

## Western's War A Study of an Ontario Canadian Officers' Training Corps Contingent, 1939-1945

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### Résumé de l'article

Si l'on veut se rendre compte de l'influence des besoins et exigences militaires sur les cursus académiques, étudier les modalités particulières de l'éducation de soldats qui sont aussi étudiants, analyser les procédures de sélection et de formation des officiers, ou juger de l'efficacité du Programme de Formation des Officiers canadiens à un des moments les plus cruciaux de son histoire, il n'y a pas de meilleur exemple et de sujet d'étude que le Programme de Formation des Officiers canadiens de l'Université de Western Ontario pendant la seconde guerre mondiale. Le choix de Western permet en fait d'explorer toute l'histoire de ce programme dans le sud-est de l'Ontario, puisqu'il était offert non seulement sur le campus principal de Western, mais aussi à l'école de médecine, ainsi que dans plusieurs plus petites institutions d'enseignement de London, comme le Collège Huron, et aux collèges affiliés de Windsor (Assumption) et Waterloo. Les résultats de cette étude peuvent aussi être comparés à des expériences similaires dans d'autres institutions d'enseignement post secondaire.

# Western's War:

*A Study of an Ontario  
Canadian Officers' Training  
Corps Contingent, 1939-1945\**

By Andrew Theobald



*The University College Arts building, 4 December 1940. J.J. Talman Regional Collection, D.B. Weldon Library, University of Western Ontario 1943 COTC Scrapbook*

## *Abstract*

*The Second World War activities of the University of Western Ontario Canadian Officers' Training Corps (COTC) provide an ideal case study that examines the influence of military demands on academic requirements, explores the experiences of part-time student soldiers, illuminates officer training and selection, and questions the effectiveness of the COTC at the most crucial stage in its history. The focus on Western highlights southern Ontario history, as the training unit encompassed Western's main campus, the medical school, smaller London institutions like Huron College, and the Windsor (Assumption) and Waterloo affiliate colleges. These findings can also be compared and contrasted with the experiences of other post-secondary institutions.*

**Résumé:** *Si l'on veut se rendre compte de l'influence des besoins et exigences militaires sur les cursus académiques, étudier les modalités particulières de l'éducation de soldats qui sont aussi étudiants, analyser les procédures de sélection et de formation des officiers, ou juger de l'efficacité du Programme de Formation des Officiers canadiens à un des moments les plus cruciaux de son histoire, il n'y a pas de meilleur exemple et de sujet d'étude que le Programme de Formation des Officiers canadiens de l'Université de Western Ontario pendant la seconde guerre mondiale. Le choix de Western permet en fait d'explorer toute l'histoire de ce programme dans le sud-est de l'Ontario, puisqu'il était offert non seulement sur le campus principal de Western, mais aussi à l'école de médecine, ainsi que dans plusieurs plus petites institutions d'enseignement de London, comme le Collège Huron, et aux collèges affiliés de Windsor (Assumption) et Waterloo. Les résultats de cette étude peuvent aussi être comparés à des expériences similaires dans d'autres institutions d'enseignement post secondaire.*

When Canada declared war against Germany on 10 September 1939, it did so with a military severely deficient in troop strength, weapons, and equipment. Yet by the end of the conflict, nearly one million people had served in the Cana-

dian forces. University-based Canadian Officers' Training Corps (COTC) contingents formed an important source of these personnel. After all, military and political leaders looked to the universities to make a distinctive contribution to the war effort. However, the army, governments, schools, and COTC members all struggled with the exact role the training corps should play. The principal question focused on whether officers should be favoured for selection based upon university education, especially since students supposedly made ideal officer candidates, particularly in critical technical po-

sitions. COTC units laboured to prepare their volunteers for these roles in active service. Nonetheless, introductory and interrupted training, shifting and often contradictory government policies, high deferral rates, rampant complaints, and army disappoint-

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\*I would particularly like to thank the editor and the anonymous reviewers of *Ontario History*. They were especially helpful, going above and beyond to assist a young scholar. My colleagues at Western, especially those in Professor Granatstein's History 515, and the attendees of the University of Waterloo's 15th Military History Colloquium, where an earlier version of this work was presented, also deserve to be singled out for their constructive criticism and support.

ment with the program meant that the COTC never reached the lofty heights its founders envisioned.

