

# The Halifax Military Lands Board: Civil-Military Relations and the Development of Halifax as a Strategic Defended Port, 1905-1928<sup>1</sup>

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*La plus grande contribution du Canada à la guerre en mer en 1914-1918 a été le port stratégique solidement fortifié d'Halifax, qui était un point névralgique pour la défense du commerce allié, et pour l'envoi de renforts et de matériel d'Amérique du Nord en Grande-Bretagne. Pour sa part, le développement de la minuscule marine canadienne avait été paralysé par des controverses d'avant-guerre en matière de politique intérieure, et la marine ne s'en était jamais remise. Le présent article soutient que les forces terrestres avaient aussi à faire face à d'importants défis en raison de l'ingérence de leaders politiques indifférents dans le développement de la garnison d'Halifax, mais l'état-major général de l'armée a réussi à résister aux pires effets. L'article porte sur le Halifax Military Lands Board de 1914-1915, organisme peu connu dont les activités jettent un jour nouveau sur la lutte d'officiers de haut rang pour que l'ordre et le professionnalisme président à l'aménagement des locaux de la garnison. Le conseil, qui a réussi à gérer plusieurs problèmes urgents, n'est toutefois pas parvenu à persuader le gouvernement de financer d'importantes nouvelles installations pour le développement à long terme de la garnison. Des projets recommandés par le conseil en 1915 ont été finalement réalisés comme mesures d'urgence au cours de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale.*

Canada's most important contribution to the naval defence of the British Empire during the First World War was the fortified port of Halifax. Once again, as in the great wars of the last half of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century, the fortress became a secure

<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper prepared for the annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association at St. John's, Newfoundland in May 1997; the author thanks Dr Peter Rider of the Canadian Museum of Civilization who presented the paper on his behalf.

principal base for British naval operations in the North Atlantic and a safe entrepot for the merchant shipping whose passage to Britain the Royal Navy protected. In contrast to the army's strong long-range batteries, the development of the tiny Canadian navy had been crippled by pre-war domestic political controversy from which the service was not able to recover. The land forces too faced large challenges from interference by unsympathetic political leaders in the development of the Halifax garrison, but the army's reasonably well-developed general staff succeeded in resisting the worst effects.<sup>2</sup>

The story of the little-known Halifax Military Lands Board, organized by the military but chaired at their invitation by a senior civil servant, sheds new light on the struggle by army officers to bring order and professionalism to the development of the garrison. Although successful in managing several pressing issues, the board did not succeed in persuading the government to fund important new facilities for the long term development of the garrison. Projects recommended by the board in 1915 were ultimately undertaken as emergency measures during the Second World War.

In its work the Lands Board dealt with properties in most parts of the city, many of which the military had occupied since the eighteenth century. The British army, until its departure from Halifax in 1905-6, had always been a much larger and more permanent presence than the British navy, whose warships were normally summer visitors. During the late nineteenth century, when Britain greatly trimmed its overseas military commitments, it had nevertheless retained a garrison at Halifax, reinforced it and rebuilt the defences. Imperial policy makers always recognized the special importance of the commodious Nova Scotia port, located close by the North Atlantic shipping routes that were the heart of Britain's trading economy. Indeed, the advent of steam-powered merchant and warships, utterly dependent upon secure refuelling places, had increased the need for defended ports.<sup>3</sup>

In 1904 Britain began further to cut its overseas commitments by abandoning the dockyard at Halifax and disbanding the Royal Navy's North America and West Indies station. The Admiralty was happy to transfer the dockyard to the Canadian government, which pressed the waterfront property into service as a base for the civil operations of the Department of Marine and Fisheries. All that the British government asked - and received - was the right of British warships to use the port facilities if and when they needed to. There was no intention, however, of removing the British army garrison and dismantling the shore defences; British interests still demanded a secure port on the western side of the North Atlantic.

<sup>2</sup> Barry Gough and Roger Sarty, "Sailors and Soldiers: The Royal Navy, The Canadian Forces, and the Defence of Atlantic Canada, 1890-1918," in *Nation's Navy: In Quest of Canadian Naval Identity*, Michael L. Hadley, Rob Huebert and Fred W. Crickard, eds. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 112-130.

<sup>3</sup> C.S. Mackinnon, "The Imperial Fortresses in Canada: Halifax and Esquimalt, 1871-1906," (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1965).

The British government did ask that Canada begin to provide a share of the troops, at Canadian expense, for the permanent garrison at Halifax. Sir Wilfrid Laurier's Liberal government responded by insisting that Canada should take full responsibility for the garrison, and in 1905-6 hurried the departure of the last of the 1700 British troops at the station so that they could be replaced as rapidly as possible by Canadian personnel. The British government was delighted at this unexpected relief for the Treasury, not least because Laurier readily agreed to stipulations that Canada should fully maintain the existing strong defences and accept periodic review by naval and military authorities in London of the state of the fortress and plans for its mobilization in war.<sup>4</sup>

Laurier's initiative followed logically from his government's nationalistic Militia Act of 1904. Until that time command of Canada's forces, the "Militia," which included 1000 regular troops and approximately 30,000 part-time militiamen, had been reserved for a professionally qualified British officer. The immediate impetus for change had been public challenges to the authority of the minister of Militia and Defence within less than four years by two British general officers commanding who, however competent as military leaders, had been tactless and ill-versed in the doctrine of civilian supremacy.<sup>5</sup>

The 1904 act vested control over the forces in a Militia Council, wherein the minister and the heads of the military staff branches made decisions collectively. Among the military members, the senior appointment was now chief of the general staff, who did not exercise direct command over the forces, but rather coordinated the work of the military staff in Ottawa as the "first among equals." This system was modelled on the new British Army Council, which had been created to overcome clashes between the civil and military authority not unlike those that had occurred in Canada. The Canadian version went further to enshrine the civil authority, however, for the Militia Council had no authority in the absence of the minister, which was not the case with the Army Council.

Although the new chief of the general staff appointment was open to Canadian officers, the Laurier government anticipated criticism that it was creating a prestige patronage billet by asking for the services of a British officer. The government insisted upon one individual, Colonel Percy H. N. Lake who, while serving in Canada during the 1890s, had won the confidence of the politicians with his efficiency and due respect for Canadian civilian authority. Lake brought with him a trusted subordinate, Lieutenant-Colonel Willoughby G.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed account of Laurier's policy in this period see Roger Sarty, "Canada and the Great Rapprochement, 1902-1914," in *The North Atlantic Triangle in a Changing World: Anglo-American-Canadian Relations, 1902-1956*, B.J.C. McKercher and Lawrence Aronson, eds. (Toronto 1996), 15-28.

<sup>5</sup> On civil-military relations see Desmond Morton, *Ministers and Generals: Politics and the Canadian Militia, 1868-1904* (Toronto 1970); \_\_\_\_\_, *A Peculiar Kind of Politics: Canada's Overseas Ministry in the First World War* (Toronto 1982); Stephen J. Harris, *Canadian Brass: The Making of a Professional Army, 1860-1939* (Toronto 1988).

Gwatkin, an expert in war mobilization planning, who served as Lake's "right-hand man"<sup>6</sup> in remaking the Canadian organization.<sup>7</sup> The intention in 1904 was to expand the permanent force to 5,000 troops, in part to provide fuller instruction to the ill-trained non-permanent militiamen, and expand their numbers to 100,000. This programme grew out of the Laurier government's commitment to build up more adequate national forces as an alternative to British demands for fuller Canadian assistance in collective Empire defence, proposals that threatened deep political divisions within Canada and particularly within the Liberal party.

