

The University of Manitoba Contingent:
Canadian Officer Training Corps 1914-1945

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In the early twentieth century the Canadian government embarked on a plan to develop militia training for university and college students via the Canadian Officer Training Corps (COTC). This paper discusses the early development of the COTC and the formation and operation of the University of Manitoba Contingent from 1914 to the end of the Second World War.

A Brief History of the Canadian Officer Training Corps in Canada

The COTC was based upon a British program begun in 1908. The ideas of a COTC fit with developments in Canadian military policy in the early twentieth century. A program of voluntary military training for students who were still in university was well suited to the Canadian policy, which relied on a volunteer militia to expand the country's army in wartime, but did little to prepare them in times of peace. The COTC offered an opportunity to create a body of men who were at least partially trained as officers, to lead the nation of volunteers if it ever proved necessary. This introduction sets out the ideas and attitudes that lay behind the COTC as it developed.

Byiers cites a number of reasons behind the early development of the COTC.¹ He notes that the strongest support for an expanded Canadian military came from a vaguely defined, but distinctly identifiable group of self-styled 'imperialists', whose primary goal was to maintain and strengthen the country's ties with Great Britain. Canadian 'imperialism' was not a clear and defined ideology, but rather a general collection of common themes, including support for British traditions distinct from the United States, a

type of Canadian nationalism. The 'militia lobby' was also part of this broader imperialist movement, which was embodied in celebrations of 'Empire Day' after the turn of the century.² This yearly event was aimed at teaching citizenship and loyalty to students in public schools, often involving participation by large groups of uniformed boys.³ An example of widespread appeal of military training before 1914 is the cadet movement that swept through Canadian schools.⁴ It was widely accepted by the Canadian public before the First World War, and particularly by public school and university educators.⁵ Between 1908 and 1910 the number of cadets increased from nine thousand to twenty-one thousand, and the number of corps from 145 to 265, and by 1914 there were approximately forty thousand cadets.⁶ Supporters of the movement stressed the many personal and social benefits of military training, including physical and mental learning, obedience, personal manners, cleanliness, patriotism and citizenship.

With interest in military education, the work of creating the COTC began in November 1910 when officers from the Canadian Militia Department submitted a revised draft of this proposal to the militia Council.⁷ The proposal was rigorous, requiring as much as three hours per week of drill and lectures in addition to musketry training. Upon completion of the course, students were expected to know everything required of a junior militia officer. Members were required to pass several practical and written tests in order to gain certificates acknowledging their qualifications. In October of 1912, fifty-five students had joined the McGill University's new unit and this contingent became the prototype for the remainder of the COTC, as the arrangements made with the university were incorporated into the working draft regulation over the next few months.⁸ The final

organisation of the contingent and the General order to authorise the COTC were both approved by the Militia Council in November, and the COTO officially came into being as of November 1, 1912.⁹

The University of Manitoba joins the Canadian Officer Training Corps

Beginning in January 1912, Colonel S. B. Steele, District Officer Commanding, Military District 10, sent a number of letters to the Secretary of the Militia Council promoting the interest of the University of Manitoba in forming a COTC contingent.¹⁰ When he was informed that regulations were not yet available, noting further was accomplished before the First World War.

On August 3, 1914 Great Britain declared war on Germany, marking the beginning of the First World War. Canadians from coast to coast rushed to recruiting stations eager to join the colours. Wanting to show their patriotism, on September 10, 1914 a special meeting of the University Council was called by University President James MacLean. At the meeting President MacLean put forward the following resolution, seconded by Reverend Doctor Wilson:

1. That for the 1914-1915 year, or until discontinued by the University Council, Military Instruction be offered by the University and a Department of Military Science and Tactics be organised for that purpose.
2. That application be made to the Militia Department for the service of an officer in this department and that in case the detail cannot be granted at this time, the Council authorise the appointment of a Commandant to take charge of the organisation of the corps and instruction to be given.

3. That a committee of five (5) be nominated by the Chancellor with power to appoint the Commandant and to act as executive committee of the Council in connection with the organisation and conduct of the department.¹¹

The motion passed and the following members made up the first Committee on Military Instruction at the University:

- Sir James Aikins, Chair
- Dr. J Halpenny
- Rev. W.A. Ferguson
- Dr. N.R. Wilson
- Mr. C.K. Newcombe
- Mr. W.J. Spence, Secretary¹²

Now that the University Council was on board, the Committee began preparations for drilling and instructing university students and staff, while negotiations were carried out with militia authorities as to the best form of organisation for this work. These negotiations carried on throughout the fall of 1914 when application for official authorisation of the corps was made on January 18, 1915, and on March 1, the University of Manitoba Contingent of the Canadian Officer Training Corps was authorised in the Official Gazette.¹³