The COTC derived, like virtually all Canadian military conventions, from British precedent. The 1908 establishment in Britain of the university-based Officer Training Corps came in response to abysmal military performance in the Boer War. Beginning in 1912, Canadian universities adopted the program, creating officer training as a means to better students morally and physically. Students were widely perceived to be future civilian leaders, and the COTC also helped steer some of the best-educated middle and upper class men into military service. The first unit was established at McGill University, but the outbreak of the Great War provided the real impetus to university training. Western University, later renamed the University of Western Ontario (UWO), established its contingent in November 1914.<sup>1</sup>

In the inter-war period, the Western COTC suffered through the severe cutbacks and outright neglect that marred all contemporary Canadian military ventures, with the Department of National Defence regularly balking at picking up the unit's costs.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, a consequent lack of equipment severely

ly hindered training. Volunteers had to purchase their own outdated uniforms, including swords, circumstances that often reduced members to training in civilian clothes. However, due to the dedicated efforts of committed faculty, the unit survived to meet the onset of the second great war.

Upon the arrival of that war, COTC units experienced a surge of recruits, with Western's contingent ballooning from 260 to nearly 500 men.<sup>3</sup> Volunteers were not obligated to enlist in the army proper, as the organization existed for training purposes only. Nonetheless, since all officers required a provincial matriculation examination, universities were the logical place to seek out potential leaders. Initially, the COTC provided trainees with basic infantry instruction and, for medical school students, some military medical seasoning.

This rudimentary training did not immediately lead to active service as an officer, even if a candidate wished to enlist, largely because of the Mackenzie King government's focus on air training and the dispatch of only one army division overseas. Also, although the country possessed just 455 professional officers before the war, 6,500 reserve and former service members were eligible for commissions, sufficient numbers

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Worthington, "Socialization, Militarization and Officer Recruiting: The Development of the Officers Training Corps," *Military Affairs*, 43 (April 1979): 90-5; Daniel Thomas Byers, "The Canadian Officers' Training Corps: Support for Military Training in the Universities of Canada, 1908-1935" (MA Thesis, Wilfrid Laurier University, 1993), 1-63.

<sup>2</sup> H.M. Thomas, *UWO Contingent COTC: The History of the Canadian Officers' Training Corps at the University of Western Ontario* (London: The University of Western Ontario, 1956), 43.

<sup>3</sup> *UWO Gazette*, 6 Oct. 1939; 13 Oct. 1939.



*COTC Dance 20 December 1940: L – R: Lt. A.M. Sweeton, Capt. Malcolm Morton, Lt. Jay Cameron, Burneice Dalbridge, Doreen Busby. London Free Press Negative Collection, D.B. Weldon Library, University of Western Ontario.*

to meet the limited need.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the prevailing attitude, expressed by Western COTC Major H.M. Thomas in a 1939 speech, cautioned that “the best possible service for any undergraduate at present is to complete his education.”<sup>5</sup> University student bodies remained repositories of potential officers, but the first volunteers from the COTC did not enlist in the active army until early 1940.<sup>6</sup>

More sustained training began that

same year, highlighted with a doubling of the number of weekly training hours to six. This allowed a candidate to complete common-to-all-arms training and sit for the first written lieutenant’s certificate after twenty-five weeks of service. Ideally, the candidate could proceed to a written qualification exam after another year, and then to a practical board and specialized training, leading to commission at graduation. For most volunteers, the summer of 1940 witnessed the be-

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey W. Hayes, “The Development of the Canadian Army Officer Corps, 1939-1945” (Ph. D. diss., University of Western Ontario, 1992), 54-5.

<sup>5</sup> *UWO Gazette*, 6 Oct. 1939.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 12 Jan. 1940.



*A section of the UWO COTC at the 1941 Thames Valley Golf Course Summer Camp: L – R: Ptes. D.M. Reid, R.G. Parker, W.A. Lockington, P.F. Henderson, E.R. Lamb, P.M. Kenny, J.O. Merritt, D.L. Oestricher. London Free Press Negative Collection, D.B. Weldon Library, University of Western Ontario.*

gining of relatively substantial army training, including weapons firing on outdoor ranges. This was basically infantry home defence training, with limited equipment necessitating devotion to map reading and marching.<sup>7</sup> This type of training could do little more than pique further interest in military service.

