

Korea 1950-53:  
A Comparison of Oral and Documented History on  
Canada's Involvement in the Korean War

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Dr. Timothy Balzer

An Essay By Ethan Mayer

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More than 26,000 Canadians served with United Nations (UN) forces in the Korean War, Canada's first armed conflict since the Second World War. There are a number of historical accounts on Canada's involvement, most of which depict a conflict that caught Canada off guard. Narratives such as William Johnston's *A War of Patrols*; David Bercuson's *Blood on the Hills*; and B.B. Watson's *Far Eastern Tour*, agree that Canada was unprepared for war. The use of three veterans oral history interviews confirms the general theme of the narratives but also sheds light on some of the inconsistencies found within the written sources. Sometimes in an attempt to argue their thesis, narratives misconstrue evidence and gloss over facts or omit details. This is by no means to say the literature is flawed, it suggests that there is always more to the story. Additionally, this does not mean that the experiences of one former soldier is to be taken as gospel on the matter, as periodically veterans disagree with one another on certain issues. Rather, oral history helps highlight certain inconsistencies. This paper examines three aspects of the Korean War experience, equipment, training and recruitment to show how oral history adds to our understanding of these issues, but also how it may raise questions as well as answer them.

This study uses the evidence of three interviewees: Major Charles Alexander Maclean, of Royal Canadian Regiment 3rd battalion (3 RCR); Major Charles Gordon Owen, pioneer officer of 3 RCR; and Colonel Robert Stirling Peacock, of 1st Battalion Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (1 PPCLI). As these are but three interviews, their testimony alone is not enough to thoroughly disprove or prove the historical narratives on the subject, yet they allow for a detailed investigation into the evidence and question its merit. Quite often in historical narratives the perspective is from higher echelons of the military and less from the soldiers on the front or their immediate commanders. These three veterans have the distinction of all being platoon commanders in the latter half of the Korean War. This places them neatly in the middle of a top-

down, bottom-up approach of investigation. As convenient as this may seem, it also provides the grounds for contestation between different accounts. In some cases the story of one interviewee lines up well with one or more narratives but contradicts the oral submission of the others. However, other aspects of oral testimony are completely free-standing and are a product of that interviewee's individual experience in the war. In these cases, oral history is most intriguing and valuable, showcasing personal details that the narratives left out. In any case, what is irrefutable is that oral sources add additional detail to the original narrative.

The end of the Second World War ended a 35 year occupation of Korea by Japanese forces. In place of Japan, American and Soviet troops stationed themselves within the peninsula and divided their administration at the 38th parallel. Attempting to unite the divided peninsula, at 4am, June 25th 1950, an estimated 90,000 North Koreans charged across the parallel, a total of seven infantry division in all.<sup>1</sup> This surprise attack sparked the beginning of the Korean War, a conflict which lasted until the July 27th, 1953 ceasefire, still in effect till today. Canada's Korean commitment was minuscule in comparison to its 1944 peak of more than 500,000 active duty soldiers.<sup>2</sup> The force that had stormed Juno Beach during D-day, and had assisted in the liberation of Sicily and Italy, in less than two years had faded away. Canada was to build the foundations of a welfare state; only the amount of money available and the degree of provincial cooperation would set the limits of the government's social service orientation. By 1947, the government reduced the national defence budget by more than 90% to 196 million from the 1943 wartime peak of 4.2 billion dollars.<sup>3</sup> The massive war-time Canadian armed forces was reduced drastically. Douglas Abbot, Canada's first post War minister of National Defence, oversaw the

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<sup>1</sup> John Melady, *Korea: Canada's Forgotten War*, (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1983), 15.

<sup>2</sup> David Jay Bercuson, *Blood on the Hills: the Canadian Army in the Korean War*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999) 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

reduction of army establishment to some 25,000 men, only 7,000 of whom were to be combat infantry.<sup>4</sup> The policy was based upon the same idea that if Canada became involved in another war they would mobilize like they had in both prior world wars; the militia would become the core of the army.. The economic situation coincided with the geographical situation. Unlike Britain and the USA, Canadians had no nearby bases of their own like Hong Kong or Japan, this complicated their method of re-supply and reinforcement for operations in Korea.<sup>5</sup> These administrative and logistical problems coincided with another, the problem of recruitment.