Short-falls in government revenue and escalating expenditures for transcontinental railway development soon put paid to the full scheme for an expanded "national" army, but, strikingly, did not unduly interfere with the new arrangements at Halifax. Governments, when faced with reduced ceilings for new expenditure, would normally have given priority to the part-time militia, which offered the opportunity to dispense patronage across the country, over the politically unpopular permanent force. However, Sir Frederick W. Borden, minister of Militia and Defence, respected the decision-making powers of the new Militia Council, his own creation. He generally accepted the advice of the military members that without a larger and more capable body of regulars to administer and instruct the non-permanent militia, further expenditure on the part-time troops would be wasted. The establishment of the permanent force was therefore tripled to over 3,000 personnel, although the difficulties in finding and retaining men during a time of prosperity kept the actual strength at around 2,800 or fewer. Borden also agreed that the bulk of the new effort had to be concentrated at Halifax to fulfill the commitment to maintain the large and complex facilities. Nearly half of the expanded permanent force, 1,100 to 1,400 troops, were assigned to the fortress.<sup>8</sup>

Although the departing British garrison had nearly completed a major modernization of the defences to compete with the increased speed and armament of the latest warships, further important changes were needed. Two new heavy batteries on either side of the harbour approaches, about six miles seaward of the Halifax waterfront, gave excellent long range coverage. The inner defences of light quick-fire guns and high-powered searchlights, however, had to be moved two or three miles seaward of their positions at Point Pleasant and George's Island, if they were to have any chance of stopping fast night attack craft before they were within range of the main port facilities.<sup>9</sup> This would cost, according to the initial estimates that later proved to be wildly optimistic, a total of \$150,000 to \$250,000 for the construction of three new concrete and steel coast batteries. Money, in any event, was not available for

<sup>6</sup> C.F. Hamilton, "Lieut-General Sir Willoughby Gwatkin An Appreciation," *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, 2 (April 1925), 256.

<sup>7</sup> Harris, *Canadian Brass*, 72-6; Desmond Morton, *The Canadian General: Sir William Otter* (Toronto 1974), 271-2.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Sarty, "Silent Sentry: A Military and Political History of Canadian Coast Defence, 1860-1945," (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1982), 183.

<sup>9</sup> A. J. B. Johnston, *Defending Halifax: Ordnance, 1825-1906* (History and Archaeology 46XOttawa 1981).

anything more than preliminary work.<sup>10</sup>

Nor was there money to improve the central barracks, administrative offices and supply depots located on a patchwork of a dozen properties within the city proper. The largest of these military properties was the Citadel, a mid-nineteenth century hill-top masonry star fort still in use as a barracks and administrative centre, on a seventy-one acre plot that was now the centre of the city, and the twenty-acre complex that included Wellington Barracks and North Ordnance Yard, the site of the army's central ammunition magazines, at the north end of the waterfront. The technological imperatives that had brought the reconstruction of the coastal batteries at sites further and further out the harbour, clear of densely settled areas, had not applied to the central facilities. Although improvements had been made at some sites, many of the buildings were too small, too old, and, especially on the waterfront, crowded in by commercial development.<sup>11</sup>

Frederick Borden at least ensured that the garrison lands were not devoured by the municipality. "The transfer of the War Department properties to the control of the Department of Militia and Defence," according to the *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board*,

apparently seemed to the City authorities a convenient opportunity for municipal improvements at Dominion expense. As early as November, 1906, in renewing previous efforts to obtain the Old Fuel Yard site [near the waterfront] for a public market, the Mayor applied to have the King's Wharf transferred for a public landing place and city wharf, and also for a strip of land sixty feet in width through the Royal Canadian Engineer Barracks [also known as "South Barracks," adjoining Royal Artillery Park]. He also asked to have the fences removed which had been erected on the Citadel Glacis round portions of the hill leased for pasturing cattle, and all the hill thrown open as a recreation ground under supervision of the City police.<sup>12</sup>

Borden brought such proposals before the Militia Council and accepted military advice, rejection in the case of the examples noted by the Lands Board.

Beyond the Militia Council there was no machinery for bringing broad defence needs before the government. At times frustrated senior officers made anonymous leaks to the press to bring advice to the attention of the government or compel the Cabinet to explain initiatives

<sup>10</sup> Sarty, "Silent Sentry," 200-1.

<sup>11</sup> On the development of the garrison facilities within the city, Harry Piers's classic, *The Evolution of the Halifax Fortress 1749-1928* (Halifax 1947) has material still not available in printed form anywhere else. This was the main source for the material on the fortress in Thomas H. Raddall, *Halifax Warden of the North* (Toronto 1948).

<sup>12</sup> Department of Militia and Defence, *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board, 1915* (Ottawa 1916), 82.

that seemed to compromise defence.<sup>13</sup> In particular, calls by the military for the organization of some kind of naval force so that Canada could protect the vast seacoasts beyond the range of the batteries at Halifax and the much smaller establishment at Esquimalt, BC, had no effect. Rather it was a political crisis in 1909, resulting from revelations in Britain about Germany's accelerated naval shipbuilding programme, that finally brought the Laurier government to found the Royal Canadian Navy in 1910. Further controversy, however, stalled development of the new service and contributed to the defeat of the Liberals in the election of 1911. One positive development was the establishment of close naval-militia co-operation through an inter-departmental committee so that planning and preparations could be made to use such maritime resources as Canada possessed to augment the land defences at Halifax.<sup>14</sup>

The victory of Robert Borden's Conservatives in the election of 1911 increased the isolation of the military staff from government decision-making. Colonel Sam Hughes, the minister of militia and a long-time member of the part-time force, loathed regular officers.<sup>15</sup> This hide-bound, self-protecting clique had failed to recognize his special military talents and conspired to deny him his due promotion and recognition. He publicly vented his feelings at the officers of the Halifax garrison in the presence of General Sir Ian Hamilton, the inspector general of the Imperial forces, in July 1913. The officers offended the tee-totalling Hughes by bringing flasks to his banquet in honour of the British general. The minister rose to denounce the regulars as "bar-room loafers"<sup>16</sup> and lectured them about their essentially subordinate status as instructors pure and simple for the part-time militia. If they did not like that, then they were welcome to "leave the force."<sup>17</sup>

Hughes, a successful politician, worked through his wide network of political friends, and all but ignored his military advisors. He seldom assembled the militia council nor informed its members about his activities. Unfortunately, the senior advisor was no longer someone with the conciliatory manner and administrative deftness of Percy Lake. In 1908 Lake had been replaced as chief of the general staff by Brigadier William Otter, the only Canadian officer who unarguably had the stature and qualifications for the post, but the Laurier government had nevertheless retained the trusted Lake in the normally ceremonial position of inspector general. When Lake departed in 1910, and Otter assumed the inspector general's appointment, the government had again requested a British officer to serve as chief of the general staff. Major-General Colin Mackenzie, a proud man with a somewhat rigid outlook, was not a happy choice. After trading insults with Hughes, he resigned in the spring

<sup>13</sup> Roger Sarty, "Canadian Maritime Defence, 1892-1914," *Canadian Historical Review* 71 (December 1990), 475-6, 479-80.

<sup>14</sup> Sarty, "Silent Sentry," 190-2.

<sup>15</sup> On Hughes see Ronald G. Haycock, *Sam Hughes: The Public Career of a Controversial Canadian, 1885-1916* (Np: National Museums of Canada, 1986).

<sup>16</sup> Connaught to Borden, 3 December 1913, NAC, R.L. Borden papers, MG 26 H, reel C-4361, 78504-7.

