

# Second World War

During the Second World War, American culture was shared with Newfoundland and Labrador through radio and recreation events. How is culture shared between countries today?

Many Newfoundlanders and Labradorians serve in the armed forces today. What are the main roles carried out by the armed forces?



5.73 *The Daily News*, Sept. 4, 1939

## Introduction

Britain's declaration of war against Germany on September 3, 1939 automatically drew Newfoundland and Labrador into the hostilities. Although many Newfoundlanders and Labradorians were eager to enlist for military service, Newfoundland did not have its own armed forces in 1939. Both the Royal Newfoundland Regiment and the Royal Naval Reserve had disbanded by the early 1920s, and the colony's struggling economy had prevented it from establishing another military force. Unable to bear the enormous expense of raising and equipping an overseas force, the Commission of Government encouraged volunteers from Newfoundland and from Labrador to join British, Canadian, and other Allied Armed Forces.

## Contributions

During the course of the war, approximately 22 000 Newfoundlanders and Labradorians served overseas. Thousands more offered, but failed to meet eligibility requirements. This was a significant contribution from a small British colony with a population of only 300 000. These volunteers from Newfoundland and Labrador served on land, at sea, and in the air. They fought in Britain, Germany, Italy, France, Belgium, North Africa, and other parts of the world. The Royal Navy attracted more volunteers than any other single branch of the armed forces, but significant numbers also joined Britain's Royal Artillery and Royal Air Force. Many joined other allied forces – especially the Canadian units, which recruited 1160 men from Newfoundland and Labrador.

5.74 John Parsons, Royal Navy, c. 1940s

During the Second World War, many Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, such as John Parsons of Greenspond, enlisted in the Royal Navy. Based on their performance, Winston Churchill called Newfoundlanders "the hardest and most skillful boatmen in rough seas who exist."







#### 5.75 RCAF-WD recruits in St. John's, Sept. 24, 1942

More than 500 Newfoundland and Labrador women joined the Canadian Armed Forces, serving in the Royal Canadian Air Force's Women's Division (RCAF-WD), the Canadian Women's Auxiliary Air Force, the Canadian Women's Army Corps, and the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service. Women who enlisted helped to close the gap in gender inequality, but also faced considerable discrimination. They earned lower wages than their male counterparts, could not receive allowances for dependent husbands, and had to work in non-combatant roles away from the front lines.

Other Newfoundlanders and Labradorians contributed to the war effort in non-combat roles. About 10 000 residents, for example, served in the Merchant Marine, crewing vessels carrying food, equipment, and personnel across the North Atlantic to Britain and other allies. It was dangerous work – German **U-boats** sank an average of 33 Allied merchant vessels each week during the peak of hostilities. The Newfoundland Overseas Forestry Unit (NOFU) also sent about 3600 loggers to the United Kingdom. These men helped to satisfy Britain's wartime demand for timber products.

Back in Newfoundland and Labrador, some residents joined the home defence force created by the Commission of Government. Originally known as the Newfoundland Militia, it became the Newfoundland Regiment in 1943. Others contributed to the war effort through charitable organizations such as the Women's Patriotic Association (WPA), the Newfoundland Patriotic Association (NPA), and the Red Cross. Individuals also sent clothes, food, and other material comforts to soldiers serving overseas. Still others provided medical care to injured troops, visited bereaved family members, or raised money to support the war effort in general.



#### 5.76 Newfoundland and Labrador enlistees, c. 1940

Joseph Kearney (left) and John Pike, two soldiers from Newfoundland and Labrador who joined the Royal Artillery during the Second World War.



5.77 An ad for war bonds from *The Daily News*, June 22, 1940





5.78 Newfoundland and Labrador as a “stepping stone to North America”

## Foreign Military Bases in Newfoundland and Labrador

During the Second World War Canadian and American armed forces built and staffed military bases throughout the colony. This was important because of Newfoundland and Labrador’s strategic location. Known as a “stepping stone to North America,” the island was closer to Europe than any other part of North America. An occupation by German forces would give easy access to both Canada and the United States; thus its security was critical to the defence of North America. Yet the colony did not have any military bases to repel an enemy attack at the start of hostilities, nor could it afford to build any.

Canada decided in September 1939 to take over the defence of Newfoundland and Labrador. It spent approximately \$65 million in the coming years to establish air bases at Torbay and Goose Bay, expand existing airports at Gander and Botwood, build a naval base at St. John’s, and open a ship repair facility at nearby Bay Bulls. It sent tens of thousands of troops to Newfoundland and Labrador – from 1943 to 1945, for example, as many as 16 000 Canadian servicemen and women were stationed in the colony at any one time.