The officer corps of the Canadian military was an effective agency, most had seen combat in the Second World War and those who had not had had extensive training. All three interviewees were platoon commanders who were in charge of approximately forty men, though it was not unusual to command up to twice that at certain times. All three had no World War II experience, yet all could personally attest to being well qualified for their position. The recruitment problem did not stem here. These officers had already been in the system for many years, starting off in the cadets and militia, subsequently making the jump to the regular force soon after the war commenced. All three participated in officer training in the summer months, once the war had started, they made the transition from the reserve force to the regular force where they took hold of their troops. Similarly, narratives do not pick on the recruitment of the officer corps for particular problems in the Canadian military. Major Owen comments that “the selection for officers was extremely thorough and they were all very qualified.”<sup>6</sup> Here oral history

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Denis Stairs, *The Diplomacy of Constraint: Canada, the Korean War, and the United States*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1974), 200.

<sup>6</sup> Major Charles Gordon Owen, Interviewed by Ethan Mayer, Victoria BC, 12 March 2015.

was able to explain the process and the length at which it took to become an officer, a shallow element of the narratives.

The recruitment problem stemmed from the outset of the Korean War when waves of men turned up to enlist for Canada's first battalion. On August 7th, 1950 Prime Minister St. Laurent announced to Canada that the decision had been made to recruit a Canadian Army Special Force for "use in carrying out Canada's obligations under the United Nations charter or the North Atlantic Pact."<sup>7</sup> The Canadian government had originally called for 7000 men to enlist, but public enthusiasm led the cabinet to immediately approve an increase to 10,000.<sup>8</sup> On paper this looked great but in actuality the flood of recruits meant that there were not enough administrative recruiters to keep up with the pace. Brooke Claxton, Abbot as minister of defence, thought recruitment procedures were too elaborate and time consuming. A number of Claxton's measures expedited the recruitment of the first men. Claxton's attempt to push more recruits through the doors, cut down interview times from thirty minutes to just five.<sup>9</sup> Charles MacLean recalled an interesting anecdote about a single public event that led to the change in the recruitment process. He claims that at the beginning, recruitment was sound and selective about who would be allowed to enlist, after all not everyone is fit for service. Claxton, among a great crowd of people, wandered into the waiting room of a recruitment centre where he happened upon a potential recruit.

(Claxton) asked him 'how long have you been here?' I came in Monday he said, 'what happened to you,' 'I dunno' he said, 'nobody tells me nothing.' Well what happened was that he came in on Monday and was rejected. He was homeless, so he wandered back in with this great crowd and sort of snuck around and found a place to sleep at night and would get a meal. Well instead of checking on this, the minister of national defence

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<sup>7</sup> William Johnston, *A War of Patrols: Canadian Army Operations in Korea*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> B.B. Watson, *Far Eastern Tour: The Canadian Infantry in Korea 1950-1953*, (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2002), 10.

[Claxton] hit the ceiling and issued an order that every man that walks into the door is to be enrolled.<sup>10</sup>

Here oral history provides us with an interesting piece of evidence not found in any of the narratives. However, it is not clear from the interview if this account was part of Maclean's first-hand personal experiences or something later heard. Most narratives merely state the displeasure exhibited by Claxton with the length of the recruitment process. Only in a couple is it even mentioned that Claxton came down to personally tour one of the recruitment depots. With news reporters shadowing his every move it was not long before men were re-enrolling and recruitment soared even further. As a result, candidates were accepted upon their enlistment but supposed to return at a later date for a medical examination and documentation. In actuality, few were able to return at their given time and were documented as medically examined on an ad hoc basis.<sup>11</sup> Naturally, these reforms hampered the army's methods of screening and selecting recruits. This meant more time weeding out those who were incompetent before deployment.

