arthur Currie, principal of McGill University, delivered the inaugural address. Every unit in the Montreal area's Military District 4 was represented at the ceremony, which attracted an estimated 25,000 onlookers, including thousands of veterans and relatives of the fallen.²³ Mrs Jane Leavitt, Verdun's most celebrated Silver Cross mother, also called "the Mother of Verdun," unveiled the memorial. She had immigrated with her family from London to Verdun in 1913, when the youngest of her nine children was fourteen. Of her five sons on active service, her three eldest had been killed, and another wounded.²⁴

Verdunites had set a standard of military service apparently unequalled in the Empire. In the interwar period and during the Second World War, this fact helped foster a strong sense of civic patriotism. Verdun's British character persisted, and the city's large veteran community spent twenty years perpetuating the ideals of loyalty, civic pride, and service. Despite the hardship that it engendered, the First World War also encouraged population growth and industrial expansion without especially exacerbating linguistic tension. It had helped build the community.

The Years of Growth

Soon after Verdun welcomed home its demobilized soldiers in 1919, the city became a virtual boom town, Montreal's major bedroom community. New dwellings – mostly low-rent rows of triplexes, and later duplexes – went up, and the city built schools, parks, playgrounds, streets, sewers, and other infrastructure as development moved steadily southwest. Large swaths of open land succumbed to new neighbourhoods. Canadian immigration policy in the 1920s kept out most immigrants but the British, and many newcomers found a ready and welcome support network in Verdun.

Densely populated central Verdun consisted of long, unvarying narrow avenues of triplexes interrupted by perpendicular laneways parallel to main arteries. Little sunlight filtered into these dwellings, which had windows only in the front and back. These structures, like most in the older neighbourhoods, had winding external wooden staircases with metal railings of the type for which the Montreal area is well known. At the back, corrugated tin sheds with interior wooden staircases stored wood, coal, and personal belongings. These sheds – great fire hazards – overlooked narrow lanes and the next avenue's back sheds. There were no yards, though families in ground-floor flats might have a patch of land off the laneway suitable for small gardens or for simple recreation. The back lanes themselves became communal backyards.

These dense housing conditions fostered a sense of common identity and shared experience. People came to know each other well and neighbourhood friendship networks became a staple of Verdun life. The four to six rooms in each flat were

usually small, and the single sunlit ventilation shaft for all six flats in a triplex allowed little privacy, especially since it adjoined each flat's bathroom. Davidson described this shared vent as "as good a conductor of family quarrels as are the flimsy walls which separate the flats."²⁵

Yet Verdun's public spaces could be spectacular, and the city's natural riverside beauty defined the community and instilled it with pride. In 1926 the city constructed a wide, handsome, four-kilometre-long wooden promenade, known as the boardwalk, on top of the riverfront dyke. A linked series of stone pillars, many with lampposts, lined the walkway along its river side. Civic boosters insisted that Verdun was ideal for raising children, and many young working-class couples settled in the city. Verdunites themselves believed that its low rents, beautiful riverside location, and proximity to downtown Montreal attracted large numbers of new residents.²⁶

Following completion of the boardwalk, Verdun's population grew even more quickly. In the period 1921-31, it increased by an astonishing 143 percent to 60,745. Verdun became the third-largest city in the province and Canada's fastest-growing city.²⁷ With a surface area of a mere 2.5 square miles (approximately 6.5 square kilometres), it was easily the most densely populated city in Canada, with an alarmingly high 24,298 inhabitants per square mile.²⁸ Suburbanization was a nationwide phenomenon, and the Montreal-area cities of Westmount, Outremont, and St Lambert also doubled their (considerably smaller) populations in this decade. Montreal's growth rate was less impressive, and Verdun was the only significant working-class community in the Montreal area to grow between the wars.²⁹