**“... the integrity of Newfoundland and Labrador is essential to the security of Canada.”**

– Prime Minister Mackenzie King, Sept. 8, 1939





**5.79 A heavy bomber hangar under construction, Goose Bay, 1953**

The construction and ongoing maintenance of the base at Goose Bay provided many with a source of cash employment.

All bases played important roles during the war. Fighter squadrons and bombers based at Torbay and Botwood patrolled the North Atlantic searching for U-boats. Goose Bay and Gander became vital refuelling stations for aircraft leaving America for Britain, and also aided in coastal defence. The Canadian naval base at St. John's was home to military escort vessels that protected convoy lanes.



**5.80 Second World War vessels J334 and J317 in St. John's Harbour, c. 1942**



**5.81 Airman and infantrymen at RCAF Station, Gander, 1943**

In the background is a Hawker Hurricane XII aircraft.

## MILITARIZING THE WILDERNESS

Of all the foreign bases built in Newfoundland and Labrador, the Goose Bay airfield probably had the largest impact on the people and environment around it. Unpopulated wilderness at the start of the war, Goose Bay became the largest airfield in the Western Hemisphere in 1943 – able to accommodate 3000 civilian workers and 5000 military personnel.

The construction of the base attracted hundreds of Labradorians who were looking for work. Although a source of much-needed employment, the base also eroded local lifestyles. For many, year-round salaried work replaced traditional season-based activities, such as trapping in the winter and fishing in the summer. In addition, as Labradorians came into contact with Canadian and American servicemen, they were exposed to North American culture. In some cases, this influenced such things as residents' recreational choices and diet. Many children, for example, began to ask for canned spaghetti, macaroni and cheese, and other North American processed foods instead of game meat and other traditional foods.



**5.82 American music, food, and other goods** became more common here with the establishment of the American military bases.





**5.83 United States Army installation atop Signal Hill, St. John's, c. 1941-1945**

The American encampment on Signal Hill consisted of heavy cannons to repel naval assaults and large guns for use against enemy aircraft.

**5.84 American base Fort Pepperrell, St. John's, c. 1942-1945**



The United States also built military bases and stationed troops in the colony. It signed a Leased Bases Agreement with Britain on March 27, 1941, giving it permission to build bases in eight British colonies, including Newfoundland and Labrador. Under the agreement, America leased these areas for a period of 99 years. In return, the United States gave Britain 50 of its naval destroyers. During the next four years, the United States spent more than \$100 million to build an army base at St. John's (known as Fort Pepperrell), an air base at Stephenville (known as Harmon Field), a naval air station at Argentia, and an army base in the neighbouring village of Marquise (known as

Fort McAndrew). It also built a series of radar sites, radio transmitters, repeater stations, and other small installations across the country. By the end of the war, more than 100 000 American troops had served in Newfoundland and Labrador.

The establishment of foreign military bases and influx of tens of thousands of North American troops triggered a series of rapid economic, social, and political changes in Newfoundland and Labrador. Some were positive; some were negative. Many would have far-reaching implications for Newfoundland and Labrador.



## Economic Impacts

The war brought a sudden injection of economic prosperity to the colony. The combined spending of \$165 million by Canada and the United States to build military bases sparked a construction boom that employed thousands of local residents in both Newfoundland and Labrador. By the end of 1942, approximately 20 000 men and women were working at the bases. More than 7000 others were earning salaries as military enlistees. In a colony where the credit (or truck) system had operated for centuries, the war allowed many people to earn cash wages for the first time in their lives. The poverty so widespread before the war was greatly reduced.

Local businesses and industries prospered greatly from the war. Building suppliers, construction companies, and a host of tradesmen and labourers were involved in constructing bases, roads and railways, and port facilities. American and Canadian troops spent heavily at local restaurants and stores. Dairy farmers also experienced increased demand for milk and other products. The colony's lumber companies sold significant volumes of timber to base contractors, and wartime demand for fish drove up the price of cod on the international market.

Wartime prosperity caused government revenue to increase dramatically. After reporting a series of deficits

in the 1930s – including two \$4-million deficits in the 1938-39 and 1939-40 fiscal years – the country enjoyed a series of surpluses totaling a combined \$28 million by the end of the 1945-1946 fiscal year. With so much money in the public purse, the Commission of Government increased spending on education, health care, transportation, housing, and other social services.

Not all changes, however, were positive. Mining and pulp and paper companies experienced temporary labour shortages as workers left to accept higher paying jobs at the bases. To help remedy this, the Commission of Government asked the Americans and Canadians to keep pay rates low for Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. Government officials also feared that if local workers earned extremely high wages during the war, they would expect the same wages when the war was over – which local industries would likely not be able to afford.

Wartime also drove up the cost of many foodstuffs and goods, increasing the cost of living in Newfoundland and Labrador by about 58 per cent. The price of a dozen eggs, for example, almost tripled from 50 cents to \$1.37. Although high employment rates and increased wages tended to offset difficulties caused by inflation, residents on fixed incomes, such as the wives of recruits serving overseas, found it difficult to afford the rising cost of living.