Also hampering the early part of recruitment was the employee strike of Canada's two railways, the Canadian National and Canadian Pacific. This walkout prevented the prompt dispersion of recruits to their training stations, as a result, Petawawa, a base in eastern Ontario, received the majority of central and eastern Canadian recruits by road.<sup>12</sup> This meant frequent rest stops and therefore opportunities for drunkenness and desertion. The amalgamation of these problems meant that within the two months of the Special Force recruitment, out the 8000 enlisted, 2000 were discharged and more than 1500 deserted.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Alexander Maclean, Interview by Ethan Mayer, Victoria BC, March 19th, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Watson, *Far Eastern Tour*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Herbert Fairlie Wood, *Strange Battleground: the Operations in Korea and Their Effects on the Defence Policy of Canada*, (Ottawa: Queen's Printer and Controller of Stationary, 1966), 31.

<sup>13</sup> Ted Barris, *Deadlock in Korea: Canadian at War, 1950-1953*, (Toronto: Macmillan Canada, 1999), 38.

These early problems did not cease and began to trickle down later in to the latter regiments assigned to tours in Korea. Both Maclean's and Owen's 3rd Royal Regiment (RCR) were relatively new, the battalion was formed in 1952 from surplus reinforcements to the regiment<sup>14</sup> What was thought initially to be an abundance of men turned out to be a shortage. Maclean recalled "the great numbers of people, a lot of whom didn't know why they were there and were undependable. The good people were getting lost trying to deal with them."<sup>15</sup>

What the Canadian Army lacked for in experienced recruits they made up for in good non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and commissioned officers. Many of the men had prior World War II experience and in fact, the veterans under examination, lament (for they wanted to join but were too young) that they were among the few who did not have this credential. All three veterans agreed that they had very good warrant officers and experienced NCOs from which to learn. According to statistics, 20% of the 45% of men who had prior World War II experience had been NCOs.<sup>16</sup> Most sources and interviewees agree that generally officers and NCOs were excited at the prospect of joining the war in Korea, they volunteered for it and were eager to put their training to use. Johnston, whose *War of Patrols* is one of the more comprehensive pieces of literature on the war, suggests that upon hearing the news of deployment, the enthusiasm of the regular soldiers of 1 PPCLI was considerably more subdued.<sup>17</sup>

Some written accounts either miss or omit a detail of a particular event, leaving out information that confuses the reader. Such is the case when, Johnston is correct when he lists 550 regulars out of a total of 873 from the 1 PPCLI were reluctant to go overseas to replace the 3

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<sup>14</sup> Wood, *Strange Battleground*, 40.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Charles Maclean.

<sup>16</sup> Wood, *Strange Battleground*, 31.

<sup>17</sup> Johnston, *War of Patrols*, 176.

PPCLI.<sup>18</sup> Similarly he is right that this put much strain on the 3 PPCLI to supply the required number of combat soldiers. However, his amusing claim that the summer announcement of 1 PPCLI would be proceeding to Korea quickly brought out an “abundance of the old categories of trick knees, bad backs and deaf ears,” is misleading.<sup>19</sup> Here oral history provides much needed context to the matter. Peacock states that the NCOs and other ranks were refusing to go because these men were trained airborne infantry, the position they were being assigned to was regular infantry.

This meant loss of seniority and you’re going to lose your jump pay and you’re going to be off the regimental list. You’re really telling people they have to give up months and months and years of work to go and serve at a lower rate...<sup>20</sup>

If Johnston had dug deeper into the reasons behind why so many men were reluctant to go, seeking out oral history then he would have reevaluated his account above. These men were well trained, but such was not always the case for those deployed to Korea.

The first constraint to Canada’s participation to the UN force was that the men had to be brought up to speed before they could be deployed. Prime Minister St. Laurent announced to the public on radio: “since our wartime forces were demobilized we have not attempted to maintain, in the Canadian Army, a fully trained expeditionary force available for immediate action outside Canada.”<sup>21</sup> As mentioned above, rapid recruitment was needed and with it came the first problems with training. All three platoon commanders recall that a portion of training was spent trying to weed lousy soldiers out. Sometimes, those that made it to Korea, who were thought to have minor physical defects had actual physical disabilities that should have been detected upon

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Colonel Robert Stirling Peacock, Interviewed by Ethan Mayer, North Saanich BC, 16 March 2015.