Pulling Together during the Depression

The effects of the Great Depression of 1929-39 in Canada have been well documented.³⁰ Unemployment rose steadily from 1930 on, peaking nationally at 32 percent of the non-agricultural labour force in the winter of 1933 and remaining high for the rest of the decade.³¹ Canada's least skilled workers in industry, construction, and manufacturing were usually the first to lose their jobs or become chronically underemployed and remained so for the longest periods. The metropolitan region of Montreal was one of the worst-affected urban areas of the country. In February 1934, 240,000 residents of Montreal proper, or 28 percent of its population, were dependent on municipal relief. Many of the families had had working hours or wages, or both, slashed, or lacked the means of subsistence, and yet remained ineligible for direct relief.³²

As most Verdun families derived their principal income from wage work in nearby factories and transportation industries, or from clerical work in downtown Montreal, this unprecedented economic crisis devastated the city. Verdun in the early 1930s suffered unemployment on a par with other large Canadian urban centres and a jobless rate approximating the national average of 20-25 percent.

(Verdun's rate was consistently lower than Montreal's.) While Verdun had granted some aid to desperate cases since late 1929, especially during winter, in January 1932 it set up the municipally operated and financed Verdun Unemployment Relief Commission to handle the increasing number of applications. This was "the first independent unemployment relief commission in the Province, if not in the Dominion."³³ In 1933 just under 30 percent of Verdunites depended on municipal assistance. This figure dropped to stabilize in the next several years at about 19 percent until 1937, when it declined further.³⁴ But conditions remained harsh. By 1938, 40 percent of unemployed Verdunites were unskilled and therefore probably experiencing the most difficulty finding and keeping jobs.³⁵

The city's generous response to residents' plight reinforced a strong sense of community and exemplified the ethos of mutual aid. In May 1933, after putting "considerable pressure" on the budget-conscious provincial government of Liberal premier Louis-Alexandre Taschereau to permit municipalities to offer shelter assistance, the city began paying part of the rents of the unemployed.³⁶ It also distributed oil lamps to residents who had lost their electricity because of unpaid bills. Subsequently, the city provided allowances for the payment of electricity bills and even for moving costs (out of Verdun), as well as for the purchase of extra milk, stoves, furniture, mattresses, and clothing.³⁷ These measures made Hervé Ferland, the populist mayor from 1933 to 1939, a favourite of the poor. The city was proud of its relief organization and of the careful financing of payments. In 1941 Verdun's general manager and chief financial administrator, Joseph R. French, announced that since 1936 traditional sources of revenue such as property taxes and licence fees had paid for the entire relief effort.³⁸ Few Canadian cities could boast as much.

While the unemployment rate had dropped noticeably by 1937, Verdun's thinner relief rolls were attributable to the city's "hiring" of relief recipients for public works projects. Its program was one of Quebec's most extensive and became the benchmark for other municipalities.³⁹ As early as 1930 the city sought tangible results from its relief expenditures. In return for providing building materials, supervision, and specialized labour, the city obtained the services of unemployed, able-bodied Verdunites. Their willingness to work was a prerequisite for the continuation of their payments; as work relief, these payments were 20 percent higher than basic direct relief. In this way, the city completed, at minimal cost, large capital projects such as the Verdun Auditorium (completed in November 1939) and the Natatorium swimming pool complex (1940), undertook road work, improved the sewer system, and provided municipal services such as snow removal and landscaping. When the Verdun Unemployment Relief Commission wound up in July 1941 (after nine years of operation but just a few months after the provincial government stopped subsidizing municipal direct relief) only 130 Verdun heads of families were receiving payments, in a city of 67,000.⁴⁰

Statistically, the Depression does not appear to have hurt Verdun as much as its working-class population might suggest. If Verdunites with memories of the era are unlikely to describe their experiences as miserable, it may be because the many people affected seem to have been reasonably well cared for by a farsighted municipal administration.⁴¹ But the widely shared experience of hard times in closely knit Verdun also solidified intracommunity ties and helped shape the city's common responses during the trying years to follow.