Whatever its shortcomings, it could not have come at a more opportune time, as the summer of 1940 marked the blackest period of the allied war effort. In June, France, along with much of the British army and its modern equipment, fell to Germany, leaving the Nazis unopposed on the continent. Suddenly, Canada became Britain's rank and file ally, an unexpected and unwelcome strategic shift necessitating massive military

expansion.

These events called for thousands more officers. However,

Defence Minister J.L. Ralston, a distinguished Great War veteran, melded British practice and personal experience in decreeing that commissions would come through previous service in the ranks only. That a soldier needed six months of overseas service before consideration for officer training clashed with the existing COTC policy. This development reduced the COTC's role to that of introducing students to the military before graduation, when they could enlist and work their way up through the ranks like everyone else. COTC training already fell outside the purview of the army's regimental system, making it uncertain how young lieutenants, fresh out of Western or other universities, would cope upon entering active service. However, the very catas-

<sup>7</sup> Thomas, *UWO Contingent COTC*, 142-45.

trope that prompted Ralston's order ensured its non-compliance. So urgent was the need for officers that COTC units could not be ignored. The military declared training corps service equivalent to service in the ranks, exempting university volunteers from Ralston's pronouncement.<sup>8</sup>

The COTC also had help from above, as many senior officers, notably those university trained in the applied sciences and engineering, considered education the most important element in officer selection. The Chief of the General Staff, General H.D.G. Crerar, unwaveringly promoted this position. Nonetheless, the focus on university education gave an advantage to those affluent enough to attend post-secondary institutions. In a country that had just emerged from the Great Depression, university enrollment, let alone completion, lay within the reach and financial resources of relatively few.<sup>9</sup> After the war, General E.L.M. Burns complained that because of its university basis, the COTC was "undemocratic" and class rather than merit-based, but Crerar's earlier opinion prevailed.<sup>10</sup>

At any rate, the Western unit welcomed its new responsibilities. Technical training in the artillery, military engineering, ordnance, service, and signals were added. In August 1941, a Royal

Canadian Air Force squadron was introduced and, echoing the establishment of the Canadian Women's Army Corps, the school also introduced a women's cadre later that year. The air force's direct association with the COTC did not last, however. Despite lagging behind the army in campus training, the air force went it alone and established a University Air Training Corps squadron in October 1942. With the establishment of an independent University Naval Training Division in March 1943, Western students had the same enlistment choices available to those outside of the university.<sup>11</sup>

The school and its COTC unit likewise played an important role under the National Resources Mobilization Act (NRMA). The NRMA, which also came into being following France's surrender, entailed the completion of a personal questionnaire by all Canadians over the age of sixteen. Subsequently, male respondents between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five were required to perform thirty days of basic military training. Although students could defer this requirement, universities unanimously agreed in July 1940 that, "all physically fit male students at University should take military training." The declaration also stated that a graduate's first duty was to the armed forces for service

<sup>8</sup> Hayes, "The Development of the Canadian Army Officer Corps," 101-18.

<sup>9</sup> A Queen's study found that only ten percent of secondary school graduates went on to university. See Queen's University Archives, Queen's University Principal's Report, 1939-40, 19; *Queen's Journal*, 1 Jan. 1940.

<sup>10</sup> Hayes, "The Development of the Canadian Army Officer Corps," 199-200.

<sup>11</sup> *UWO Gazette*, 5 April 1940; 10 Oct. 1941; 31 Oct. 1941; 13 Nov. 1942; 12 Feb. 1943.

in a technical capacity.<sup>12</sup> Students who chose not to join the COTC as volunteers were classed as Personnel Undergoing Training at Universities (PUTU). However, they were trained by COTC staff, and, as a result, were still exempted from the thirty days of compulsory basic training required of all others.