<sup>17</sup> *The Canadian Annual Review, 1913* (Toronto 1914), 217, quoting the Conservative *Halifax Herald*.

of 1913, a year before the end of his engagement.<sup>18</sup> Hughes's biographer is undoubtedly right that the minister was under pressure from the prime minister to select another British officer in order to mollify authorities in London and minimize controversy. Hughes selected Gwatkin, now a full colonel, who had demonstrated qualities and talents similar to those of Lake, his mentor in Canada. Gwatkin, according to Hughes in a tribute to a professional officer that was rare for the minister, "had been specially trained to observe rights and functions under responsible government."<sup>19</sup>

The new Conservative government did nothing to clarify questions of coastal defence in general or resolve particular problems at Halifax. When Borden's legislation to provide direct financial assistance to the Royal Navy was defeated by the Liberal-dominated Senate in May 1913, the government abandoned all naval endeavours, leaving only the remnants of Laurier's initial effort, two obsolescent cruisers that had been purchased from the Royal Navy as training ships, and a few hundred personnel whose numbers were being eroded by desertion and the departure of seconded British instructional personnel. Although the Conservatives increased militia spending greatly, from, \$6.9 million in fiscal year 1910-11 to \$10.9 million in fiscal year 1913-14, Hughes directed almost all of the additional funds to the part-time force, and the strength of the permanent garrison had Halifax fell from 1275 personnel on 31 March 1911 to 1071 on the same date two years later.<sup>20</sup>

The Conservatives provided some money to move the inner defences at Halifax seaward, but considerably less than the staff requested, and not until fiscal year 1914-15. Using the inter-departmental committee, Gwatkin trimmed back the proposed fortification scheme to meet only the threats identified as most likely by the navy. This gave priority to an expanded system of searchlights in the outer harbour approaches, and provided for completion of only one of the three planned quick-fire batteries planned, a scheme that could be achieved within the level of funding likely to be available.<sup>21</sup>

In the midst of these efforts, Gwatkin learned that the efficiency of the fortress was threatened on another front. One of the Conservatives' leading priorities on entering office was to build the long-promised ocean terminals at Halifax, the eastern end of the trans-continental railway system. The existing railway facilities and piers, at the northern end of the Halifax peninsula, were on a small scale and crowded around the naval dockyard and amidst the industrial section of the city. What was needed were deep-water thousand-foot long berths to accommodate the largest passenger ships, and suitable passenger and freight handling facilities, including rail marshalling yards. The powerful Department of Railways and Canals

<sup>18</sup> Morton, *The Canadian General*, 292-312; Harris, *Canadian Brass*, 76-100.

<sup>19</sup> Haycock, *Hughes*, 170-1. On Gwatkin's Canadian career see, in addition to Hamilton, "Gwatkin," 226-30, John Griffith Armstrong, "Canadian Home Defence, 1914-1917, and the Role of Major-General Willoughby Gwatkin," (MA thesis, Royal Military College of Canada, 1982).

<sup>20</sup> Sarty, "Silent Sentry," 179-81.

<sup>21</sup> Sarty, "Silent Sentry," 201.

selected the slightly developed waterfront on the southern part of the peninsula, approximately two kilometres of shoreline from about the foot of South Street to the northern reaches of Point Pleasant Park. At the South Street end of this tract, was the Lumber Yard, a large property about 250 yards in length and 150 yards in depth back from the shoreline.<sup>22</sup> Still named for its earliest function, the yard had long since been developed as the main depot of the fortress engineers,<sup>23</sup> the military corps responsible for the design, construction and upkeep of the permanent harbour fortifications. On mobilization for war the engineers would also be charged with the speedy erection of accommodation buildings for the augmented garrison, and the construction of earth and timber field fortifications to cover possible landing places along the coast and to protect "vulnerable points" such as the city's water supply lakes on the mainland to the west of the peninsula.

The rapid progress of technology since the mid-nineteenth century had made the Lumber Yard increasingly important. The new seaward coastal batteries, inaccessible by land, were serviced by water transport that operated from a deep water pier and boathouses at the Lumber Yard, which also featured ample space for the storage and handling of heavy items such as construction materials, communications cables, searchlights, and other electrical equipment. The fortress's telephone communications system largely depended upon underwater cables, and these came ashore at the Lumber Yard, where there was test and maintenance equipment. The yard's dozen buildings housed the administrative offices of the engineers, and the military engineering school where personnel from across the country received training in fortress engineering. The yard's convenient location, close by the main headquarters and barracks facilities in the city, but also with ready access to the outer defences, was particularly useful for the work starting on the construction of the new seaward quick-fire battery and searchlight system.<sup>24</sup>

The department of Railways and Canals began expropriation proceedings for the Lumber Yard early in 1913, but without consulting Militia and Defence. Only in August did Railways and Canals make contact, and then to ask for help in speeding the transfer of the site. The expropriation proceedings had revealed that the Canadian government held the military properties in the Halifax area only in trust on behalf of the British War Department. Canada had acquired the use of the lands solely for military purposes; otherwise the War Department had to be indemnified with the full value of the property and the installations on it. Hughes sought the advice of the commander of the Maritimes Provinces, Colonel R. W. Rutherford, and that was not encouraging: "No military property available here, at present, will afford such facilities and none that could be used even temporarily." The transaction

<sup>22</sup> *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board*, 6-13, perambulation plan no 8; see also J. Castell Hopkins, ed., *The Canadian Annual Review, 1908* (Toronto 1909), 201, for earlier discussion of the proposed ocean terminals.

<sup>23</sup> Piers, *Evolution of the Halifax Fortress*, 10-11, 36, 85.

<sup>24</sup> On the development of the roles of the engineers and the facilities and services for which they were responsible see the 1904-1910 revisions of *The Halifax Defence Scheme*, DHH 340.003(D1).



would therefore be expensive and difficult. Replacement buildings and works would cost \$170,000, exclusive of the amount that would have to be paid for another substantial piece of prime waterfront land. Nor was that all. None of the proceeds of the sale of the Lumber Yard to Railways and Canals could be used for these replacement facilities. Under the terms of the transfer of the fortress to Canada, all of that money would have to go to the British War department.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, on 30 October 1913 Hughes signed a report to the Canadian Privy Council requesting the British government to authorize the transfer of the Lumber Yard to the department of Railways and Canals. He certified, in a formula the Department of Justice recommended, that the property "is no longer needed by the Dominion for military purposes, and the intention is that at early date it shall cease to be used for those purposes."<sup>26</sup> The minister was undoubtedly responding to the personal interest the prime minister had shown in expediting the ocean terminals project; he signed this letter while the construction crews were moving into the vicinity of the engineer depot.

Suddenly, a real estate deal of no particular interest to the chief of the general staffs branch had important implications for military efficiency. On 15 November 1913 Gwatkin wrote to Colonel Eugène Fiset, the deputy minister: "I see this file for the first time... [and] learn with amazement that the Lumber Yard is no longer needed..."<sup>27</sup> Gwatkin, showing the qualities that had made him an effective staff officer in Canada, was sympathetic to the pressures on his minister, but insistent on the points Rutherford had made:

2. I quite understand that is now too late to go back. The commercial development of Halifax must not be arrested; and there are political factors which cannot with safety be ignored. All I urge is that before the property changes hands, the Department of Railways and Canals should undertake to provide another site in some equally convenient locality, and to construct thereon suitable accommodation in replacement of the quarters, officers, stores, etc., which are about to be vacated.

3. It is possible that the Imperial Government would allow the money realized by the sale of the Lumber Yard to be sunk in the purchase of another site, provided that the site were treated in all respects as War Department property; but whatever happens, no part of the expenditure involved should go to swell the total of Militia Estimates.

4. Our official forbears parted with much of their inheritance, and we

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board*, 14.

<sup>26</sup> Hughes to governor-general in Council, 30 October 1913, printed in *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board*, 135-6.

<sup>27</sup> Gwatkin to deputy minister, 15 November 1913, HQ 71-26-72 pt 1, NAC, RG 24, vol. 6357. This memorandum, together with several other key items from this file are printed in *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board*, appendix 8.

suffer for lack of business foresight. If we with fuller knowledge follow their example, posterity may hold us guilty of a breach of trust.