Britain on the St Lawrence

One of the principal concerns of this book is to examine some of the war's effects on Verdun's social structure and the extent to which Verdun's contribution to the war effort reflected its social composition. Consequently, a brief sketch of the people of Verdun is in order. English speakers of all ethnicities made up nearly 60 percent of Verdun's population. But any discussion of Verdun society in the period 1939-45 must recognize the British-origin character of the city, which is evident in Table 1.1.⁴² As much as class, family circumstance, or individual motivation, its significant British population explains the city's remarkable record of military

Table 1.1

Origin	1931		1941	
	Number	%	Number	%
English	20,342	33.49	21,530	31.97
Scottish	8,631	14.21	8,263	12.27
Irish	5,665	9.33	5,966	8.86
Other British	331	0.54	303	0.45
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>34,969</i>	<i>57.57</i>	<i>36,062</i>	<i>53.55</i>
French	23,277	38.32	28,242	41.93
German	464	0.76	376	0.56
Scandinavian	356	0.59	320	0.48
Hebrew	344	0.57	471	0.69
Italian	204	0.34	295	0.44
Other European	821	1.35	1,241	1.84
Asian	62	0.10	88	0.13
Other/not stated	248	0.40	254	0.38
Total	60,745	100.0	67,349	100.0

Source: 1931 Census, vol. 2, 374-5; 1941 Census, vol. 2, 382-3.

enlistments during the Second World War. Verdun was home to the densest per capita concentration of British-born residents in the Montreal area and was a bastion of “old country” values and allegiances. Most of the families from Britain (including a small number from the Irish Free State) contained semiskilled workers and originated from such cities as London, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Belfast.⁴³

About one-quarter of the almost 30,000 interwar British immigrants to Montreal had settled in Verdun.⁴⁴ The 1931 census indicates that 14,570 (24 percent) of Verdun’s 60,745 inhabitants were born in the British Isles, and perhaps two-thirds of them had emigrated following the First World War. The English made up 55.7 percent of the British total, the Scots 34.5 percent, the Irish 8.3 percent, and the Welsh 1.2 percent.⁴⁵ The 1941 census did not reveal a significant shift in the ethnic mix of Verdun’s British Isles-born residents, but the British-born population of the city had dropped to 16.7 percent (12,309 of 67,349 residents) – a decline of 30 percent in a decade.⁴⁶ This number included the wartime mayor, Edward Wilson, and the city clerk, Arthur Burgess. With so many of its residents born in the British Isles, Verdun was very much an anomaly in wartime Quebec; indeed, no other city in the province boasted as high a percentage of British-born citizens, and few Canadian cities could match these proportions.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, sharply curtailed immigration during the Depression meant that Verdunites were increasingly Canadian born.

Chain migration led many Britons to Verdun, where they found a comfortable atmosphere and a support network of cultural, social, fraternal, and political organizations, as well as local branches, or their equivalents, of familiar institutions such as churches or sporting associations. Verdun hosted more of these organizations than any other community in the Montreal area.⁴⁸ It was common to hear English spoken with “broad” old-country accents and to see shops displaying British-style food, furnishings, and clothing. (There was a profusion of fish-and-chips shops, for example.) Davidson and Reynolds noted that the homes of British immigrants often contained British literature, photos of the royal family or British country scenes, and souvenirs of British events and occurrences, such as royal jubilees, sporting events, or military service. In 1932, half of all British-immigrant families in Verdun received British newspapers.⁴⁹

When war came in September 1939, Verdun’s British character allowed many English speakers a personal, widespread, and immediate identification with the cause of Britain. Many among the British born, notably Wilson and Burgess, assumed leadership of Verdun’s war effort. In 1939 “patriotism” in Verdun meant lending support to Britain. Subsequently, as the war widened and grew in intensity, Verdunites mobilized on behalf of Canada, and the community lent its support primarily to local causes, demonstrating an attachment to local identity.