During the first year of military instruction the Contingent was authorised to form eight companies, each consisting of sixty men of all ranks, and a headquarters staff of five members. As it was, four hundred and seventy-four men participated, which was significant considering total university enrolment in 1914-1915 was seven hundred and twenty-nine.¹⁴ The 1914-1915 Report of the Committee on Military Instruction makes it clear that the first year was somewhat chaotic, as Corps members were not equipped with uniforms, rifles and other kit. The government of the day was not prepared to issue such

equipment as military resources were devoted to organising Canadian overseas volunteers. Corps members drilled weekly in civilian attire and ninety members of the corps also attended weekly lectures throughout February and March 1915 in order to prepare for Certificate 'A' (Lieutenant) examinations in April. This was in addition to regular university course work Corps members were also undertaking. By the end of the first academic year the COTC had become an integral part of the campus war effort and a way for the University to express its commitment to the conflict. The contingent was seen as the best way to contribute to the war and was eagerly supported by both university leaders and students. Although the University of Manitoba was not one of the universities to initially give academic credit for COTC training, it did allow COTC enrolment to replace compulsory physical training. Eventually the COTC itself became mandatory.¹⁵

During the remainder of the conflict, the University of Manitoba Corps fell into a routine of training men for war. Drill took place Saturday afternoons at Minto Armouries, while lectures for Certificate 'A' and Certificate 'B' (Captain) exams were offered January to March to prepare for spring exams.¹⁶

One significant development during 1916 was the development of the 196th (Western Universities) Battalion. Early in 1916, officers from the University of Manitoba contingent approached officers of the contingents connected with other western Canadian universities with a view of presenting to the Minister of Militia an offer of a battalion for overseas service.¹⁷ The presidents of the Universities of Manitoba, Saskatchewan,

Alberta and British Columbia, along with the University of Manitoba Commanding Officer Captain McWilliams, were appointed to tender the offer formally to the Minister. The offer was accepted, and under the leadership of officers from the University of Manitoba contingent, the 196th (Western Universities) Battalion was at full strength and training at Camp Hughes, Manitoba by the spring of 1916. This was a significant development as it brought together personnel from other western Canadian COTC contingents to provide common training in order to reinforce troop numbers overseas.

In 1917 another development affected the University of Manitoba contingent. As the federal government introduced conscription it cancelled all grants to universities for militia training, and stopped accepting COTC commissions for the Canadian Expeditionary Force.¹⁸ Although many other COTC contingents ceased to exist due to these measures, that Manitoba contingent carried on, albeit with only three hundred and sixty members.¹⁹ In order to show support for conscription, the University of Manitoba Governors passed a resolution barring students from class lectures or examinations unless the student presented to the Board satisfactory reason why he had not enlisted for active service. Not only was military training required to study on campus, students must have also enlisted for active service. Only those with a physical disability, as established by a medical officer, or those members of religious organisations known to include non-participation in military work, were exempt.²⁰ To further tighten up on military training, in the fall of 1917 the University Governors passed a resolution compelling the university registrar to secure from the COTC Adjunct a statement that each male student stating he

had satisfactorily completed his military training before admittance to April examinations on course work.²¹

As 1918 rolled around the University of Manitoba contingent was still only a smaller portion of itself when compared to 1916 and as September started it was evident that the war in Europe was coming to an end. With this new development the Committee on Military Instruction had to determine a path to follow. Because conscription was still in place, and as it was still impossible for trained students to obtain a commission without service at the front, it was recommended by the Committee and adopted by the University Council that compulsory military training for all students be suspended.²² Since many of the students who would have formed part of the University of Manitoba contingent had already been conscripted, this motion did not have a large effect on enrolment numbers in the COTC.

At this point, the organisation and operation of the University of Manitoba contingent is more properly a part of its post-war history. It does show the degree the university community was willing to involve itself in the war effort. The early years of the war saw a large number of the student population involved in military education as the COTC focus shifted from training students as officers to preparing students for military service. University leaders supported the development of the COTC, were able to sponsor it fully, and a number even participated in the contingent. Although part of the commitment to military training was support for the war overseas, many of the ideas presented laid the foundation for military training following the First World War.

The Interwar Years: 1919-1938

With the end of the First World War and the demobilisation of Canadian troops in Europe, the University of Manitoba's enrolment numbers began to swell. Enrolment for 1918-1919 stood at 755 students and in 1919-1920 enrolment almost doubled to 1414 students.²³ Many of these students were returning veterans and this influx lasted until the early 1920's. Manitoba relied upon these returning veterans to replenish the contingent that had seen its numbers decline during the later years of the war. However contingent numbers did not reach the highs recorded during the early years of the war. The following table shows contingent numbers from 1921 to 1938.