The last paragraph was almost certainly a reference to the many military properties in Ontario and Quebec to which the British government had given Canada full title when the Imperial garrisons had withdrawn, partially in the 1850s and then fully in 1869-71. The intention was that they should be used either directly, or with the revenue from their lease or sale, to underwrite the development of Canadian forces.<sup>28</sup> Nothing like that had happened, most of the lands being given over by Ottawa for urban development and the support of civil government works.<sup>29</sup>

Gwatkin's warning had no effect. Nothing was done about alternate facilities for the engineer depot, and the government and its friends pressed ahead to rearrange garrison accommodation in two other instances with no regard to military advice. The first concerned the Old Fuel Yard, a lot of about 35 by 65 yards on the north west corner of Prince and Lower Water Streets, on the central part of the waterfront. The old buildings on the site accommodated the Canadian Permanent Army Service Corps, responsible for providing the whole range of domestic supplies, including food, to the garrison and its outposts. The property was conveniently located immediately across Lower Water Street from the King's Wharf, a military pier used by the Service Corps water transport service, the regular run that carried supplies and personnel to the various outstations of the fortress.<sup>30</sup>

The Old Fuel Yard was adjacent to the department of Customs offices in Halifax, and during 1913 that department began proceedings to take it over for construction of a new warehouse. Colonel Rutherford advised against surrendering the land. Aside from the needs of the Service Corps, the site was the most likely of the few waterfront locations available where additional facilities might be built for the engineers when they were displaced from the Lumber Yard. The department of Customs allowed that a story could be added to their proposed building that would be made available to the military. Much of this was arranged at the ministerial level. As in the case of the Lumber Yard, and at the same time (October 1913), Hughes certified for the benefit of the War Office that the site was no longer required for defence purposes. The military authorities in the department of Militia and Defence had argued in vain over the years for replacement of the Old Fuel Yard's ancient buildings. Now the minister's office and the department of Public Works showed considerable energy in moving the Service Corps staff out of the Old Fuel Yard in April 1914 and onto the fifth floor of the Dennis building on an expensive three-year lease at a rate of over \$3,000 per year. The building was owned by Dennis Realty, one of the interests of Senator William A. Dennis,

<sup>28</sup> C.P. Stacey, *Canada and the British Army 1846-1871: A Study in the Practice of Responsible Government* (Rev ed.: Toronto 1963), 96-7, 102, 251-2.

<sup>29</sup> Eg., André Charbonneau, Yvon Desloges and Marc Lafrance, *Québec: The Fortified City: From the 17th to the 19th Century* (Ottawa 1982), 449-52.

<sup>30</sup> *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board*, 25-6, "Perambulation Plan" 5.

publisher of the Conservative *Halifax Herald*.<sup>31</sup>

Meanwhile, during the latter part of 1913 Conservative MP E.N. Rhodes, a future premier of Nova Scotia, had contacted Hughes on behalf of the Halifax Electric Tramway Company about acquisition of a large lot containing the garrison headquarters building at the eastern end of Spring Garden Road, the location of the present day Maritime Telephone and Telegraph building. Colonel Rutherford advised Hughes to reject the proposal. The old headquarters building, which now contained the staff of the whole of the Maritime Provinces area as well as the fortress staff, was overcrowded, but there was ample room on the lot for expansion, and the site was ideally located at the focal point of garrison activities. Then in December 1913 Senator Dennis, who although no friend of the tramway consortium had perhaps caught wind of an opportunity,<sup>32</sup> pressed Hughes to have his department rent another floor of the Dennis building to house the command staff. Hughes not only agreed that this was a good idea, but was relentless in pursuing it. The reasons are obscure, for the tramway company did not pursue its bid for the land, and Rutherford was damning about the suitability of the top floor of the Dennis building as a headquarters. Not only did it lack many of the facilities required, but there was no way of controlling access by the public. Hughes sent a compliant officer from Ottawa to investigate and make a favourable report that contradicted the area commander's views. When Public Works doubted the need to make another large high-rate rental when the perfectly serviceable headquarters building was available, Hughes blasted "We must have the two floors [in the Dennis Building]."<sup>33</sup>

Gwatkin in April 1914 wrote another note, this time directly to the minister.

At Halifax, things are not as they ought to be.

Consequent on the surrender of the lumber and fuel yard properties, accommodation for offices, store-houses, quarters, etc., must be provided elsewhere; and I recommend that the question be dealt with, comprehensively, by a Committee to be specially appointed by yourself.

The same Committee could consider how best to re-adjust the system of fortress communication which has been deranged by work which is now in progress [a reference to interference by the work on the Ocean Terminals, near the Lumber Yard, to either engineer water transport or the underwater fortress telephone cables or both].

I am on thin ice when I express regret that Divisional Headquarters are to be moved (for what ostensible purpose I do not know) to the top of the Dennis Building - a rookery of offices one of which is adorned by the Stars and Stripes [the US consulate was in the building, and the American flag

<sup>31</sup> *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board*, 26-34.

<sup>32</sup> J. Murray Beck, *Politics of Nova Scotia* Volume Two "1896-1988" (Halifax 1988), 56-7, 60.

<sup>33</sup> *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board*, 34A2, minister quoted on 42, "Large Scale Plan" 5,6,7.

flew from some prominent place on it]...

I know that commercial and political interests are involved, but that is no reason why fortress requirements should be overlooked; and I venture to hope that it is not too late to amend the situation.<sup>34</sup>

Gwatkin heard nothing prior to the outbreak of war.

Thanks to the careful preparations by the staffs in Ottawa and Halifax, and mutual confidence between Rutherford and Gwatkin who had jointly overseen refinements in the plans since 1911, the fortress mobilized quickly and smoothly. The first warning telegram arrived from London on 29 July, and within forty-eight hours the regular garrison had brought the key forts into operation and established the most important "vulnerable points" and other detachments. Thus the fortress command was able instantly to implement the fuller precautions the British began to call for on 1 August. On 3 August, part-time militia units began to augment the regulars in the garrison, and the fortress was at a high state of readiness by the time the war telegram arrived on the night of 4-5 August. Perhaps the greatest evidence of professionalism was that Rutherford and Gwatkin, with only brief exchanges of messages, succeeded in limiting the mobilization. The defence scheme, based on the traditional worst-case scenario of war with the United States, provided for the mobilization of over 5,000 militia troops. Although there were at least two German cruisers in the western Atlantic, and many fast merchantmen that might be carrying fighting equipment, Gwatkin immediately saw that there was no possibility of a full-scale siege, something Rutherford also understood. They therefore restricted call-outs from the part-time force to approximately 2,000 troops, the ones needed to complete the garrisons of the forts, and provide protection for the main vulnerable points.<sup>35</sup>

The events at Halifax were among the few orderly elements in the Canadian mobilization. Hughes had scrapped the plan for raising an infantry division for overseas service that the military staff, primarily Gwatkin, had prepared since 1911. Hughes telegraphed commanders of militia units across the country, asking them to send men to Valcartier, Quebec, a site near the embarkation port of Quebec City, but entirely undeveloped as a military camp. While the men flooded in, Hughes directed everything personally, pressing on the construction contractors, while also selecting officers for key appointments in the expeditionary force. Hughes's methods succeeded in quickly raising the first contingent of 30,000 men and shipping it to England in October, even if everything about the force smacked of confusion. He had nevertheless short-circuited the notoriously inefficient government bureaucracy and obstructive militia politics that he knew all too well. Yet he also bypassed the professional staff, who were no less determined than he was to rush the contingent to the front, with the result that the military staff lacked the most basic information they needed to

<sup>34</sup> Gwatkin to Hughes, 25 April 1914, HQ 71-26-72 pt 2, NAC, RG 24, vol. 6357.

<sup>35</sup> Sarty, "Silent Sentry," 263^1,267-8.

support the minister's initiatives with essential administrative action.