Class and Community

While Verdun was culturally mixed, a strong common bond of place and community claimed residents' loyalties. Hervé Ferland, the Depression-era mayor, described the local ambience as "une mentalité toute spéciale," proudly different from other Montreal-area communities.⁵⁰ This positive self-perception encouraged a shared citywide response during the war and led to local initiatives in support of the war effort and especially in aid of Verdunites on active service.

A clear link existed between Verdunites' sense of community and local culture and their sense of class. Working-class consciousness constituted a badge of identification worn by many inhabitants, especially those of long residency. For example, many Verdunites had jobs at the Canadian National Railways shops in Point St Charles and felt a bond between themselves that did not extend to co-workers from other parts of Montreal.⁵¹

Verdunites as a whole were among the top wage earners of the Montreal-area working class. Independent-minded Verdunites retained an internalized belief that they enjoyed a higher standard of living than many other Montreal neighbourhoods. This standard of living was defined by more than just skill level and family income. Verdun was far newer and cleaner and contained fewer of the obvious social ills that afflicted Montreal's poorer industrial neighbourhoods, such as nearby Point St Charles and St Henri.⁵² This was not how most Montrealers (except those in southwestern working-class neighbourhoods) saw Verdun, and Verdunites themselves were aware that their city did not attract an upwardly mobile, managerial, or professional middle class. Whatever boasts the city could offer therefore seemed that much more impressive. Verdun had the lowest proportion of slum dwellings in the entire country, 7 percent, even though it was the runaway leader in terms of rented dwellings (90.3 percent) and population density.⁵³ Verdunites were aware that their city was different, special even, and certainly knew this better than other Montrealers.

External perceptions helped determine Verdun's class status, and working-class distinctiveness was what many non-Verdunites noted about the city. For example, in one week in 1941, the *Gazette* reminded readers that Verdun was "practically devoid of wealthy citizens," while the *Montreal Daily Star* noted, "there are very few wealthy people in Verdun."⁵⁴ Aileen Ross, in her 1941 study of Montreal's social elites as seen through the membership and activities of the Junior League (English-speaking debutantes) and the Ligue de la jeunesse féminine (similar, though less exclusive), observed, "it could never happen that an English-speaking girl could join the Junior League were she living in Verdun."⁵⁵

Intraclass differences in Verdun defied an outsider's monolithic view, however. This local stratification had a residential and linguistic basis, dividing the more affluent English-speaking west end from the mostly French-speaking east end.

Even though most landlords and shop owners were French speaking, class remained defined as much by language as by income. The oldest and shabbiest parts were considered overwhelmingly French speaking, while the newer, less congested areas were felt to be the preserve of the city's English-speaking population. Davidson wrote of British immigrants: "The more poorly situated family is forced to live in the older, cheaper residential section of Verdun, mingling with the French ... As the family progresses in economic and social status, it moves ... [and] becomes separated from the French."⁵⁶ She implies that it was not quality of life, as determined by immediate physical surroundings, but rather proximity to sizable elements of the French-speaking population that defined the social position of the British immigrant family. Perception did not always reflect reality. Although most west-enders were indeed English speaking, many English speakers lived in the east end. Conversely, French speakers could be found in some numbers in Crawford Park, Verdun's most westerly and most prosperous section.⁵⁷

As the notion of a Montreal "metropolitan community" began to form in the 1900s and 1910s, the concept of a satellite locale like Verdun existing independently from the nearby metropolis grew increasingly invalid. The advent of motorized vehicles, the extension of public transit systems, and other factors such as the availability of radios and telephones in the home led to a more wide-ranging view of community. An overarching sense emerged that separate districts belonged to larger, linked urban collectives, which in turn belonged to wider national or international networks. Natural boundaries, either municipal or neighbourhood, became less meaningful socially.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, in 1948 the political sociologist Leo Zakuta defined a "natural area" as "a specialized and differentiated part of the community in its selection of population types, in its performance of particular functions in the community and in its separation from other areas by distinguishable barriers" such as rivers, canals, railway tracks, or large parcels of vacant or wooded land. Ethnicity, housing, occupation, and income were all relevant to his definition. The boundaries of a natural area were clear and physically defined. According to Zakuta, "local self-consciousness" and a shared sense of history were also major defining factors. These factors united members of the community and formed a barrier to outside influence. Verdun possessed these physical, social, and psychological boundaries. Zakuta labeled Verdun one of the strongest natural areas in the Montreal area.⁵⁹