Shortly after this expansion, a second monumental change in Canada's strategic position prompted further modifications. The Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor, Hong Kong, and other targets on 7-8 December 1941, and the unhindered expansion of Imperial Japan in the aftermath, menaced an invasion of Canadian soil itself. The perceived threat led to the formation of the 7th and 8th army divisions. The need for junior officers among these home defence units made the COTC even more valuable. One May 1942 army directive authorized the 8th division to recruit from the COTC, even when simultaneously describing the men as "university students with only partial training."<sup>13</sup>

Many parties opposed these policies. In particular, considerable debate occurred over student deferment and the PUTU system. Deferment certainly seemed unfair to those unable to af-

ford university since, as historian A.B. McKillop noted, "The best way for a university student to avoid becoming a casualty of war was, in short, to enlist in the COTC – and then study hard."<sup>14</sup> Some observers, especially on the Prairies, considered COTC service as shirking active duty, arguing that only medical and science students deserved deferment. This position echoed allied practice, particularly in Britain, where under the strain of total war universities had essentially morphed into technical training schools. On the other hand, Western Registrar K.P.R. Neville and a majority of his counterparts, from a pragmatic but public-spirited desire to maintain their student bodies, supported the status quo. The government acceded to this position, since the Prime Minister was both supportive of a limited liability war effort and anxious to avoid meddling in the provincial field of education. Historian Michael Stevenson asserts that the cooperation between the government and universities on this issue constituted, "one of the success stories of mobilization in Canada during the Second World War."<sup>15</sup>

In spite of mixed sentiments, the student deferment system sought to

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<sup>12</sup> Michael D. Stevenson, *Canada's Greatest Wartime Muddle: National Selective Service and the Mobilization of Human Resources during World War II* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 52.

<sup>13</sup> Excerpted in Daniel Thomas Byers, "Mobilizing Canada: The National Resources Mobilization Act, The Department of National Defence, and Compulsory Military Service in Canada, 1940-1945" (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 2000), 223 (n 95).

<sup>14</sup> A.B. McKillop, *Matters of Mind: The University in Ontario, 1791-1951* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 524.

<sup>15</sup> Stevenson, *Canada's Greatest Wartime Muddle*, 64.



keep people in school, especially those in the “essential” fields of medicine and the sciences.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, students in the arts, with the notable exception of those studying German, Italian or other advantageous languages, often had to justify their continued attendance at university. To demonstrate support for the system while still encouraging enlistment after graduation, Western accelerated medical degrees, shortening completion time from six to five years. The belief that technical training held the key to victory also led to more emphasis on scientific education for officers. In March 1943, all science students came under the control of the Wartime Bureau of Technical Personnel, prompting still more army-imposed demands on studies, degrees, and wartime employment prospects.<sup>17</sup>

These accelerated programmes resulted in intense pressure on students trying to balance COTC training with academics and other activities. For one, training intensified, with infantry instruction and weapons familiarization during the school year culminating in the two-week summer camp. Occasionally, students appealed poor exam results with claims that military training had unfairly disrupted their studying. Colo-

nel Ibbotson Leonard, commanding officer of the Western unit, responded to complaints of this nature by asking whether students would prefer to be attending “Hitler University.” Ultimately, a compromise established that degrees could not be threatened by COTC obligations, and all final-year students could forego training to meet their academic responsibilities and get into uniform or essential occupations faster.<sup>18</sup>

In 1942, Western’s COTC unit peaked in size, with 751 trainees. This strength fluctuated throughout academic terms, but, following the submersion of the PUTU into the COTC proper one year later, the unit averaged 500 members for the remainder of the war.<sup>19</sup> In spite of this relatively large size, an examination of Western’s enrollment statistics makes it clear that many students circumvented military training. Even when taking into account deferments for medical reasons, married students, theological acolytes, “enemy aliens,” and conscientious objectors, the COTC comprised less than half of the male student body during any of the war years. This was in keeping with a national trend, evident in comparing the 10,422 trainees with the 34,917 male students enrolled in universities in

<sup>16</sup> Order in Council P.C. 9566 denoted the essential disciplines: Agriculture, Architecture, Commerce, Dentistry, Education, Engineering or Applied Science, Forestry, Medicine, Pharmacy, Veterinary Science, and special courses in Math, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, and Geology.

<sup>17</sup> *UWO Gazette*, 5 Feb. 1943; 11 Feb. 1944; Frederick Thorburn Brown, “A Study on the Selection of University C.O.T.C. Candidates,” (MSc Thesis, McGill University, 1950), 50.

<sup>18</sup> *UWO Gazette*, 19 March 1943.

<sup>19</sup> Strength returns may be found in the J.J. Talman Regional Collection, D.B. Weldon Library, University of Western Ontario, University of Western Ontario Canadian Officers’ Training Corps Collection (UWO COTC) Papers, Boxes 7 and 10.



