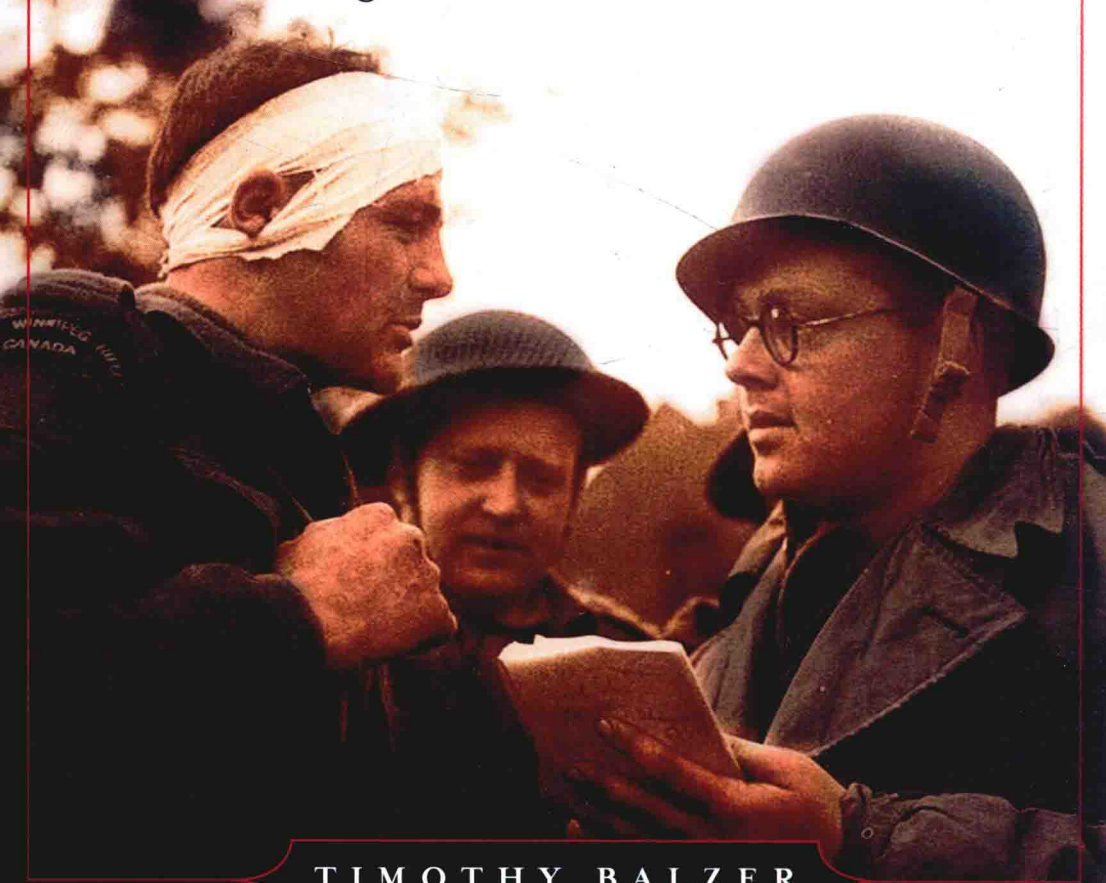


THE INFORMATION FRONT

The Canadian Army and News Management
during the Second World War



TIMOTHY BALZER

**The Information Front:
The Canadian Army and News Management
during the Second World War**

Timothy Balzer



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The Information Front

STUDIES IN CANADIAN MILITARY HISTORY

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Abbreviations

AFHQ	Allied Force Headquarters
ADPR	assistant director of public relations
AP	Associated Press
BPI	Bureau of Public Information
BUP	British United Press
CCF	Co-operative Commonwealth Federation
CCO	chief of combined operations
CMHQ	Canadian Military Headquarters
CP	Canadian Press
CNR	Canadian National Railways
COHQ	Combined Operations Headquarters
CWRO	Canadian War Records Office
DADPR	deputy assistant director of public relations
DDPR	deputy director of public relations
DND	Department of National Defence
DPR	director of public relations
FANTOX	15 Army Group Headquarters
GPO	General Post Office
MoI	Ministry of Information
NDHQ	National Defence Headquarters
NRMA	National Resources Mobilization Act
PR	public relations
PRO	public relations officer
RAF	Royal Air Force
RCAF	Royal Canadian Air Force
RCN	Royal Canadian Navy