Some of Hughes's spur of the moment decisions flew in the face of his larger objectives. His quick agreement to requests from political friends that militia units should be called out to guard factories and municipal facilities across the country absorbed large numbers of troops who should have been available for the overseas effort. One of Gwatkin's preoccupations throughout the war was to trim back inflated guards details, much as he and Rutherford succeeded in doing from the outset at Halifax.<sup>36</sup> One corollary of economy in manpower for home defence was the need to make sure that the equipment and facilities at Halifax allowed the garrison to be as effective as possible. This helps to explain the tenacity with which Gwatkin continued to pursue the fortress properties issue.

The outbreak of war had put two of the real estate deals the military had resisted into abeyance. The garrison was able to reclaim the Old Fuel Yard, decrepit as the buildings there were, and had taken over the extra floor at the Dennis building, forced on them by the minister, without giving up the headquarters building at the foot of Spring Garden Road.<sup>37</sup> The most important matter of the Lumber Yard, however, had not been settled. The burdens on the engineers included not just the mobilization tasks, but also the major construction projects for improvement of the defences on the outer harbour that had been delayed by the absence of funding in peacetime. Hundreds of civilian workers had to be transported to the various sites every day, together with the large quantities of construction materials.<sup>38</sup>

Towards the end of September 1914 Rutherford warned Gwatkin that construction of the Ocean Terminals, which had begun with the erection of the massive breakwater at the northern end of Point Pleasant Park, was creeping ever closer to the engineer depot. "Owing to the demolition of adjoining buildings, the Lumber yard is now practically open to anyone who may wish to get in, and ... dredging and filling operations have been going on for some time in front of the property with the result that apparently the wharf itself will soon become inaccessible for the Government boats..." Rutherford had had his staff make plans to move the engineer depot to the King's Wharf on the central waterfront. This, however, triggered a protest by the Army Service Corps that the King's Wharf facilities were already stretched to the limit in supplying thousands of troops with their daily needs. In the following weeks, the dispute in turn caused a deadlock at headquarters between the Quartermaster-General and the Master-General of the Ordnance, whose respective branches were responsible for the service corps and engineers.<sup>39</sup> At this same time, the British War Office, which before the war had

<sup>36</sup> Armstrong, "Canadian Home Defence."

<sup>37</sup> *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board*, 20, 26, 35-6.

<sup>38</sup> Roger Sarty and Bruce Ellis, "Connaught Battery and the Defence of the Atlantic Coast," *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 15 (Spring 1986), 29-33.

<sup>39</sup> Rutherford to secretary of the militia council, 28 September 1914 (quoted); Macdonald to master general of the ordnance, 21 October 1914, Benson to chief of the general staff, 26 October 1914, HQ 71-26-72 pt 2, N A C, RG 24, vol.6357; for the details of the proposal to move the engineer depot to King's Wharf see *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board*, 18-19.

quickly agreed to the sale of the Old Fuel Yard and the Lumber Yard on Hughes's recommendation, was plaintively asking what was happening. The lack of action on the part of the Canadian government to complete the necessary legal work and make the payments owing to the War Office deeply embarrassed Gwatkin.<sup>40</sup>

By November 1914 the Chief of the General Staff had lost patience. "At various times I have offered advice," he wrote to the deputy minister,

... which the Minister ignored.

But something must be done, and done quickly. The MGO and QMG are at loggerheads...

Without further delay an independent Committee should be convened at Halifax to deal comprehensively with the points at issue.... I would volunteer my services but at present I cannot leave Ottawa, nor can you.

The Committee need not be composed exclusively of military officers. I suggest as Chairman a Haligonian, Mr. J.G.A. Creighton, CMG, Law Clerk to the Senate (he would represent political, legal and business interests), and as members ~

1. The OC [officer commanding], R C A [Royal Canadian Artillery], to hold a brief for the Fortress (as such), and to give due prominence to the question of defence.
2. An officer [of the garrison]... to represent the QMG.
3. An officer [of the garrison]... to represent the MGO.<sup>41</sup>

When nothing happened for a further two weeks, Gwatkin took advantage of one of Hughes's frequent absences from Ottawa to put the matter before J.D. Hazen, the acting minister, and received authorization to act. Immediately, the chief of the general staff asked the adjutant-general, the legal and administrative authority at headquarters, to promulgate orders establishing the committee "We are wasting time," Gwatkin wrote impatiently, but he nevertheless warned the adjutant-general to "let the Honourable the Minister know what is going on; for it is on the cards that he will not agree with Mr Hazen as to the necessity for assembling a committee." Whether because of Hazen's views, or because of haste in clearing away administrative detail, Hughes gave his approval.<sup>42</sup>

The chief of the general staff had long since been in touch with J.G.A. Creighton, who promptly accepted the presidency of the committee when he received the formal invitation in

<sup>40</sup> Eg., Pope to deputy minister Militia and Defence, 27 October 1914, HQ 71-26-72 pt 2, NAC, RG 24, vol. 6357.

<sup>41</sup> Gwatkin to deputy minister, 3 November 1914, HQ 71-26-72 pt 2, NAC, RG 24, vol. 6357.

<sup>42</sup> Gwatkin to adjutant-general, 20 November 1914, HQ 71-26-72 pt 2, NAC, RG 24, vol. 6357.

December 1914.<sup>43</sup> Creighton, 64 years of age and a member of the legal staff at the Senate since 1882, was a superb choice. In addition to decades of experience in parliamentary affairs and the Ottawa bureaucracy, he had in a previous career served as an engineer on construction of the Intercolonial Railway and other major public works, and had put himself through law school by working as a journalist. A native of Halifax, he was the son of the Lieutenant-Colonel William H. Creighton who, in the 1860s, had commanded the city militia artillery brigade assigned to reinforce the regular garrison, and had briefly been an officer in the brigade himself.<sup>44</sup>

The committee, now designated the Halifax Military Lands Board, 1915,<sup>45</sup> met daily in Halifax from 18 January to 5 February 1915, visiting the garrison properties and consulting widely. Creighton was ready to make an early report, but Gwatkin asked him to continue his work.<sup>46</sup> Railways and Canals and Militia and Defence had come to a stalemate over the Lumber Yard. In the spring as ocean terminals construction managers began to demand rights of way through the depot, Rutherford's position hardened to an insistence that the facility must be left undisturbed until the end of the war. This view soon gained force when alarm over the danger of German U-boat attacks in the unprotected St Lawrence brought the transfer of troopship sailings from Quebec City to Halifax. These ships, with their thousands of military passengers, were the most precious vessels in the Allied inventory, and their regular presence ruled out compromise in the efficiency of the harbour defences not least because neither the British or Canadian navies could provide efficient anti-submarine warships.<sup>47</sup> The Department of Railways and Canals, believing that the arrangements in hand to transfer the land gave them clear title, tried to order the military to vacate the property. Militia headquarters, with Hughes again absent, empowered Rutherford to refuse any encroachment.<sup>48</sup> The difficulty, as Creighton explained, was the sloppy methods by which Hughes had allowed the initial land transfer proceedings to take place in 1913-1914. The obligation of Railways and Canals to provide fully equivalent facilities for the displaced engineers had never been formally laid out, as Gwatkin had recommended on three occasions, and therefore had been forgotten. Cooler heads prevailed in the fall and winter, no doubt in part because of Creighton's lucid explanation of the Railways and Canals commitment.<sup>49</sup> Early in 1916, with

<sup>43</sup> Creighton to Denison, 17 December 1914, HQ 71-26-72 pt 2, NAC, RG 24, vol. 6357.

<sup>44</sup> *Canadian Parliamentary Guide* (Montreal 1915), 84-5; Henry James Morgan, *The Canadian Men and Women of the Time* (Toronto 1912), 277.