*Sergeants of the UWO COTC at a 1943 Camp. Front Row - L-R: Sgt. J.P. Metras, CSM H.B. Rockey, Sgt. H.B. Hitchcock, CSM A. Truant, RSM J.W. Rivett, CSM M.G.G. Pickell, Sgt. H.A. Leah, Sgt. G.E. Aziz; Rear Row - L-R: Sgt. H.D. Sinclair, Sgt. J.L.M. Fitzgerald, Sgt. J.H. Norton, Sgt. J.R. Barber, Sgt. H.B. Parkees, Sgt. R.D. MacDonald, Sgt. R.C. McIver, Sgt. D.E. Fleming. London Free Press Negative Collection, D.B. Weldon Library, University of Western Ontario.*

1940-41.<sup>20</sup> Even at its peak, the COTC failed to attract more than one third of Western students. Clearly, many wished to attend university without performing military service.

Direct enlistment also reduced the numbers taking training. Students were excused from COTC training if they had begun the active enlistment process, which, especially early in the war and in air force and naval procedure, often took considerable time. Indeed, the keenest simply enlisted, with little

or no COTC or equivalent training. Conversely, some trainees opted for the COTC instead of directly volunteering in order to complete their education while still earning some money. For example, Alexander M. Ross served in the Queen's University and Ontario College of Education units respectively, noting in his memoirs that both times he joined for the pay. Similarly, Huron College student Robert Miles Sanderson welcomed being compensated for spending time with

<sup>20</sup> Talman Regional Collection, UWO Registrar Statistical Reports, Box 1; Robin S. Harris, *A History of Higher Education in Canada 1663-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 456.

his classmates.<sup>21</sup>

Internal factors prompted the third major change in COTC organization. In late 1942, the army adopted a psychological officer selection system. Testing opened up the possibility of “scientifically” determining a candidate’s suitability for a commission without reference to formal schooling. This innovative system sought to accelerate the selection process and eliminate nepotism and other personal judgments. In spite of this change, university-educated candidates still held an advantage, being more familiar with the technical traits coveted by examiners. Furthermore, those performing the testing were usually little more experienced than those being tested.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, COTC training did not automatically an officer make. After the army entered into sustained combat, beginning with the July 1943 Sicily landings, COTC service was deemed no longer to equal time spent in the ranks. Since they ceased receiving direct commissions upon graduation, trainees underwent the regular officer selection process, where they fared poorly, failing in disproportionate numbers.<sup>23</sup> This provided further evidence for those who considered active service the best

method of selecting officers, and the policy change ended the COTC’s glory days.

Coupled with this development, the army had a surplus of officers by late 1943. Progress in the war against Japan led to the disbandment of units in the 7th and 8th home defence divisions and the military even transferred over 600 officers to the British under the Canloan scheme. Some university-educated officer candidates looked to the air force, the navy, and the American and other allied services for opportunities. The service corps, in which many Western business students trained, ceased accepting cadets in 1943, due to their own surplus.<sup>24</sup> Inter-service rivalries influenced the army’s decision to avoid discouraging COTC candidates, but experienced non-commissioned officers and other sources had overtaken the universities by the end of the year. In March 1944, officer candidates began completing their training in Britain, a change in which the COTC played no direct role.

All things considered, it is not surprising that students faltering under the combined academic and training workload received little sympathy. In reference to an insubordinate trainee, West-

<sup>21</sup> Alexander M. Ross, *Slow March To A Regiment* (St. Catharines: Vanwell, 1993), 46-65; Robert Miles Sanderson and Marie Sanderson, *Letters From A Soldier: The Wartime Experiences of a Canadian Infantryman, 1943-1945* (Waterloo: Escart Press, 1993), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Terry Copp and Bill McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Canadian Army, 1939-1945* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990), 27-43; Hayes, “The Development of the Canadian Army Officer Corps,” 125-63.