### 5.85 Construction workers, c. 1941

Workers help construct a dock at the American air naval base in Argentia. About 4000 labourers from Newfoundland and Labrador were employed on the base at any one time during construction.







5.87

## Excerpts from *Paradise Cafe*

*Paradise Cafe* was written by a group of students from Robert Leckie Intermediate School in Happy Valley-Goose Bay in 1990. It is based on the changes that occurred

in the community over time with the construction of the Goose Bay Air Base in the 1940s, the pullout of the American operations in the 1970s, and beyond.

**Gladys:** Jim, if we don't build on promises and hopes then what can we ever build on?

*(The Paradise Cafe sign shines on the drawn stage curtains. The Real Estate Man enters with a free-standing tripod, a "For sale" sign and hammer and nails. He sets the tripod down and begins to nail the sign up. Gladys enters to watch.)*

**Gladys:** This place has such memories. It's a shame we have to part with it. I was here the day it opened ... I can't believe I'm here now, selling it ... if it could talk, what stories it would tell...

**Gladys:** Yeah, Clarice married a serviceman too, but she went back to the States with hers. Me and Jim, we stayed here. He likes it here. I went on working at the cafe for the first few years, while Jim was still in the Air Force. Then when he got out, we collected our pennies and put them together for a small down payment on the little place. It was hard work to make a go of it...

**Gladys:** But the 70's now, they brought a different kind of problem... At first, times seemed promising enough. The military weren't building so much anymore, but they were employing a lot of people. And there was a feeling of growth ... Little Happy Valley was not just a construction camp built up around the base. It was beginning to be a real little community, in its own right. It has schools, churches, and its own hospital, a small library...

Those were the Linerboard Days. Oh, yes, Joey had big plans for us.

*(Lights come up on the cafe. Gladys is seated at a table, sketching renovations. Jim carries in a step ladder and begins to work.)*



**Jim:** Before you get too carried away with your renovations now, what're you gonna do if the military really do pull out, like some people say they will? And what if the government doesn't come through with the bucks for the Linerboard operation? What're you gonna do if you got the window out and one wall torn up and the Labrador winter whistlin' through? Maybe you shouldn't build on promises and hopes...

**Gladys:** Jim, if we don't build on promises and hopes, then what are we ever going to build on?

*(Jim gets up from the table. He climbs his ladder at the back of the stage and begins to nail a board as if to make a new window frame. He is interrupted by an audio announcement.)*

**Jim:** *(voice over, on tape)* The American Air Force announced today that it will be pulling out of its Goose Bay operations in June of this year. The news is no surprise, as it had been rumoured for some time ... *(Volume fades in and out)* Premier Frank Moores announced today that the Labrador Linerboard will close down its operation on ...

*(As the Audio announcement fades, Jim nails a board diagonally across the window he was fixing ...)*



5.88 Workmen at Goose Bay

## Experiencing The Arts

Now you are ready to write your scene. Remember to include any necessary stage directions for your "performers", as well as suggestions for props, backdrops, etc.



\*Bell Island is one of the few locations in North America that German forces directly attacked during the Second World War.



5.89 Knights of Columbus Hostel  
fire, St. John's, Dec. 12, 1942

5.90 Interior view of the  
Knights of Columbus Hostel,  
St. John's, c. 1940-42

Until it was destroyed by fire in 1942,  
the Knights of Columbus Hostel in  
St. John's was a popular recreation  
facility for service personnel during  
the Second World War.



5.91 Enlistment  
and deaths of  
Newfoundlanders and  
Labradorians in the  
Second World War

Branches	Number Enlisted	Fatalities
Merchant Marine	5000	266
Newfoundland Overseas Forestry Unit	3596	34
British Royal Navy	3419	352
British Army	2343	83
Canadian Forces	1684	120
Royal Newfoundland Regiment	1668	30
British Royal Air Force	713	139
Other Forces (e.g., American Army)	unknown	4

## Social Impacts

Newfoundland and Labrador society experienced both direct and indirect consequences of the Second World War. Many families were directly impacted by the loss of family members who died while fighting overseas. Over 1000 Newfoundlanders and Labradorians lost their lives as enlisted personnel during the Second World War. Others were killed on home soil by direct acts of war. These include those who were among the 136 lost when a German U-boat sank the SS *Caribou*, the Sydney to Port aux Basques passenger ferry, on October 14, 1942 and the more than 60 men who were killed when German U-boats attacked Bell Island twice in 1942, sinking four ore carriers.