RN	Royal Navy
SHAEF	Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force
UP	United Press
WIB	Wartime Information Board

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Introduction

*Compared with all previous wars, the Second was uniquely the
Publicity War.*

— PAUL FUSSELL, *WARTIME*¹

WAR HAS ALWAYS been news. According to tradition, the ancient Greek runner Pheidippides ran the thirty-five kilometres to Athens from the scene of the victory over the Persian force at Marathon in 490 BC to proclaim the news, whereupon he collapsed and died. Before the advent of mass circulation newspapers, town criers announced notices of important battles to the populace. Military leaders such as Napoleon courted publicity by using proclamations and bulletins to trumpet their victories to press and public, emphasizing the role of their leadership. Unfortunately, his victory bulletins also purportedly led to the phrase “to lie like a bulletin” because of their unreliability and obvious propaganda purposes. The dispatch of the *Times* war correspondent Howard Russell, who reported on the Crimean War, marked a new development: war news from the front written by a journalist rather than by military officers. The advent of the war correspondent meant a rival source of war news that could contradict and challenge official accounts of operations. Russell’s portrayals of the horrors of war and the suffering of the troops along with his accusations of bungling, particularly by the British commander Lord Raglan, raised anger in both the public and the military, although for very different reasons.

In the First World War, these two sources of war news came to greater prominence. The military and governments realized that information had become a potent weapon in the context of total war. Official propaganda sought to rally public support for the war effort by declaring the wickedness of the enemy and the justice of the cause. At first, British commanders regarded correspondents as little better than the enemy: at one point early in the war, the British minister of war, Lord Kitchener, ordered the arrest and deportation from France of a number of war correspondents. Grudgingly, the military recognized the value of news reports and allowed a limited number of correspondents to go near the front, albeit tightly controlled by escorting officers and severe censorship.²

During the Second World War, the volume of war news and publicity greatly exceeded that of the First World War. Much of the operational news came not only from the traditional source – communiqués written by staff officers – but also from reports sent by a greater number of war correspondents. While the restrictions on these correspondents were generally liberal compared with what they were in the First World War, the military enacted a number of steps to ensure that their stories did not involve sensitive or embarrassing information. The armies' military field press censors vetted reporters' copy before transmission, while press conferences at headquarters kept correspondents informed of the "big picture" of operations and implanted the military's interpretation into their stories. Public relations officers (PROs) liaised with the press, conducted reporters in the field, and sought both to control and to assist them. Military public relations (PR) organizations exploded in size and numbers during the war. As well, the major western Allies relied on civilian propaganda agencies for stories to motivate the populace. These agencies included the American Office of War Information (OWI), the British Ministry of Information (MOI), and the Canadian Bureau of Public Information (BPI), later renamed the Wartime Information Board (WIB).³

The Canadian Army began the Second World War with no PR organization at all, which is not surprising considering its shoe-string budget during the interwar period. Yet, by the end of the war, Canadian Army PR was a substantial organization employing hundreds of personnel, with First Canadian Army in Europe, Canadian Military Headquarters (CMHQ) in London, National Defence Headquarters (Army) (NDHQ) in Ottawa, and small PR establishments at each of the thirteen military district headquarters throughout Canada. The vast majority of the PROs had been reporters before the war or had worked in the advertising industry. These journalists in uniform oversaw a bewildering variety of tasks: press liaison, press censorship, psychological warfare, film and photographic coverage, accrediting correspondents, ensuring the transmission of news stories to Canada, promoting the image of the Canadian Army, and interacting with the Allied PR authorities.

The Second World War Canadian Army has been the subject of much historical investigation, but army PR has received relatively little attention. The books that have explored related aspects of it vary in quality and accuracy, and none provides a detailed examination of the Canadian Army's PR and its interaction with war news. Most memoirs and academic studies that explain PR do so only in the course of examining other subjects.⁴ In contrast to the PR services, scholars have given some attention to the press coverage of Canadian Army operations, particularly in dealing with problems such as the disastrous Dieppe raid and

the botched announcement of Canadian participation in the Sicily landings.⁵ Press coverage of incidents in Northwest Europe receives less attention, apart from studies about war crimes against Canadian troops.⁶ On occasion, the official histories deal with press reports of routine operations such as Operation Goldflake, the move of I Canadian Corps from Italy to Holland in 1945.⁷ Apart from Dieppe, few of these studies delve very deeply into the coverage of Canadian Army news and its political ramifications, perhaps because bad news attracts more controversy (and thus study) than good news.