Post-war COTC Enrolments²⁴

1921 – 266	1925 - 250	1929 – not stated	1933 - 198	1937 - 164
1922 – 273	1926 - 232	1930 - 173	1934 - 139	1938 - 175
1923 – 216	1927 - 169	1931 - 139	1935 - 126	
1924 – 186	1928 - 246	1932 - 188	1936 - 140	

During the interwar years, the COTC fell into a routine of drill, musketry training, signalling training and preparation for 'A' and 'B' examinations. The COTC returned to its original mandate of training militia officers as opposed to training men for war. Each year the contingent also participated in the Inter-University Rifle Competition, even returning as champions three years running from 1928-30.²⁵ Except for the creation of a medical company in 1928, the operation of the contingent had become so routine, the Committee of Military Instruction was meeting only annually to conduct business.²⁶

The Canadian Officer Training Corps and the Second World War

With the outbreak of hostilities once again in Europe in September 1939, the Committee on Military Instruction began preparations to train men for war. At a special meeting on September 21, 1939, the committee proposed to request to the General Staff Officer, Military District 10, to increase the unit strength from 175 to 500, and on October 11 a motion was made to amend the increase from 500 to 800 to accommodate the heavy enlistment.²⁷ Unlike the First World War, the transition to training men for war was much smoother as the COTC infrastructure had been in place for almost twenty-five years. There was not the concern regarding the creation of a new organisation to oversee the training. As opposed to securing training supplies and uniforms, the COTC could focus on more pressing matters such as recruitment. By the end of October the unit strength was listed at 639.²⁸

It was not only men who were interested in the COTC at the outbreak of war. Mrs. Mary Speechly, a member of the University Board of Governors, wrote to the Committee regarding the formation of a Women's Committee COTC. However the offer was politely declined and suggested that the matter be referred to the Faculty Women's Club for their consideration.²⁹

By the end of 1940 the Committee overseeing the COTC was meeting sporadically. The strength of the contingent was at 614, things were well in hand and training was going smoothly.³⁰ To compliment the COTC, the University Air Training Corps was

established in October 1942, and in March 1943 approval was given to establish a University Naval Training Division.³¹

The COTC carried on its work until the end of the Second World War. In addition to the standard drill and lectures, the COTC also organised an annual two-week camp each spring at Camp Hughes.³² It was here that COTC members gained practical experience in camouflage, field engineering, PIAT, and artillery, among others. Time was also spent in extra curricular activities, such as sports, films, concerts and newscasts.

The 1944 Spring Camp COTC War Diary discusses the difficulty with camp communication among camp members.³³ In order to enhance communication between all members attending camp, a new camp bulletin was established with the first editor of the bulletin being University of Manitoba Student Union President, Sergeant Monte Halparin. After the war, Sergeant Halparin would go on to fame as game show host Monty Hall.

Conclusion

In February 1968, the Canadian government passed the Canadian Forces Reorganization Act (Bill C-243)³⁴. One of the casualties of the reorganisation was the cancellation of the COTC program at all universities and colleges across Canada. From its early beginnings as a show of patriotism for the First World War, it developed into a well established organisation set on creating leaders for Canada's military, in both war and peace. It took

some strain off of the government defence department for training officers, and allowed young men to combine military training with the simultaneous goal of achieving a university education. During times of war it was also able to step up efforts and train soldiers of all ranks.

The University of Manitoba contingent played a part in this national effort. This paper discussed the early development of the University's contingent from the beginning stages of the First World War in 1914, and concluded with the its efforts during the Second World War. It illustrated the progression the University went through to develop a local contingent, and how this effort provided service to Canada's military institution.

Endnotes

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24. University of Manitoba Canadian Officer Training Corps Report 1925, University of Manitoba Archives, UA 41, Box 1, Folder 2, and University of Manitoba Canadian Officer Training Corps Report 1926-1927, University of Manitoba Archives, UA 41, Box 1, Folder 2, and University of Manitoba Canadian Officer Training Corps Report 1927-1928, University of Manitoba Archives, UA 41, Box 1, Folder 2, and University of Manitoba Canadian Officer Training Corps Annual Report 1928-1929, University of Manitoba Archives, UA 41, Box 1, Folder 3, and University of Manitoba Canadian Officer Training Corps Report 1930-1931, University of Manitoba Archives, UA 41, Box 1, Folder 3, and University of Manitoba Canadian Officer Training Corps Report 1931-1932, University of Manitoba Archives, UA 41, Box 1, Folder 3, and University of Manitoba Canadian Officer Training Corps Report 1932-1933, University of Manitoba Archives, UA 41, Box 1, Folder 3, and University of Manitoba Canadian Officer Training Corps Report 1933-1934, University of Manitoba Archives, UA 41, Box 1, Folder 3, and University of Manitoba Canadian Officer Training Corps Report 1934-1935, University of Manitoba Archives, UA 41, Box 1, Folder 4, and University of Manitoba Canadian Officer Training Corps Report 1935-1936, University of Manitoba Archives, UA 41, Box 1, Folder 4, and University of Manitoba Canadian Officer Training Corps Report 1936-1937, University of Manitoba Archives, UA 41, Box 1, Folder 4, and University of Manitoba Canadian Officer Training Corps Report 1937-1938, University of Manitoba Archives, UA 41, Box 1, Folder 4.

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