

## CANADA'S INDUSTRIES GEAR UP FOR WAR

**INTRODUCTION**

When the Second World War began, Canadian industry was still struggling in the midst of a bumpy and uncertain recovery from the Great Depression. The mobilization of our country's industrial potential during the war was nothing less than revolutionary and led to significant changes in the conditions experienced by workers in Canada. With the coming of the war, the government would suddenly find itself actively involved in building production plants, training a work force, controlling wages and prices, managing labour disputes, and regulating the movement of employees seeking to change jobs.

- During the Second World War, Canadian industries manufactured war materials and other supplies for Canada, the United States, Britain and other Allied countries. The total value of Canadian war production was almost \$10 billion – approximately \$100 billion in today's dollars.
- In 1940, the Honourable C.D. Howe became the Minister of the newly-created Department of Munitions and Supply. This government department controlled and coordinated all aspects of war production.
- This department was, in a sense, one of the biggest businesses in the world. It coordinated all purchases made in Canada by British and other Allied governments for things like military transport vehicles, tanks, cargo and military ships, aircraft, guns and small arms, ammunition as well as uniforms, minesweeping equipment, parachutes, firefighting equipment and hospital supplies. It also created 28 Crown corporations to produce everything from rifles to synthetic rubber.

**THE GENIUS OF "BITS AND PIECES"**

Though much was invested in new plants, plant expansions and technological upgrading, industry showed a remarkable talent for adapting existing space and technology to fit the needs of wartime production. Harry J. Carmichael – a Vice President of General Motors who had been loaned to the Department of Munitions and Supply for one dollar a year – brought with him a genius for sub-contracting. Called the "bits and pieces program" by C.D. Howe, Mr. Carmichael's initiative brought scores of small, unproductive factories into production even though the British had rated them as little better than garages at the start of the war.

- For example, the Canadian Cycle and Motor Co. Ltd. of Weston, Ontario, which had made bicycles and hockey skates before the war, took over the manufacture of armaments including gun parts, tripods for Bren guns, and cradles and pivots for anti-tank guns.
- There were spin off industries born of wartime conditions. For example, Industrial Engineering Ltd. of Vancouver produced a much-improved chainsaw. This development increased the efficiency of lumberjacks and also allowed some people to cut wood who otherwise would not be physically able to do the job. In these ways, the new chainsaw helped fill the gap created by the lumber industry's loss of personnel to military service.
- Liquid Carbonic Canadian Corporation, a Quebec company, had a soda fountain division which was turned over to building tank parts.

**A COUNTRY GETS TO WORK**

On the heels of the crippling depression and staggering levels of unemployment of the 1930's, the coming of



war meant Canada suddenly needed every worker it could get. To set up for the new industrial growth and help smooth the way for efficient production, several related issues also had to be addressed.

- To meet the needs of workers who had to relocate in order to work in the new munitions plants and other industries, the Department of Munitions and Supply established a Crown corporation called Wartime Housing Ltd. Though the original plan was to build temporary housing, it soon became apparent that the housing would have to be of adequate quality in order to ensure that the buildings would be habitable for decades. This corporation produced two basic house models: a two-bedroom residence that sold for \$1,982 and a four-bedroom residence that went for \$2,680.
- The federal government entered into agreements with the provinces to share the cost of day-care facilities required by many working mothers engaged in wartime industries (although, most commonly, the important task of child care fell to other family members or community volunteers).
- Out of Canada's population of 11.3 million, the total number of workers engaged in essential war industries was 1,049,876, with approximately 2,100,000 more engaged full-time in what was called "essential civilian employment", which included agriculture, communications, and food processing.
- To ensure that wages remained under control and to curb inflation, the government established the National Selective Service Regulations, prohibiting employers from advertising for workers except

through National Selective Service offices. As well, employees were prohibited from seeking other employment without a permit.

## THE AFTERMATH

Perhaps most remarkably, Canadian industry, which had "geared up" for war, did not gear down greatly in its aftermath. Some jobs disappeared, certainly, but they were replaced by other employment. C.D. Howe was again involved, this time in charge of the new Department of Reconstruction, which overcame a potential economic crisis by orchestrating the transition from a wartime economy to a peacetime one. In 1948, unemployment was still at a minimum; steel mills were exceeding their wartime capacity while the demand for aluminum held. Canada had become the third largest trading nation in the world. Best of all, the war seemed to have taught Canada the value of our "human capital" and things would never again be the same for Canadian workers.

## THE LEGACY

The collective experiences and stories of all the Canadians, including those who worked in industry, who contributed to the national effort during the Second World War provided our country with a proud and lasting legacy that will continue into the future. To learn more about Canada's efforts during the Second World War, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada Web site at: [www.vac-acc.gc.ca](http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca) or call **1-877-604-8469** toll-free.

