



CANADIAN WAR
MUSEUM
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MUSÉE CANADIEN
DE LA GUERRE

In Their Own Voices

An Online Oral History Exhibition

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Canada and the Second World War

September 10, 1939–September 2, 1945



Canadian troops landing on D-Day. From the photograph album of Tom Wood, Canadian official war artist.

George Metcalf Archival Collection / Canadian War Museum / CWM 20150216-004_8a

Historical Overview

Under Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist (Nazi) party, Germany wanted to expand its territory and conquer Europe. After Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, Canada joined Britain and France in declaring war on Germany, following a debate in Parliament. Newfoundland, which in 1939 was a British dominion governed by the United Kingdom, was automatically brought into the conflict. Canada went to war against Japan in December 1941 after Japan attacked American, Dutch and British targets in Asia and the Pacific, as well as Canadian forces defending the British Crown colony of Hong Kong.

About the War

The Second World War was a total war involving most elements of society. Canadians contributed in many ways, fighting overseas, defending the country at home, and producing the weapons of war and food for Allied nations. With massive financial support and incredible exertions demanded of most Canadians, few were left untouched by the war.

During the Second World War, Canadians defended the east and the west coasts and fought in a series of long and difficult campaigns — on land, at sea, and in the air — to defeat the German, Italian and Japanese forces.

In addition to those who served in the armed forces, some 12,000 civilians served in the merchant navy, braving enemy U-boats, mines and aircraft to bring supplies and troops to Britain and around the world. The home front was largely directed to winning the war.

About 1.1 million Canadians and Newfoundlanders served in the armed forces, and more than 45,000 died. Victory was finally achieved against Germany in May 1945 and against Japan that September.



Sharon Birchall Chandler, the daughter of Second World War veteran Leonard Birchall, describes how she felt when her father came home after more than three years in Japan as a prisoner of war. To learn more about Sharon's experience, visit the *In Their Own Voices* online exhibition and listen to her clip.

Photo courtesy of Sharon Chandler.

The Aftermath of the War

The human devastation of the Second World War is difficult to comprehend. Estimates of its death toll range from 50 to 80 million people. It was the deadliest war the world has ever known.

Canada contributed significantly to the Allied victory in this just and necessary war. Revelations of the Nazi atrocities and the Holocaust shocked the world. The war also led to the decolonization of empires, the creation of the United Nations, and a new Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, and their respective allies.

Canada was also fundamentally transformed. More than a million veterans came home to lead Canada into the prosperous second half of the twentieth century. There was increased urbanization, industrialization, state intervention in the lives of Canadians, interconnected trade with the United States, and a widespread desire for greater commitment in world affairs.

A new Canada emerged from the service and trauma of the war.