INTRODUCTION

Canada officially entered the Second World War on September 10, 1939, and continued at war for nearly six years. The struggle involved virtually the whole country and made enormous demands on the Canadian people, whether they were involved in the actual fighting or remained on the home front to work in industry or farming to support the war effort.

As you read through the chronology of events, it is important to remember that Canadians had no assurance at the outset of the war that their country would not be invaded or that their homes would not be bombed. As well, although many Canadians were hoping for a rapid end to the conflict, no one knew with any certainty when the war would end.

CHRONOLOGY

September 3, 1939: the passenger liner Athenia is torpedoed, killing the first Canadian of the war, stewardess Hannah Baird of Quebec.

September 10, 1939: Canada declares war on Germany - the first and only time Canada has declared war on another country on its own.

September 14, 1939: The Prime Minister, William Lyon MacKenzie King, declares that Canada should be the arsenal of the Allies and pledges not to institute conscription.

September 16, 1939: the first Canadian convoy of merchant ships sails for Britain.

November 13, 1939: an advance party of Canadian officers lands in Britain.

December 17, 1939: the first of the main body of Canadian troops arrive in Scotland; inauguration of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan to train pilots and aircrew in Canada, away from the fighting.

April 9, 1940: Canada creates a Department of Munitions and Supply to manage the production of war material.

June 12, 1940: the 1st Brigade of the Canadian 1st Division lands in France; they are forced to leave days later when France surrenders to the Nazis.

November-December 1941: Canadian troops are stationed at Hong Kong; on December 8, 1941, Hong Kong is attacked by the Japanese; on December 25 Hong Kong falls (of 1,975 Canadian troops, 290 were killed with the remaining 1,685 taken prisoner; a further 260 of these Canadians would die as prisoners of war before the end of the war).

April 4, 1942: a Royal Canadian Air Force plane spots the Japanese fleet en route to Ceylon and gives warning in time for successful defence of the island (Winston Churchill cites this episode as “the most dangerous moment of the war”).

April 27, 1942: the National Plebiscite and subsequent amendment to the National Resource Mobilization Act authorize conscription.

August 19, 1942: the Dieppe Raid sees a force of more than 6,000 Allied soldiers (almost 5000 of whom were Canadian) taking part in a raid in occupied France. The operation would prove to be a failure, with 1,946 of the force being taken prisoner and 913 Canadians losing their lives.

May 1943: the most dangerous period in the Battle of the Atlantic draws to a close; over 1,200 Canadian and Newfoundland merchant seamen had been killed at sea since the beginning of the war.

July 10, 1943: Canadians, forming a part of the British 8th Army, join in the invasion of Italy.

August 17, 1943: the conquest of Sicily is completed.

September 3, 1943: On the fourth anniversary of Britain and France’s declaration of war on Germany, Canadian troops join Allied forces in the invasion of the Italian mainland.

December 28, 1943: After heavy fighting, Canadian troops occupy Ortona, on Italy’s east coast.

May 11, 1944: tanks of the 1st Canadian Armoured
Brigade support the Allied assault up Italy’s Liri Valley to begin the campaign to liberate Rome from the Nazis.

**May 14, 1944:** after four days of heavy fighting, the first enemy defences in the Liri Valley are broken.

**May 16, 1944:** the 1st Canadian Corps is ordered to advance on the second German defensive line across the Liri Valley (this is the first time since 1918 that a Canadian Corps - a body of troops numbering about 50,000 - was to attack on a European battlefield).

**June 6, 1944:** D-Day. 15,000 members of the Canadian Army as well as hundreds of members of the Royal Canadian Air Force and the crews of 60 vessels of the Royal Canadian Navy participate in the landings in Normandy as part of an invasion force of some 150,000 Allies (there were 1,074 Canadian casualties on D-Day, including 359 deaths).

**July 10, 1944:** the city of Caen in France, the Canadian D-Day objective, is finally taken by a combined British-Canadian assault.

**July 23, 1944:** Lt. General H.D.G. (Harry) Crerar takes over command of the First Canadian Army, the first army-sized field force in Canadian history.

**August 1944:** by this time 700,000 Canadian-built motor vehicles of more than 100 designs are in service.

**August 25, 1944:** the battle of Normandy ends with the liberation of Paris, the Canadians having been successful in what is generally agreed to have been the fiercest portion of the campaign (Canadian losses amounted to 9,368 casualties of which 2,258 were fatal).

**September 1, 1944:** Canadian troops, tasked with clearing the heavily-defended English Channel ports of their German garrisons, return to Dieppe as liberators.

**October 23, 1944:** the First Canadian Army begins the Battle of the Scheldt in Holland.

**November 9, 1944:** the end of the Battle of the Scheldt; a full three weeks would elapse before the Scheldt estuary could be cleared of mines and the first convoy, led by the Canadian merchant ship Fort Cataracqui, could sail into Antwerp with supplies for the Allies.

**December 1, 1944:** the Canadian Corps in Italy attempts to break through into the Lombardy Plain and attain the Senio River, the northernmost outpost of the Italian Front.

**February 1, 1945:** the withdrawal of Canadian forces from Italy for deployment in northwest Europe begins.

**February 8, 1945:** commencement of the Rhineland Campaign; General Crerar’s First Canadian Army, augmented by Allied formations, becomes the largest force ever commanded by a Canadian.

**April 1, 1945:** the First Canadian Army begins its campaign to open up a supply route through Arnhem and clear the Netherlands and the coastal belt of Germany.

**May 7, 1945:** Germany surrenders, the war in Europe ends; the next day, May 8, is declared VE Day.

**August 6, 1945:** dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima in Japan and, days later, Nagasaki, ends the necessity of sending into battle the approximately 80,000 Canadian troops who volunteered to serve in the Pacific.

**August 14, 1945:** Japan surrenders - VJ Day. The Second World War is officially over.

**THE LEGACY**

Having a knowledge of Canada’s experiences during the Second World War is important. The achievements and sacrifices of the people of Canada during this pivotal time of history have a direct bearing on the peace and freedom Canadians enjoy today. For more information, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada web site at www.vac-acc.gc.ca or call 1-877-604-8469 toll-free.