<sup>21</sup> R.A. MacKay, *Canadian Foreign Policy, 1945-1954: Selected Speeches and Documents*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), 371.



enlistment.<sup>22</sup> Other times, those that had failed certain portions of training still made it through to the lines. Maclean recalled that the first casualty he had was when one of his soldiers mishandled a grenade when trying to clean it.<sup>23</sup> It was later found that this soldier did not receive proper grenade training if any at all.

Besides the problems from recruiting ill-suited men, both Watson and Bercuson agree that there were serious deficiencies in material and tactics for the nature of the fighting in Korea. Bercuson claims that the Canadians “went to Korea unprepared in doctrine, untrained in tactics and woefully ill-equipped to fight a defensive war.”<sup>24</sup> Johnston, on the other hand, asserts that “the 25th brigade was the best prepared and most combat ready force Canada has ever fielded.”<sup>25</sup> Johnston concludes that over the three years there were essentially three versions of the brigade group that rotated through the Korean theatre and that any differences and limitations in effectiveness were the direct result from the three different Brigadier generals in command.

Watson argues that from the outset, Canadian soldiers were not suitably prepared for combat and that their training was more appropriate for European style warfare. Bercuson echoes this sentiment. He alleges that the reason for this was because a large number of the volunteers were World War II veterans and used to British equipment and doctrine; “using British weapons wherever possible would help cut training time...”<sup>26</sup> However, as it will be discussed, Canadian forces quite often traded for foreign weapons they had not trained with, so how much training time was shortened is up for deliberation. Peacock adds more authority to the matter, expressing

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<sup>22</sup> Wood, *Strange Battleground*, 67.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Charles Maclean.

<sup>24</sup> Bercuson, *Blood on the Hills*, 275.

<sup>25</sup> Johnston, *A War of Patrols*, XIX.

<sup>26</sup> Bercuson, *Blood in the Hills*, 55

that the focus was developing the 27th brigade in Europe to fulfill Canada's NATO commitment, there was no distinct training for Korea.<sup>27</sup> Maclean's testimony provides evidence to the matter:

The training we took was quite unsuitable for Korea, we went out in open fields and we trained for moving at night. There wasn't really any of this in Korea. We were in the trenches all the time and digging trenches during the day. We placed head covers so we couldn't be seen from the air, but there was no air threat, I don't know why we did that training, it had nothing to do with Korea. There weren't any Chinese aircraft coming into our area and besides, we were in the trenches...<sup>28</sup>

The entire Canadian defence programme, as it had been developed during the post war years, was predicated on the assumption that Canada's responsibility in any future outbreak would be in defence of Western Europe.<sup>29</sup> This European focussed attitude meant there was initially little emphasis on patrolling. However, as the war progressed, 3RCR attempted to orient their training to Korean conditions. For example, during training at Camp Wainwright in the summer of 1952, the third battalion rifle companies attended the mountain warfare course at Jasper, Alberta. Bulletins appeared towards the end of 1952 calling for an increased emphasis on patrolling in Canadian collective training programs.<sup>30</sup> These appeared too late to be of any significant use to the 3 RCR and 3 R22eR. Although this was a step in the right direction, the end result was that the 25th brigade's infantry battalions were ill prepared for the operations they would be subsequently called upon to carry out. It was not until 1953 that a patrol school was finally opened in Korea, this was however, too little and too late. Major W.H. Pope, who served with 1 R22eR as a company commander, in 1953 drafted a paper entitled "Infantry Patrolling in Korea". In it he describes some of the shortcomings of patrolling experienced by his regiment

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with Robert Stirling Peacock.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Charles Maclean.

<sup>29</sup> Stairs, *The Diplomacy of Constraint*, 62-63.