<sup>23</sup> Hayes, “The Development of the Canadian Army Officer Corps,” 138. See also Ross, *Slow March To A Regiment*, 84.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas, *UWO Contingent COTC*, 227.

ern's dean received a letter from COTC HQ, "Warning that the next conviction will result in his being struck off the strength of the Unit and reported to the Divisional Registrar, National Selective Service."<sup>25</sup> Academic failure meant not only expulsion from university, but also compulsory service in the ranks. For example, when Robert Miles Sanderson failed to maintain satisfactory grades at Huron College in 1943, he wound up serving as a private. In a letter to his parents, he noted that "There were 89 at Queen's required to withdraw and enlist in the armed forces, 75 at Alberta."<sup>26</sup> Likewise, the academic expulsion of an Assumption student from Detroit caused the authorities to note that American officials "might also call his Draft Board's attention to the case."<sup>27</sup> To discourage repeat incidents, National Selective Service orders declared all male students ranked in the bottom half of non-essential classes and all incoming non-essential students eligible for call up. By January 1945, with the conscription crisis raging, Western fixed enrollment numbers, with no callable male students admitted if incoming grades remained lower than those from the previous year.<sup>28</sup>

Regardless, the main training concern rested with the question of usefulness. From summer 1940 until July 1943, when COTC service was officially considered as time spent in the active ranks, volunteers looked forward to being commissioned after graduation. Despite the official pronouncement, however, COTC training could not compare to real service. Even though many universities combined summer camps with other schools and local reserve units, training was always small scale, classroom instruction coupled with orienteering, weapons practice, and as much inter-service cooperation as the many components could muster. Of course, by definition, COTC training inevitably took place in a non-military setting. Trainees returned to their residence rooms or homes following a few hours of weekly instruction, essentially free from the clutches of military discipline. The only continuous period of concentrated training, and the one time slightly approximating active service life, came during the summer camps. The COTC's problems boiled down to the quandary Western unit chronicler H.M. Thomas recognized, "It would take four years at the University to do the equivalent of an intense four months in the Active

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<sup>25</sup> COTC HQ to Dean K.P.R. Neville, 30 March 1944, in UWO COTC Papers, Box 9, File 5-4, Discipline Police.

<sup>26</sup> Sanderson and Sanderson, Letters From A Soldier, 7-11, 29; Frederick W. Gibson, *Queen's University, Volume II, 1917-1961: To Serve and Yet Be Free* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983), 206.

<sup>27</sup> HQ MD 1 to OC No. 30 Coy. Canadian Provost Corps, 15 March 1945, in UWO COTC Papers, Box 9, File 5-4, Discipline Police.

<sup>28</sup> University Joint Services Committee Minutes, in UWO COTC Papers, Box 9; Stevenson, *Canada's Greatest Wartime Muddle*, 63-4.

Force!”<sup>29</sup>

Complaints surfaced from many other quarters as well. Heading the McGill contingent's list of grievances was the fact that, unlike Western or their own school, Queen's gave academic credit for training.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the major protests at Western were the work of “essential” medical and science students, whose accelerated academic workload came without a relaxation in training responsibilities. Members of this group also believed that their technical skills should guarantee them direct commissions without additional training. For instance, medical students requested more practical instruction in a bitter unsigned student newspaper editorial entitled “Can't We Help,” asking: “Can someone tell us how we'll help to win this war? We're anxious to do our best, but if someone could only explain how our C.O.T.C. training, as arranged at the present time, will help the country we would really appreciate it.”<sup>31</sup>

Anger with the many policy changes also made itself felt. In another student-penned editorial, the authors commented that: “This state of affairs [psychological testing] - where the university student is given no more credit for his college training than a private with no higher education - should not be tolerated. It is an entirely arbitrary

*Ester Wong scored an 85-85 on the 1944 COTC shooting course. The star of the university basketball team, Miss Wong went onto a post-war career as a physician. London Free Press Negative Collection, D.B. Weldon Library, University of Western Ontario.*



and senseless system, badly in need of a change.”<sup>32</sup> McGill President F. Cyril James supported reforming the real impetus behind these charges, admitting that training, especially for students already engaged in it for two or three years, was “monotonous.”<sup>33</sup> The combination of fluctuating government and

<sup>29</sup> Thomas, *UWO Contingent COTC*, 194. Four months of continuous service represented the minimum time required to train a recruit.

<sup>30</sup> *UWO Gazette*, 29 March 1940; *Queen's University Principal's Report, 1940-41*, 25.

<sup>31</sup> *UWO Gazette*, 21 Feb. 1941.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 12 Nov. 1943.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 17 Dec. 1943.

defence demands, inter service rivalries, and widely different policies between universities clearly placed the Western unit and its trainees in a confusing and difficult situation.