<sup>45</sup> The board was formally created and named by Militia Order 24, 11 January 1915, NAC, RG9HB3, vol. 36.

<sup>46</sup> *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board*, 1.

<sup>47</sup> Michael L. Hadley and Roger Sarty, *Tin-Pots and Pirate Ships: Canadian Naval Forces and German Sea Raiders 1880-1918* (Kingston and Montreal 1991) chapter 5.

<sup>48</sup> Correspondence, 4 May - 9 November 1915, HQ 71-26-72 pt 2, NAC, RG 24, vol. 6357, part of which is printed in *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board*, appendices 10, 11, 12; see also the summary on 21 A

<sup>49</sup> *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board*, 18, 24, 43-55.

Hughes himself finally moving to resolve the dispute,<sup>50</sup> Railways and Canals agreed to purchase a commercial wharf and warehouse complex adjacent to the King's Wharf, and pay for improvements of the accommodation,<sup>51</sup> a somewhat scaled down version of the solution that the Creighton board recommended.<sup>52</sup> Arrangements were made for the engineers to begin to move from the Lumber Yard to the new property immediately, using existing buildings there and at the Old Fuel Yard while work began to augment and improve the new facilities.<sup>53</sup>

Gwatkin personally attended to the promulgation of the completed report. Although the report generally avoided mentioning names, it was clear Hughes had been neglectful at best and, at worst, had given priority to the interests of political friends. Creighton, whose experience as a journalist as well as a lawyer is clearly evident, told the stories of the Lumber Yard, the Old Fuel Yard and the Dennis building leases with an unerring eye for telling quotes from the official files. Gwatkin had every reason to be pleased. Creighton printed all of the chief of the general staff's warnings, and demonstrated with careful legal analysis of the terms under which Canada held the British properties in trust why he had been right. Gwatkin had 100 copies of the report printed and distributed them to the prime minister's office, the governor-general's office, the navy, and all offices within Militia and Defence concerned with works and buildings. It must have been satisfying for the chief of the general staff, given his concern about the government's failure to keep British authorities informed, to send copies to the War Office lands and works directorates, together with copies for deposit in the British Museum Library and the library of the army Staff College at Camberley.<sup>54</sup>

The report went well beyond the particulars of the real estate transactions that had triggered its creation. The board had investigated the condition of all of the garrison properties on the city peninsula and reviewed proposals made by all three levels of government since the last years of the British regime for redevelopment of various parcels of land. Creighton was struck by the extent none of these had reflected even the dimmest concern for military needs; every authority had evidently treated the advice of the militia staff as an annoyance.

A principle which ought to dominate seems to have been gradually lost sight

<sup>50</sup> Elliot, memorandum [concerning meeting with Hughes and the manager of the Inter-Colonial Railway], 11 February 1916, HQ 71-26-72 pt 2, NAC, RG 24, vol. 6357.

<sup>51</sup> Déroche, memorandum [reporting on meetings in Halifax in February between Militia and Defence and Railways and Canals], 2 March 1916, Elliot to deputy minister, 23 March 1916, HQ 71-26-72 pt2, NAC, RG 24, vol. 6357.

<sup>52</sup> This was the purchase for the engineers of the Mitchell wharf complex adjacent to the King's Wharf; the lands board had suggested acquiring both this property and a second adjacent wharf complex belonging to N & M Smith Limited: *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board*, 62 and "Large Scale Plans" 8 and 9.

<sup>53</sup> PC 632/21 March 1916, General Officer commanding 6th Division to secretary of the Militia Council, telegram, 25 March 1916, HQ 71-26-72 pt 2, NAC, RG 24, vol. 6357.

<sup>54</sup> Gwatkin to SPSC [Secretary printing and stationary controller?], 16 June 1916, and distribution lists dated 30 June to 2 July 1916, HQ 64-1-23, NAC, RG 24, vol. 6309.



of during the long period of peace and especially since Canada assumed the responsibility of the defence of her own soil. The commercial importance of the City of Halifax and its value to the Dominion are evident, but great as these are they are subordinate to the military significance of the fortress of Halifax in the defence of Canada and the Empire. The existence of the city and the continuance of its commercial importance depend upon safety from attack.<sup>55</sup>

The Lumber Yard case was only the most striking one where solely "commercial, financial and engineering reasons were considered in the decision,"<sup>56</sup> but it was especially disturbing. The Ocean Terminals, a \$6.5 million undertaking intended as the first phase of a project several times that large, would shift the focal point of the Halifax waterfront some four kilometers closer to the harbour entrance, at the position on the city peninsula most exposed to seaward attack. Early in the final report, Creighton went well beyond the information in departmental files to disclose what he could only have learned from the staff at Halifax. "Modern battleships and battle cruisers, even those not armed with anything heavier than 12-inch guns, have an effective fire at ranges of 18,000 to 20,000 yards. An enemy ship might therefore easily shell the terminals while still engaging the coast batteries at the limit of the latter's effective range."<sup>57</sup>

The situation was more complex than Creighton suggested, but no less worrying. Although there was always a danger of major German warships breaking out of the North Sea, whence they could readily reach the waters off Nova Scotia, the main effort of the whole of Britain's battle fleet was to bottle up the main enemy squadrons. It was for this reason that Britain had allowed coastal fortifications to fall somewhat behind the armament in warships. The greater danger was from smaller fast vessels, or disguised merchant vessels, expendable types that the enemy might well be willing to sacrifice in an effort to penetrate right into key ports. The submarine, which until the era of nuclear propulsion was most effective moving fast on the surface relying upon the near invisibility of its low profile at night or in foggy conditions, was a logical development of earlier small-warship technology. Surreptitious attack was a special concern at Halifax because the north-west Atlantic fogs provided perfect cover for days on end, and the broad entrance to the harbour could in no way be kept under constant, effective surveillance. It was against that threat that the Canadian military had been working to improve the Halifax defences since 1906 by pushing the searchlight and quick-fire gun armament further out the harbour approaches. With the Ocean Terminal project, the waterfront had instantly marched seaward close behind, sitting almost within the new inner defence zone between Purcell's Cove and the northern end of McNabs Island.

*Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board, 1.*  
*Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board, 8.*  
*Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board, 8-9*

Armament, of course, is only as efficient as the men who operate it, which is why comfortable accommodation, spacious, clean training facilities and proper food and other support services are essential. On this score Creighton was deeply impressed with the enthusiasm and efficiency of the garrison, and amazed that they could sustain it in the squalor of many of the buildings in the main barracks and depots on the city peninsula:

As for the office accommodation, nothing that has been said about the state of the buildings at Halifax generally can convey any idea of the disgraceful conditions under which this Department [the Canadian Permanent Army Service Corps] has to carry on its work. The offices are in a tumble-down old building with small and utterly insanitary rooms, devoid of every ordinary fitting or appliance and nothing better than fire-traps, heated by bee-hive stoves and lighted by oil lamps ,..<sup>58</sup>

...old and dilapidated wooden structures which will not hold together much longer. Like all the buildings of their date and kind in the fortress, they are badly lighted, gloomy, the heating arrangements are of the most primitive kind and dangerous.

The Board found the most primitive lavatory and sanitary arrangements, latrines improvised with boards and buckets, the lavatories unheated and the taps and basins consequently covered with ice, the rooms infested with bedbugs.<sup>59</sup>

These conditions were the result of peacetime spending limits that had not allowed proper repair or replacement of buildings that had been in marginal condition when the British left.<sup>60</sup> They had been closed or relegated to use as storehouses, leaving sufficient accommodation only for the peacetime garrison; then on mobilization the run-down structures had to be fully employed once more.

This state of affairs, and the bare adequacy of even the best facilities, spoke volumes about the priorities of the federal government:

There is a striking contrast between the office accommodation furnished in Halifax for the administrative branches of the Militia and that for the Civil Service. The latter are for the most part in modern buildings so designed and

<sup>58</sup> *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board*, 75, describing the Canadian Permanent Army Service Corps main depot at Glacis Barracks.