<sup>30</sup> Watson, *Far Eastern Tour*, 23.

and others, paramount to it was the lack of training.<sup>31</sup> Maclean corroborates by commenting that he did not participate in any patrolling exercises prior to being deployed. These evidences provide part of the backbone of Johnston's thesis that links the succeeding Brigadier generals to the preparedness and effectiveness of Canada's 25th brigade. After all, it was under the last Brigadier Jean Victor Allard, who took command in April 1953, that opening of a patrol school was ordered and the heavily criticized (by the narratives) tour of Brigadier Mortimer Patrick Bogert who had curtailed patrolling, ended.<sup>32</sup>

Not all what can be argued on training is so clear; Owen's recollection contradicts what has been assessed about training. Owen commented that he did lots of patrolling exercises; both in Canada and Korea, and that his training was more than adequate. He was though, a pioneer officer (combat engineer) for 3 RCR so his training was much more specialized than the average infantryman. In fact, as the pioneer officer for 3 RCR he was "left pretty much alone because I was the only one qualified to teach explosives."<sup>33</sup> He personally commented that the training he had was very thorough and all of his commanding officers were confident and experienced, with many having been involved in the mountainous Italian campaign. These experienced officers were able to teach him some of the lessons they had learned in the Italian Alps and applied it to the rugged Korean theatre. One of Owen's primary roles was to navigate through minefields, setting up and removing of booby traps. He was on patrol all the time, doing whole weeks consecutively, and his experiences and training repudiate everything else that has been said on the matter.<sup>34</sup> His patrolling helped to facilitate the mounting of other patrols. However, his role

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<sup>31</sup> Christopher Doary, "Minature Set-Piece Battles: Infantry Patrolling Ops in Korea," *Canadian Military History*, 6, no. 1 (1997), 12.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Charles Gordon Owen.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Charles Alexander Maclean.

was so specialized and crucial that it would have been unusual to have not been well versed in patrolling. These training setbacks seem to have been more accustomed to the bulk of the force and not those units which handled specific tasks.

Comparing and contrasting narratives with oral testimony on equipment is useful. Much writing can be devoted to why tactics failed, the shortcomings of training and other aspects of preparing an effective task force. At the core of the military is its equipment and how men operate with it. As a result of government cuts, Canadian soldiers in Korea were not well equipped. Peacock had much to say about Canadian equipment in the Korean War giving it a rating of “C-,” saying “it was adequate but bore no resemblance to what we were faced with...”<sup>35</sup> This notion rings true among the narratives on the Korean War. Most commonly cited as lacking or inadequate, were Canada’s cold weather gear, radios, boots, and weapons. In the study of these most pressing military accessories, oral history has much to add. Radios for example, are a crucial piece of military hardware.

In a scenario where a patrol is under attack artillery is called in to help repel the assault. Without radios the men on the ground cannot communicate with their support. All three interviewees commented at length on the need for reliable communication. In some of the narratives its existence is merely noted but no reference is made to any problems or additional uses. In Bercuson’s epilogue he states that “...Doctrine and equipment exist in a symbiotic relationship...and both determine a divisions approach to battle.”<sup>36</sup> Despite this strong emphasis on equipment he barely makes any passing reference to radios. Watson in *Far Eastern Tour* only

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Robert Stirling Peacock.

<sup>36</sup> Bercuson, *Blood on the Hills*, 21.

says: “patrols became dependent upon radio sets and their operators for survival in a firefight.”<sup>37</sup>

Here is a case where two historical accounts, whose overarching theses are about unpreparedness, simply gloss over a crucial equipment component. Peacock claimed that their radios were unreliable, “much like walkie talkies you give to kids,” and most only worked within a line of sight.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, he claimed the battery sets did not last long, especially in the cold. Nevertheless, it is only fair to mention that Maclean explained that radios were very reliable; “I don’t ever remember a radio going out on me, they had pretty good range.”<sup>39</sup>

Contradictory evidence might have been the reason that in these narratives details on radios is absent, but it also would help the narrative’s accounts to bring up the discrepancies. All oral accounts attest to the wide variety of radio sets used, Canadians used a mishmash of American and British sets, it could have been that Maclean was in operation of a superior radio set.