The COTC responded to these complaints, first by cutting some training down to sixty hours per year, and by releasing an announcement explaining:

The C.O.T.C., in spite of its many limitations, does much to introduce its personnel under training to matters concerning and conditions prevailing in the modern army and its work, and during the comparatively short time and [sic] actually spent on training during the cadet's three or four years in the corps, much is done to make his initiation into the active army on graduation much more pleasant than it otherwise would be had he received no training.<sup>34</sup>

This proclamation plainly represents a modest goal. COTC training, much like the initial thirty day NRMA call up, "sold" the military to its trainees, inviting them to enlist voluntarily in an active unit.<sup>35</sup> Regardless, the swift expansion of the unit, alongside the constant skimming off of the cream of officers and non-commissioned officers for the active force, adversely affected training. The COTC rightly took a low priority in comparison to active service, and this discrepancy became especially pro-

nounced following the July 1943 policy change.

Furthermore, all the interest and energy of even the most resourceful members of the Western COTC could not overcome the unit's acute equipment shortages. As late as 1943, its entire scattered arsenal consisted of 200 rifles, two Bren guns, and one artillery piece. This worked out to less than a rifle per soldier, and the unit possessed limited ammunition for the weapons it did have.<sup>36</sup> Requests for improved equipment in larger quantities met with consistent refusal, with the unit waiting until demobilization to receive its first complete issue of the standard Lee-Enfield rifle. Thus, only at war's end was the COTC equipped to begin proper training.

Of course by then the COTC had been relegated in importance, and it showed. Compounding low morale, internal dissent, and equipment shortages, the weapons handling and general discipline of trainees often left the army with much to be desired.<sup>37</sup> For instance, the Assumption College component suffered the most serious COTC disciplinary lapse during the Second World War, when 400 rounds of .22 calibre ammunition "disappeared" from unit stores in January 1945.<sup>38</sup> Most other disciplinary complaints were minor, simi-

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 20 Oct. 1944.

<sup>35</sup> J.L. Granatstein and J.M. Hitsman, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977), 147.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas, *UWO Contingent COTC*, 285-86.

<sup>37</sup> See A/Lt. Col. Frank Stiling, "Report on the University of Western Ontario Contingent of the Canadian Officers' Training Corps," 15 Sept. 1944, in UWO COTC Papers, Box 17.

<sup>38</sup> UWO COTC Papers, Box 9, File 5-4, Discipline Police.

lar to a report that, on a London bus in October 1944, unit members,

were rowdy, noisy, profane, slightly obscene, and generally regardless, in their conduct, of the comfort of the other passengers on the Bus. They were improperly dressed ... Battle Dress blouses in most instances being open to the waist, revealing a variety of coloured shirts and ties.<sup>39</sup>

Inevitably, training and discipline standards reflected a university setting, but the uncertain mandate and fluctuating overall aims of the COTC did not help.

More positively, the COTC forged a collective identity for its members and Western's wider student body. The unit did much to break down insular rivalries between the various colleges, towns, and populations of southwestern Ontario. Thomas' narrative suggested the unit, like the university, province, and country, was markedly British-oriented, but people of many origins also served. "Racial" background represented a particularly sensitive issue with the Waterloo College component. Thomas declared, "These Waterloo nominal rolls are of course like no others in Canada and the heavily Teutonic cast of their names and to some degree the Teutonic

cast of the College itself struck Canadians of older stock strangely."<sup>40</sup> In fact, throughout the war, the German-Canadians of Waterloo spearheaded that college's training, with approximately fifteen volunteers each year, producing Western's highest per-capita number of active service enlistments.

Overall, Western and its COTC unit played a distinguished part in Canada's war effort. Particularly notable is the fact that most training corps graduates entered the active forces with combat arms commissions, especially in the infantry, or as pilots or bomber crew. With the army's five overseas divisions in action, the casualty rates for infantry officers badly miscalculated, and the large number of requisite non-combat supporting troops, the surplus in officer strength quickly evaporated.<sup>41</sup> As Table I demonstrates, 980 contingent veterans, nearly half of the over 2,000 students trained by the unit, enlisted in active allied forces; a contribution closely approximating those of larger institutions such as Queen's and the University of Toronto.<sup>42</sup>

Fifty-two men, including forty-two officers, who had trained with the Western COTC gave their lives on active

<sup>39</sup> HQ COTC to Major H.L.A. Skinner, OC B Coy, 17 Oct. 1944, in *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Thomas, *UWO Contingent COTC*, 382. See also Elaine Bernard, "A University at War: Japanese-Canadian Students at UBC during World War II," *BC Studies*, 35 (1977), 50; Kathryn M. Bindon, *Queen's Men, Canada's Men: The Military History of Queen's University, Kingston* (Kingston: Queen's University Contingent, Canadian Officers' Training Corps, 1978), 78-9.