<sup>59</sup> *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board*, 80-1, describing Royal Artillery Park.

<sup>60</sup> *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board*, 120.

furnished that their work can be done under proper conditions. For instance, to provide offices for the Ocean Terminals Engineering Staff, which are to be occupied only during the construction of the works, two large three-story brick residences on Pleasant Street have been turned into one building commodious enough to house the whole staff of the Royal Canadian Engineers, far better, as regards space, light and general suitability, than the old buildings in the lumber yard which they have to leave.

Under such conditions as exist at Halifax nothing but a high sense of duty accompanied by the best of good-will, energy and zeal could have enable the administrative staff, the general staff and the executive to do their work so efficiently as it has been and is being done.<sup>61</sup>

Creighton agreed with the fortress officers that it would be impossible to attempt any general revision of the garrison properties in wartime. So rapid was the development of military technology moreover, it would be wiser to await the end of the war for a general review of all aspects of Halifax's defence requirements. He underscored, however, that the land held in trust for the War Office must be treated properly as a legacy for the armed forces. The disadvantages created by the scattering of many properties throughout the city core in haphazard development since the mid 18th century had also created an opportunity. The great and continuing increases in the commercial value of the lands had provided a financial nest-egg. If the British authorities were properly approached with a comprehensive scheme, proceeds from the sales of the land could probably be used to underwrite a modern centralized garrison facility clear of the main commercial areas of the city that would benefit everyone.

Tragically, the occasion for such a full scale reorganization came much earlier than anticipated. On 6 December 1917 the northern part of the city was nearly demolished by the explosion of the munitions ship *Mont Blanc*. It was immediately apparent that recovery would entail massive urban redevelopment. With the exception of Wellington Barracks, the main infantry depot close by the site of the explosion, the garrison buildings did not suffer fundamental structural damage, but - or so it seemed at the time - rationalization of the numerous and intrusive garrison properties would be an essential part of reconstruction of the city. In January 1918 the Department of Militia and Defence asked the British Army Council "to send out to Canada (there to remain for two or three months) an officer, technically qualified; whose mission would be two fold: to advise on questions likely to arise in connection with the defence of Halifax, and to safeguard the local interest of the British War Department." <sup>62</sup> The archives do not reveal the origin of this invitation, but the last line shows

<sup>61</sup> *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board*, 56-7.

<sup>62</sup> Deputy minister Militia and Defence to Governor-General's secretary, 11 January 1918, HQ 71-26-99-12 pt 1, NAC, RG24, vol. 6359.

the hallmark of Gwatkin's influence. Failures to keep British authorities properly informed about transactions with the Halifax lands may have been troubling him again for there had recently been another complaint from the War Office about the Lumber Yard transfer. Although Railways and Canals had deposited \$209,985 with the Department of Finance to the credit of the Imperial government in September 1916, it had never been explained to the British authorities that this was the full sum and that it had been arrived at after an independent assessment of the property's value.<sup>63</sup>

Most significantly, the need for fully efficient defences at Halifax had become still more imperative at one of the most difficult points in the war. The course of the struggle at sea had increased the strategic importance of Halifax, and its liability to attack, at the very moment the butchers bill on the Western Front was creating a severe shortage of military manpower. In the summer of 1917 the success of the German U-boat offensive and the failure of Allied anti-submarine methods had finally brought the British Admiralty's decision to sail transatlantic merchant shipping in defended convoys. Halifax had become one of the principal convoy assembly ports and also a key base for both British and American escort warships. A hundred or more merchant ships - among them *Mont Blanc* - arrived and sailed every week. At this same time, U-boats were acquiring the ability to make extended transatlantic cruises, and there was the ever present danger that heavy German warships might break past the British fleet to strike on the convoy routes and against western convoy ports.<sup>64</sup> The fact Allied anti-submarine warships were all tied down in the eastern Atlantic required round-the-clock readiness of the Halifax shore defences, which had kept the garrison at a strength of some 3,500 personnel, a number Gwatkin was determined to trim. Rutherford, with whom Gwatkin had worked so effectively, had retired in 1915, afflicted with failing eyesight, and his successor did not have the same easy relationship with the chief of the general staff.

In February 1918, Gwatkin assigned Major-General F.L. Lessard, his trusted friend, to the Maritimes command with a sweeping mandate to reorganize the Halifax defences. It proved impossible to reduce the garrison, only to redeploy members so that the need for higher levels of readiness of the gun and searchlight defences did not actually increase marining needs. Part of the reason for the difficulty in trimming manpower was the need to employ hundreds more personnel than otherwise would be necessary to guard and deliver coal and other supplies to the many scattered garrison properties.<sup>65</sup>

When the War Office expert, Major-General Louis Jackson, arrived in May 1918 he proved enthusiastic and helpful. The garrison officers and Militia headquarters had found a possible site for a centralized facility with the news that the Department of Railways and Canals would be vacating its roundhouse yard at Willow Park in the northern part of the city.

<sup>63</sup> Corcoran to under-secretary of state, Colonial Office, 15 October 1917, deputy minister militia and defence to under-secretary of state for External Affairs, 8 January 1918, HQ 71-26-72 pt 7, NAC, RG 24, vol. 6358.

<sup>64</sup> Hadley and Sarty, *Tin-Pots*, chapters 8-9.

<sup>65</sup> Sarty, "Silent Sentry," 320-35.

There was a good deal of additional land available in the near vicinity.<sup>66</sup> Jackson estimated that a major facility with accommodation for perhaps 5,000 troops could be developed there for a cost of just under \$9.5 million. He judged, however, that sale of the old garrison properties at market value would bring in over \$5 million and he urged the War Office to allow the Canadian government to retain this money and apply it to the new facility. "Finally," he concluded in his preliminary report,

it may be repeated that the most important feature of Halifax is the fortress; and it is worth while to spend many millions on the Ocean Terminals and other improvements, it is surely worth while, apart from the question of Imperial strategy, to spend a few millions to safeguard them in war. If this is not done now, the opportunity of making proper provision for the garrison will be lost, with the expansion of the city; and things will once more have to be done in haste and at great cost in war time, which might be one with moderate expenditure now.<sup>67</sup>

The prime minister and S.C. Mewburn, who had become minister of Militia and Defence after Borden had finally fired Hughes late in 1916, strongly pressed for the reorganization of the garrison properties when they were in Britain during the summer and fall of 1918. Certainly there was a nationalist tinge to their views. Borden had had personally to intervene in the Lumber Yard question several times, so he was fully aware of how difficult it was to work within the trusteeship agreement. It must also have struck him as anachronistic that Britain should retain this guardianship over Canadian territory to assure effective defence when Canada had unstintingly made such an enormous war effort. Mewburn explained to the War Office that Canada was virtually owed the properties as compensation for the severe damage to Halifax caused by *Mont Blanc's* explosion, the direct result of the Dominion's contribution to the Allied cause.<sup>68</sup>

Even though both men were worried about the steep costs of rebuilding Halifax, they were also convinced that construction of more efficient defence facilities was an essential part of reconstruction. While Borden was in Britain, U-boats began to operate off Nova Scotia, and he pleaded with the Admiralty with only limited success for the deployment of anti-submarine warships in the area. None of the submarines tried to challenge the Halifax defences, but two hovered 20 to 30 miles off the harbour mouth, sinking a large tanker there

<sup>66</sup> Deputy minister of militia and defence to deputy minister of Railways and Canals, 2 March 1918, HQ 71-26-99-12 pt 1, NAC, RG 24, vol. 6359.

<sup>67</sup> Jackson to Master General of the Ordnance, "Halifax Reconstruction," 31 May 1918, HQ 71-26-99-12 pt 1, NAC, RG 24, vol. 6359.