Contradictory statements regarding the reliability and availability of equipment is made in a few other instances of the oral accounts. For example both Peacock and Owen comment on the inadequacy of winter clothing. Cold weather clothing issued to troops were a mix of British, American and Canadian winter warfare kit.<sup>40</sup> Peacock states that the Canadian parka and pants were developed for the Arctic and made from nylon that created such a racket that “on a crystal clear night you can hear it 100 yards away.”<sup>41</sup> Maclean made no such judgements on the parkas only commenting that Canadian winter wear was very comfortable. According to Owen however, he upheld that they (Canadians) “didn’t have parkas, the British had parkas,” in fact,

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<sup>37</sup> Watson, *Far Eastern Tour*, 81.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Robert Stirling Peacock.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Charles Alexander Maclean.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Stirling Peacock, *Kim-Chi, Asahi and Rum: A Platoon Commander Remembers Korea 1952-53*, (Toronto: Lugus Productions, 1994), 77.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Robert Stirling Peacock.

according to him they came to Korea with almost no cold weather gear.<sup>42</sup> Here again contradictions arise. All were platoon commanders with similar roles (except for Owen who was a combat engineer) in Korea from 1952 till the wars end, yet different accounts arise. In the narratives there is no room for information that might contradict its conclusions.

In the spirit of these contradictory statements, there are certain cases that arise where the interviewees agree with each other but are at odds with the narratives. All veterans agree that helmets were a must, the threat of flying or falling debris causing injury was too great to ignore. In contrast, Bercuson's and Watson's research shows that Canadian soldiers cared naught for their heads. Watson claims that the helmets were rarely worn and "veterans of 2 PPCLI fondly remember tossing their steel helmets overboard as their troopship approached Pusan."<sup>43</sup> Bercuson claims that until mid-1952 the helmet was rarely worn, after that it was up to the unit commander. All interviewees counter and concede that their helmets were some of the most important pieces of equipment. None of them recalled it being a judgement call by unit command but recall only that it was a requirement, and for good reason. Owen provides further claims that there was a \$25 fine right across the front for not wearing your helmet.<sup>44</sup> Again oral history has provided more detail which has questions the narratives.

Both narratives and oral accounts had much to say about the weapons used in the Korean War. Canadians were generally dissatisfied with their standard weapon the Lee Enfield .303 Mk IV, a bolt action rifle. It fed from a 10 round magazine that required the bolt to be operated after each shot. At most it could fire up to 15 rounds per minute.<sup>45</sup> Maclean humoured that "rifles aren't very good in action anyways, they're good to lean on but very rarely a guy gets a chance to

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<sup>42</sup> Interview with Charles Gordon Owen.

<sup>43</sup> Watson, *Far Eastern Tour*, 35.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Charles Gordon Owen.

<sup>45</sup> Watson, *Far Eastern Tour*, 39.

hit anything...”<sup>46</sup> The Canadians preferred automatic weapons over their bolt rifles and for good reason. In the heat of close battle, stress and adrenaline hamper firing abilities and looking down the sights costs valuable time. In the close quarter patrol clashes that occurred, Canadians were at a disadvantage compared to their Chinese adversaries who were armed with the latest Communist bloc automatic weapons.<sup>47</sup> The ability to fire consecutively makes it easier to hit a target and not having to fidget with the weapon after each shot reduces time. The Canadian Sten gun was standard issue submachine gun, made in the garages and kitchens of British civilians during World War II. Narrative sources comment frequently on the unreliability of this weapon, no such criticism surfaced in interviews. In fact, Peacock reported in his personal memoir that “the Sten Mark 5 machine gun...was crude but reliable under all conditions,” and his weapon of choice to carry on patrols.<sup>48</sup> Canadians also fielded British Bren guns as squad weapons. The Chinese fielded these as well but had newer versions compared to the Canadians.<sup>49</sup> Overall, the Canadians were not well equipped in terms of weapons and frequently traded for replacements. The weapon of choice was the American M2, a .30 automatic carbine, which the Canadians bartered for in great numbers.<sup>50</sup> If one was fortunate enough to get Chinese weapons, which were copies of Soviet designs, they they were much more reliable than the M2 or the Enfield and had a higher rate of fire. Both narratives and oral testimonies are in agreement of the lacklustre performance of standard issue weapons and the means by which to obtain American equipment; again oral history provides elaboration. The veterans discussed that the ‘punch’ of a weapon was a very desirable attribute. The ability of the gun to knock a threat to the ground led

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with Charles Alexander Maclean.