<sup>41</sup> E.L.M. Burns, *Manpower in the Canadian Army* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company, 1956), 17-18; C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men, and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1970), 434-41.

<sup>42</sup> See Queen's University Archives, *Queen's University Principal's Reports, 1939-1946*, COTC and Registrar's sections; James William Noel Leatch, "Military Involvement in Higher Education: A History of

Table I, *Western COTC Personnel to Active Allied Forces, to 31 July 1945\**

	<i>Army</i>	<i>Air Force</i>	<i>Navy</i>	<i>US Forces</i>	<i>Dutch Forces</i>
London Colleges	305	161	105	2	1
Medical School	186	36	15	4	-
Assumption College	44	39	25	13	-
Waterloo College	34	7	3	-	-
Totals	569	243	148	19	1

Note: \*File on "Personnel to Active Allied Forces," in UWO COTC Papers, Box 7.

service during the war.<sup>43</sup>

Whatever their origin, rank, or manner of service, Western and its COTC lost promising young students during the war. For instance, the university's student newspaper reported Seaforth Highlander Captain Thomas Woolley's decoration with the Military Cross on 13 October 1944, noting that "Capt. Woolley makes it clear that he has not forgotten his alma mater. Part of his pride in wearing the decoration lies in the fact that its ribbon is Purple and White." He was killed in action four days after the piece appeared. Edgar Venus, a freshman in 1939, enlisted upon graduation as a lieutenant with the Governor General's Foot Guards; he died supporting the desperate assault on the Hochwald Gap.<sup>44</sup>

These COTC sacrifices did not go unremembered. In his 1944 annual re-

port, Western COTC commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Frank Stiling noted that, "When it is borne in mind that the function of the Unit in peace time was to train and qualify young men for commissions in the Reserve Army, it will be realized that the Corps has made a great contribution to the conduct of the war, a contribution out of all proportion to the number of its personnel."<sup>45</sup> While the former part of the sentence is the most important, the years 1940 to 1943, encompassing the officer selection and compulsory training debates, certainly did mark the most significant period in Canadian Officers' Training Corps history. Nevertheless, in those three years, the contingent's role and influence never reached the level the COTC desired. If its proponents had had their way, the COTC would have retained its favoured status. Instead, the

the University of Toronto Contingent, Canadian Officers' Training Corps" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1995), 249.

<sup>43</sup> Files of M.A. Garland, COTC Padre, "Record of letters written to relatives of university men - killed in action, prisoners, or died as members of the unit," in UWO COTC Papers, Box 1.

<sup>44</sup> *UWO Gazette*, 24 March 1944; 13 Oct. 1944.

<sup>45</sup> Stiling, "Report on the University of Western Ontario Contingent," passim.



training corps adjusted to a more modest mandate, a mandate better reflecting its limited size, its limited equipment, its limited training opportunities, and limited student interest.

Moreover, specialized army and air force training, such as the radio and aviation physician experiments conducted by Western's physics and medicine departments, ignored the COTC. By 1943, the training corps had become a burden for the army, the universities, and most students. Of course, the training corps also possessed an uncanny and consistent ability to remain just relevant enough, with the sanctity of voluntarism denoting the gap separating the perceived elite ideal of university students from the reality of compulsory service.

Nonetheless, the training corps did contribute to the war effort. It gave stu-

dents an introduction to the hallmarks of military service, including discipline, physical fitness, and firearm instruction. The COTC made its volunteers potentially better soldiers, granting them an opportunity to justify their unique recruiting status, and helping to produce some excellent personnel for the allies. The COTC's invaluable contribution came in the preparatory training of vital infantry officers, air force personnel, physicians, and scientists. Decried from inside and out as a way of avoiding or delaying active service, as elitist, monotonous and even pointless, the Canadian Officers' Training Corps University of Western Ontario contingent did its best to respond to critics through action, no more so than in the example of its fifty-two trainees who made the ultimate sacrifice during Western's war.

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