Verdunites were proud of their city. In a strikingly self-assured tone, the *Guardian* spoke for many when it stated: "No city or town is more imbued with the true spirit of 'community.' Verdun ... does not take any particular interest in what occurs in its immediate vicinity. It is 'Verdun' and 'Verdun' exclusively."⁶⁰ While this newspaper clearly relished its role as a community leader and booster, this affirmation nevertheless denotes a commonly held local self-perception. A French-

language letter in the bilingual *Messenger* showed that this civic pride crossed linguistic barriers. In response to a Montrealer who had described Verdun as “un petit village,” the anonymous, irate writer rebutted: “you’ve never set foot in Verdun, which explains why you think we live in a small village.”⁶¹

Verdun on the Eve of War

In May and June 1939, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth toured Canada. The entire country appeared to be seized by imperial sentiment. Public figures and ordinary Canadians, groups and associations, corporations and communities vied for royal attention.⁶² The British city of Verdun was no exception. When the schedule for the royal visit was announced in January 1939, Verdunites were disappointed. Their Majesties’ visit to Montreal would be very brief, and no time could be spared for Verdun. On 18 May the king and queen arrived in Montreal, an event that the *Guardian* reported with a large red banner headline. Verdun organized its own parade and fireworks display that evening, and the city’s streets were festooned with bunting and flags in their honour. As the *Guardian* put it, the “cup of fealty was found to be overbrimming.”⁶³ This assertion would soon be put to the test.

As the summer of 1939 wore on, the drift to war appeared unmistakable; Canadians had seen this before. Despite the recent royal visit, there was no rush to embrace the sacrifices occasionally demanded by imperial loyalty. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of Britain’s declaration of war on 4 August 1914, the *Guardian* reminded readers that some 4,000 men from Verdun had seen service during the First World War but expressed the hope that another war might yet be averted.⁶⁴

As a whole, Canada entered the Second World War of its own accord but did so with resignation. The citizens who recalled the terrible bloodletting of the earlier conflict did not repeat the near-euphoria that had greeted the call to arms in 1914. In its last prewar edition, 1 September 1939, the *Guardian* made few references to the upcoming conflict. It requested local employers to cooperate with the authorities in protecting vital installations and informed citizens that social group and community activities would be cancelled in the event of war. Notwithstanding the muted enthusiasm, Verdunites had already begun enlisting.

Verdun’s English-speaking youths, too, had noticed the approach of war. The spring 1939 *Annual* of Verdun High School, a Protestant institution, reflected interest in the European situation. Apprehensive essays focused on aerial bombing, and one was entitled “Could War Destroy Modern Civilization?” In an article on “Leadership,” one student wrote, “Men like *Der Fuehrer* and *Il Duce* show us how much leadership is needed, but it is not the kind of leadership essential to the well-being of a nation.” There was also a moving essay on the futility and tragedy of war.⁶⁵ Despite the war scare produced by the Czechoslovakian crisis during the autumn of their graduating year, only one student professed his desire to join the

military – Britain’s Royal Air Force, not the Royal Canadian Air Force.⁶⁶ The eighty-six students of the class of 1940 began their final year of high school just as war erupted in the autumn of 1939. Perhaps surprisingly, just one of the forty young men in the class stated his intention to enlist. Archibald Boyce Cameron aspired to be an air force commander. Instead Flight-Sergeant Cameron was killed in action in 1944.⁶⁷