While literature on army PR is sparse, rather more is written about Canadian war correspondents. During or shortly after the war, numerous Canadian journalists published memoirs, and a few wrote later reflections on their experiences.⁸ Only three histories and one biography of Canadian war correspondents have appeared. Of these, the most recent and scholarly is Aimé-Jules Bizimana's study of French Canadian war correspondents. It is the only study to make significant use of the voluminous Canadian Army archival materials on the subject.⁹

Both Canadian and international studies of war correspondents typically offer two opposing evaluations of the quality of Second World War journalism and the severity of military control and censorship. In 1957, American historian Joseph Matthews argued that Second World War news was a prisoner of the military publicity machine, which enforced censorship and controlled correspondents' accreditation. He warns of "the overwhelming determination to force the news to render service in the common good" as the biggest threat to reporting a "modern war," yet he praises news coverage of the Second World War, saying that it gives an accurate overview of events and avoids the more blatant propaganda of the First World War. Journalist Phillip Knightley's 1975 Pulitzer Prize-winning study disputes Matthews' positive evaluation, contending that the correspondents became a virtual component of the military: in a total war against a clearly evil enemy, the "patriotic war correspondents got onside." He approvingly quotes columnist Fletcher Pratt, who said that censorship "pretty well succeeded in putting over the legend that the war was won without a single mistake by a command ... of geniuses." Knightley's final word on the quality of Second World War news is a quotation from Canadian correspondent Charles Lynch: "It wasn't good journalism, it wasn't journalism at all."¹⁰

The literature on Canadian war correspondents also reflects this controversy. Studies of censorship by Claude Beauregard and Gillis Purcell, as well as Stursberg's and Bizimana's reflections on war correspondents, resemble Knightley's views on censorship and correspondent patriotism.¹¹ In contrast, Canadian literature professor Eric Thompson's article on war correspondents quotes journalist Ross Munro as saying that he "never felt [he] was a PR agent for the

government” and that other correspondents were “wrong” when they made such claims. Thompson highlights the correspondents’ professionalism in seeking “to keep Canadians informed of the truth they witnessed and believed.” In his memoirs, former PRO Richard S. Malone argues that war correspondents had considerable freedom after D-Day, when policy censorship was invoked only twice. He says that censors passed criticism even when “untutored,” although they sometimes took steps to make sure the “correspondent got the correct facts.” Furthermore, “the army neither suggested nor fed direct lies to the press.” On the few occasions when correspondents had reason to complain, Malone took up their cause with higher authorities. War correspondent Gerald Clark respected censorship and believed that most Second World War correspondents “accepted it as logical and necessary – not as an attempt to stifle opinion which we could express even during the war.”¹² Clearly, opinions over the severity of military press censorship and the independence of Canadian war correspondents are divided.

Despite the memoirs and the existence of popular histories that suggest there is a market for such books, there has been little academic study of Canadian Army PR and war news during the Second World War that takes full advantage of the rich documentary sources. The often-sweeping comments in the memoirs of correspondents and PROs need to be checked against archival records to provide a more complete context for discerning the extent of military control over the news media. The whole question of how much PR independence Canada could exercise under the control of its more powerful allies also remains largely unexplored. Both Beauregard and Bizimana correctly place Canadian PR under the command of Eisenhower’s Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF), but did this leave room for Canadian concerns? Malone indicates clashes with Allied authorities over Canadian PR priorities, but were these conflicts typical? How great a control did the military actually exercise over the war correspondents? Which version of the role of the patriotic press and military censorship debate is more accurate? These various underexplored and controversial aspects of army PR demonstrate a need for a dedicated study of the Canadian Army and war news during the Second World War.

The Information Front seeks to answer these questions by focusing on how the Canadian Army attempted to influence, shape, and control war news during the Second World War. Since the army PR organizations were created to accomplish these tasks, in large part I concentrate on their organization, development, policies, and activities. During the war, Canadian Army PR grew both in size and in effectiveness, from individual officers who performed their duties virtually single handed to an efficient publicity machine, part of the larger Allied