<sup>47</sup> Watson, *far Eastern Tour*, 14.

<sup>48</sup> Peacock, *Kim-Chi, Asahi and Rum*, 22.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Robert Stirling Peacock.

<sup>50</sup> Bercuson, *Blood on the Hills*, 167.

some Canadians to trade their Browning 9mm pistols for American Colt .45s which were much more powerful according to Maclean.<sup>51</sup> In any case when on patrol the best weapons were hand grenades. The simplicity and effectiveness of the hand grenade are an obvious advantage to rifles and machine guns, but being from World War II stock, they had to frequently be cleaned and attended to keep in working order.

Despite historians' poor rating of Canadian issue equipment, oral sources maintain that it was not all that bad. As Owen put it "...It was WWII equipment at its best for its time...it all worked."<sup>52</sup> Maclean similarly added that the equipment all worked, and that is the most important part. Furthermore if you really needed something all sources tell us that you could get, but for a price. Bartering was commonplace in Korea and Canadians were at an advantage for what they had to offer, they were better off than other troops. Their great surplus of fresh butter and cheap rum and whiskey made them the intermediary merchants of trade. For example, Canadians could trade their daily rum and whisky ration for an M2 Carbine.<sup>53</sup> To conclude, the equipment was not perfectly suited for the situation, but what the Canadians lacked in desirable equipment items they made up for in trade goods to allow them to get essential items. Trading was an integral part of the war effort in Korea and was one of many tools of improvisation all forces used to get the job done.

Throughout the three interviews, a theme of improvisation has come to light. No matter the circumstance, a soldier is not going to be prepared for every situation nor have every piece of equipment needed for a given situation. In this paper, the testimonies of three veterans have been explored alongside the accounts of historical narratives. The enveloping theme is that Canada

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<sup>51</sup> Interview with Charles Alexander Maclean.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Charles Gordon Owen.

<sup>53</sup> Watson, *Far Eastern Tour*, 41.



was unprepared for the Korean war in terms of recruitment, training and equipment. All interviewees confess that no matter the situation they made do with what they had, and if they did not have it, then they found a way to get it or, they found a way around it. Comments like “training was adequate under the circumstances,”<sup>54</sup> “... You’re always learning and training, if you’re not, you’re not doing your business...”<sup>55</sup> and “We did a good job with the limitations we had,”<sup>56</sup> attest to how these veterans coped under circumstance.

As it has been explored, Canadian troops faced an abounding number of barriers but the improvisation of soldiers to deal with any impediments has not received much attention by the documented sources. Some of the narratives on the subject, like *Strange Battleground* are too anecdotal and not attentive enough to the experience of the lower echelons of the army. Others like *Deadlock in Korea* or *Canada’s Forgotten War* utilize the personal memoirs of veterans in an attempt to produce an engaging story yet they lack particular important details that could otherwise question their accounts. Others, like the three used as the backbone sources of this essay, suffer from an inability to present counters to their arguments. Regardless of their form, documented sources can, in a sense, expunge some human elements from past events. Lest we forget, when reading about events such as these, the characters and stories from narratives are actually imprints upon pages depicting real people who fought and died. Furthermore, it grants historians the ability to add some personality their analysis in a more substantive way than with a focus on impersonal doctrine or simply relying on famous events or individuals from the past. Yet, despite its ability to commemorate individual histories and reassert humanistic qualities, it is

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<sup>54</sup> Interview with Charles Alexander Maclean.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Robert Stirling Peacock.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Charles Gordon Owen.

not without its drawbacks. It is therefore up to the keen ear and eyes of the investigator to deem what is unerring for both written and oral sources.

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