<sup>68</sup> Mewburn to Borden, 31 July 1918, NAC, MG 26 H, reel C-4329, pp. 50950-1; Mewburn to Macpherson, under-secretary of state for War, 9 August 1918, HQ 71-26-128 pt 1, NAC, RG 24, vol. 6360.

and forcing the diversion of shipping to other east coast ports. The experience helped to complete the conversion of Borden's earlier faith in Britain's ability to provide the main cover for the Canadian coasts to a determination to develop the sort of the comprehensive naval and land defences that the naval and militia staffs had long urged. A large part of the reason for the anxiety about the security of the east coast was the belief in all Allied capitals that the German submarine operations on the North American coast in 1918 had only been a reconnaissance for a much stronger offensive in the spring and summer of 1919.<sup>69</sup>

With the early end of the war in November 1918 Borden nevertheless maintained pressure on the War Office to turn over the garrison properties.<sup>70</sup> The British government ultimately did so with an order in council, "The Canadian (Nova Scotia Province) Fortifications Order," of 21 December 1920.<sup>71</sup> By this time the impetus for reorganization of the fortress properties was already fading. Borden had quickly discovered, with the return of peace, that his projects for creating effective national coast defences had no support whatever among a war weary population, and that included his own cabinet. The half-million men and women of the wartime services were demobilized as rapidly as possible, and defence spending slashed. When the Liberals, under William Lyon Mackenzie King, returned to office in the general election of December 1921 they cut military spending further, to pre-war levels, even though wartime inflation had drastically reduced the buying power of these amounts. Faced with draconian choices, the military cut back Halifax to a shadow of the wartime and pre-war establishment. The permanent garrison was now 500 personnel or fewer, a number that could readily, if not comfortably, make do with the best of the old buildings and the many temporary structures that had been thrown up during the war.<sup>72</sup> When federal politicians from the Halifax area protested, Major-General J. H. MacBrien, Gwatkin's successor as chief of the general staff and a hero of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, explained "since Germany collapsed, the strategical importance of the fortress has declined: the centre of interest has shifted from the North Atlantic to the North Pacific."<sup>73</sup> There was no potential enemy on the Atlantic, and the Royal Navy was now utterly supreme on that ocean. By contrast, deep tensions between the United States and Japan, and the limited strength of British forces in the Pacific, raised profound worries about the security of British Columbia, where defences were far less

<sup>69</sup> Hadley and Sarty, *Tin-Pots*, chapters 10-11.

<sup>70</sup> Borden to Mewburn, telegram, 21 December 1918, Mewburn to Borden, 24 December 1918, telegram, Macpherson to Borden, 2 January 1919, Borden to Churchill, 16 May 1919, NAC, MG 26 H, reel 4334,56712-13,56715, 56986-7.

<sup>71</sup> Copy in HQ 71-26-128 pt 1, NAC, RG 24, vol. 6360.

<sup>72</sup> Sarty, "Silent Sentry," 368-75.

<sup>73</sup> Chief of the general staff to secretary of the Militia Council, 30 April 1920, HQS 66 pt 11, NAC, RG 24, vol. 2324; Senate, *Debates*, 5 May 1920, 356.

adequate than in the Maritime provinces.<sup>74</sup>

The commercial boom that Creighton and Jackson had anticipated would make redevelopment of the fortress facilities imperative and - through sales of old garrison properties at soaring prices - fund it, never took place. The post-war slump from which the Maritimes never fully recovered, dashed the high hopes created by the construction of the first phase of the Ocean Terminals and the wartime demand for port services.<sup>75</sup> It was a striking proof of Creighton and Jackson's insistence that Halifax's first importance was as an Imperial fortress.

Only one significant part of the scheme for new facilities was ultimately carried out. The manner in which this happened, however, underlined the extent to which the fortress had slipped back to near invisibility among federal priorities. One of the most urgent needs Creighton had identified in 1915 was to remove the central military magazines from the vicinity of Wellington Barracks at the north end of the city; the navy's main magazine was nearby in the dockyard. The senior ordnance officer warned Creighton that the explosives stores were now too close to built up areas, and, in the case of the military facility, the main intercolonial Railway line whose locomotives spewed burning embers into the property. The ordnance officer was especially worried about the proximity of the magazines to the navy dockyard and the graving dock which would be likely aiming points in an enemy bombardment. Creighton strongly endorsed the Halifax staff's recommendation that explosives handling facilities should be concentrated at a more remote and secure site, perhaps on the shores of Bedford Basin.<sup>76</sup> The "bombardment" came not from the enemy, but the detonation of *Mont Blanc* nearby, and it was only freak luck and heroic fire-fighting by still-dazed military personnel that prevented the heavily damaged magazines from adding to the inferno.

Major-General Jackson repeated the recommendation for a central magazine on Bedford Basin. He was probably aware that the need to modernize explosives handling facilities had become more pressing than at the time of Creighton's report, quite aside from what had happened in December 1917. As additional ammunition of all kinds had poured into Halifax during the war to support the increasing numbers of warships visiting there, the military had had to take the desperate expedient of converting unused artillery casemates at two of the oldest forts, Charlotte on Georges Island and Clarence on the Dartmouth shore, into makeshift magazines. Although these were partially subterranean, heavily built stone

<sup>74</sup> A. K. Maclean, MP for Halifax later made a spirited attempt to press Militia and Defence to get on with the reorganization of the properties; see his correspondence, 28 February-15 May 1923 in HQ 71-26-99 pt 3, NAC, RG 24, vol. 6359. Mewburn, now on the opposition benches, also raised the question at length: House of Commons, *Debates*, 9 May 1922, 1580-1.

<sup>75</sup> Ernest R. Forbes, *The Maritime Rights Movement, 1919-1927: A Study in Canadian Regionalism* (Kingston and Montreal 1979), chapter 4; David Frank, "The 1920s: Class and Region, Assistance and Accommodation," in *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, eds. (Toronto 1993), 233-6.

<sup>76</sup> *Report of the Halifax Military Lands Board*, 70-1.

structures, they were ill-suited for storing of large quantities of ammunition on anything other than a short-term emergency basis. In 1920-1921 the militia and the navy made a joint proposal to carry out the Bedford Basin scheme, but the project was dropped for want of funding. Then in 1923, paradoxically just when officers came down from Ottawa to study the shortcomings of the magazines, a pile of artillery shells that had been brought outside at Fort Clarence for emptying and disposal detonated. A civilian employee died, and hot shell fragments showered the works of the new Imperoyal oil refinery nearby, without, fortunately, causing a secondary explosion. Investigation determined that the accident had been caused by unsafe procedures that had been necessary because of the lack of proper facilities. In 1924 work on the Bedford joint services magazine got underway, and in 1927-8 the munitions from Charlotte and Clarence were moved into the new facility.<sup>77</sup>

Other than this project, the fortress continued as a mouldering shadow of the old Imperial establishment. With the depression of the early 1930s, several of the forts were emptied of ammunition and mothballed to allow further trimming of the garrison. Later in the decade many of the secondary guns were removed to arm new forts on the west coast. Only with the outbreak of war in 1939, when against all predictions a reborn German navy again menaced Britain's vital transatlantic shipping, did things change. Once again there was the chaotic and enormously costly scramble to refurbish ancient structures and build temporary facilities that Creighton and Jackson had warned against.

<sup>77</sup> This story is told in NSC 1038-1-4, NAC, RG 24, vol. 3954; HQ 71-26-100 pt 1, NAC, RG 24, vol. 6359; Brodeur to Director of the Naval Service, 1 September 1922, 6 December 1923, 5 February 1924, V. G. Brodeur papers, folder 2, DHH 79/19; Department of National Defence, *Report for year ending 31 March 1928*, 14; —, *Report for year ending 31 March 1929*, 23.