The Second World War had a major cultural impact on Newfoundland and Labrador society. Local residents came into contact with thousands of Canadian and American troops and were thus more directly exposed to North American entertainment and consumer goods. American radio played on local airwaves, styles of dress changed, and standards of living generally improved. Civilians and military personnel mixed at dances, sporting events,\* movie

nights, and other social events. Relationships with local residents were generally good. A considerable number of American servicemen married Newfoundland women. These interactions and exchanges helped integrate the local society into the larger North American culture.

Foreign military bases also were the means by which the colony gained a significant amount of social capital. Both the Canadians and Americans invested millions of dollars in state-of-the-art hospitals, airports, roads, telecommunications systems, sewage systems, living quarters, and other infrastructure. When the bases closed, the local community inherited much of this at virtually no economic cost. Canada, for example, sold its 100-bed hospital at Botwood to the Commission of Government for just \$1 in 1946. The building served as a cottage hospital until it closed in 1989. Many other facilities built during the Second World War are still in use today, including airports at Stephenville, Gander, Torbay (today the St. John's International Airport), and Goose Bay.

\*Local civilians and visiting troops competed against each other in hockey games, baseball games, boxing matches, and at the annual St. John's Regatta.



## 5.92 Airports established, used, or refurbished during the Second World War







**5.93 Posted to Newfie, Paul Goranson (1942)**

Military personnel were a common sight in Newfoundland and Labrador during the Second World War as depicted in this painting by Paul Goranson, a commissioned war artist for the Royal Canadian Air Force.



**5.94 An unidentified soldier of the United States Army**  
posing with a 40 mm Bofors  
Anti-Aircraft gun, Hill O' Chips,  
St. John's, c. 1941-45

Some frictions did emerge between residents and visiting military personnel. The Newfoundland government expropriated private properties needed by the forces. Government officials compensated all dislocated property owners with money, but many felt their payments did not cover the emotional and economic costs of moving. The daily presence of foreign military personnel also created some problems for residents and civil authorities. Some communities were overwhelmed with the vast numbers of enlisted men who were sometimes unruly and disorderly. However, military authorities challenged the rights of local authorities to arrest and prosecute enlisted men under civilian law. An increase in sexually transmitted

diseases, drunkenness, brawling in public places, motor vehicle accidents, and the poaching of fish and wildlife represent some negative influences.

Nonetheless, the war period was generally a time of prosperity in Newfoundland and Labrador. Exposure to a more affluent and materialistic North American culture began to change expectations and values. Employment rates were high and many families became accustomed to a quality of living they could not afford just a few years earlier. Wartime prosperity produced social and economic changes which soon led to the demand for political change.



### 5.95 German submarine

This submarine is possibly the German U-boat (U-190) that was surrendered to Canadian corvettes off Cape Race, Newfoundland on May 11, 1945. It was escorted into Bay Bulls and later sailed into St. John's Harbour with the White Ensign of the Royal Navy flying.



## Political Impacts

By 1945, Newfoundland was financially self-supporting. Employment was much higher than before the war, the government was reporting successive surpluses, and even made a series of interest-free loans to Great Britain. Many people believed the tremendous economic hardships of the pre-war years, which had culminated in the loss of responsible government, were past. As the colony's 1933 arrangement with Britain was that the Commission of Government would last until Newfoundland was once again self-supporting, a debate soon emerged over which form of government Newfoundland should adopt.

Many people supported a return to responsible government, but others feared this would again lead to economic ruin. They argued the colony's current prosperity would not last and believed that a union with Canada – and its stable economy – was a more sensible choice. The war had done much to strengthen Newfoundland's ties with Canada. After the war began,

for example, growing numbers of workers regularly left the country for seasonal or temporary jobs in Canada. Trade between the country and Canada was also increasing. Immediately before the war, Newfoundland imported 37 per cent of its goods from Canada. This had jumped to 61 per cent by 1945.

Moreover, Canadian officials grew increasingly receptive to confederation during the war, as it became apparent that Newfoundland and Labrador was of significant economic and strategic value to Canada. Some Canadian officials even feared the country would join the United States and become “another Alaska” on its east coast. By helping to integrate Newfoundland and Labrador into North American society and economy, the Second World War also helped to bring about one of the most profound and far-reaching political changes in the colony's history – union with Canada.

## Questions:

1. How did exposure to North American culture during the war impact Newfoundland and Labrador lifestyles?
2. What armed forces and other organizations did volunteers from Newfoundland and Labrador join during the Second World War? Why might so many men have joined the Royal Navy and the Merchant Navy, and other mercantile marines?
3. The forerunner of what is now St. John's International Airport was built by the Canadian military during the Second World War. What other buildings built during the war are still in use today? How have their purposes changed since the war?
4. Why did American and Canadian military forces decide to build military bases in Newfoundland and Labrador during the Second World War?
5. How did the Second World War change the economy of Newfoundland and Labrador? How did it change Newfoundland and Labrador politics?