

Ontario's Soldiers' Aid Commission:

100 Years of Assistance
to Veterans in Need

1915-2015

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The Commissioners

Inaugural Commissioners, 1915

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Ernest G. Anderson
William Banks
W. L. Best
Robert J. Christie
The Honourable George Gordon, Senator
John B. Laidlaw
Kenneth W. McKay
William F. Nickle, KC
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Centenary Commissioners, 2015

The late James W. Smith, Chair
Colin R. Rowe, Chair
Homer R. Brooks
Alfred H. L. Harris
John A. Stapleton
W. Earle Thomas

*This history is dedicated to the memory of the
Commissioners we have lost since the beginning of the
new millennium, all of whom advocated strongly for
the commemoration of the SAC's 100th anniversary:*

Tibor L. J. Divinec, Chair
William C. Seyers, Chair
James W. Smith, Chair
Dr. Clifford J. Williams
Gordon T. Ormiston
Herman E. Young

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THE LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR OF ONTARIO
LA LIEUTENAUTE-GOUVERNEURE DE L'ONTARIO

November 2015

Ontario society has changed enormously over the past 100 years. We have gone from a largely agrarian culture to a predominately urban-based population, where the knowledge economy and technological advancement are highly valued. Whereas once our ethnic makeup was mainly white Anglo-Saxon, our province now boasts a diverse multicultural character. Ontario has been transformed into a true reflection of the world in the best sense. We are a welcoming place where peoples live in peace.

This is why we should never take for granted the foundation on which we have built our province. The service and sacrifices of our military men and women have contributed enormously to the relative stability and freedom we enjoy today. The Soldiers' Aid Commission of Ontario was born out of a need to assist and integrate Veterans returning from First World War battlefields into civilian life. Over the decades its work paralleled the efforts of governments in creating societal policies and programs. Today and under the auspices of the Ministry of Community and Social Services, it continues to serve World War and Korean Veterans and their families.

In 2015, there are other Veteran assistance programs and newer non-profit organizations that tend to the needs of soldiers. Our interconnected world and our ability to instantly communicate have made it possible for concerned groups to support and fundraise on their behalf. However, nothing can replace the historical and social importance of the Soldiers' Aid Commission. Our country and province owe a debt of gratitude to the selfless citizens and volunteers that have committed themselves to the health and welfare of those who fought for us during Canada's formative years. The history on the following pages documents well the struggles and accomplishments of this remarkable, benevolent society.

As the 29th Lieutenant Governor of Ontario and as Her Majesty The Queen's representative in our province, I extend my warm congratulations and admiration to the Soldiers' Aid Commission of Ontario on this milestone anniversary.

Elizabeth Dowdeswell



Premier of Ontario - Première ministre de l'Ontario

November 2015

A PERSONAL MESSAGE FROM THE PREMIER

On behalf of the Government of Ontario, I am delighted to extend warm wishes to the Soldiers' Aid Commission of Ontario as it marks its 100th anniversary.

The Soldiers' Aid Commission was created under the dark shadow of the First World War — when the world was experiencing one of the highest number of casualties in recorded history. As wounded soldiers returned home to Ontario, the province established the commission to help support and re-integrate Veterans into society. It continues to assist Veterans and their families today.

Democracy is a privilege and freedom is a blessing — we cannot take these for granted. The service and sacrifices of the brave men and women who serve in the military have helped secure and preserve peace and democracy at home and abroad.

On this milestone anniversary, I commend the Soldiers' Aid Commission for its invaluable work in promoting the well-being of our Veterans and their loved ones for a century. Thank you for your dedication to helping those who put themselves in harm's way to ensure our freedom. And to our Veterans — thank you for making it possible for us to live, work and raise our families in a peaceful and prosperous Ontario.

Please accept my heartfelt gratitude and my best wishes for much continued success.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kathleen Wynne".

**Kathleen Wynne
Premier**

A Message from the Minister

This book honours the work of the men and women who have served as Commissioners, chronicling the Commission's successes and achievements over the decades and it represents a significant milestone in a rich history of dedicated service to Veterans and their families.

The Soldiers' Aid Commission was established by an Order-in-Council passed by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario on 10th November 1915.

The purpose of the Commission, when it was first established, was to help returning First World War Veterans and their families with problems they faced as they re-entered civilian life, such as finding work and housing. Throughout the past 100 years, the Commission has risen to the increasing challenges faced by returning Veterans and their families, creating new programs and supports to meet the changing needs of those who defended our country. With financial aid and support to Veterans in need, the Commission's work continues today.

Congratulations to our Soldier's Aid Commissioners who have worked tirelessly to support this project. This book is a testament to the accomplishments of the volunteer men and women who identified a need and rose to meet the challenges. I wish the Commission much success in its continued efforts to provide this invaluable service to Veterans.

Dr. Helena Jaczek,
Minister of Community and Social Services

Timeline of the Soldiers' Aid

- 1914:** Canada enters World War I.
- 1915:** The Soldiers' Aid Commission (SAC) is created by an Order-in-Council on November 10 and housed in the Parliament Buildings at Queen's Park in Toronto.
- 1915:** W.D. McPerson, K.C., Member of Provincial Parliament for Kingston, named first Soldiers' Aid Commission Chair.
- 1915:** Canada's first social policy legislation, the *Ontario Workers Compensation Act*, is proclaimed.
- 1916:** The Soldiers' Aid Commission receives Royal Assent on April 27.
- 1917:** The Commission moves from the Parliament Buildings to the residence of the former Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario at 138 Avenue Road.
- 1917:** The Great War Veteran's Association forms in Winnipeg and branches form across Canada to aid Canadian Veterans with pensions and administration.
- 1918:** Federal legislation is introduced for the Department of Soldiers' Civil Re-establishment.
- 1918:** World War I ends on Armistice Day, November 11.
- 1919:** The Paris Peace Conference begins in January, leading to the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations.
- 1920:** The Soldiers' Aid Commission receives all of the powers of a Children's Aid Society to serve as the ward for hundreds of Ontario children.
- 1925:** The Great War Veterans' Association amalgamates with a number of smaller associations to form the Canadian Legion.
- 1930:** The federal government establishes the Veterans' Bureau.
- 1930:** The Soldiers' Aid Commission becomes part of the newly created Department of Public Welfare in Ontario.
- 1930:** The Veterans' Welfare Service is created in Ontario to help unemployed ex servicemen.
- 1931:** The Ontario Canteen Fund is established under the direction of the Department of Public Welfare.

Commission & Related History

- 1934:** The Royal Canadian Air Force Benevolent Fund is established.
- 1934:** Bon Air Residence is closed permanently following Premier Hepburn's election.
- 1939:** World War II begins with Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland in September.
- 1942:** The Royal Canadian Naval Benevolent Fund is established in November.
- 1943:** The Marsh Report addresses poverty and economic insecurity and presents a plan to address postwar reconstruction across Canada.
- 1944:** The federal government creates the Department of Veterans Affairs in March.
- 1945:** World War II ends with Victory in Europe in May and Japan's unconditional surrender in September.
- 1950:** The Ontario Canteen Fund merges with the Soldiers' Aid Commission in May. In June, the Korean War begins when North Korea crosses the 38th Parallel, invading South Korea.
- 1953:** After more than three years of combat, the Korean War comes to an end.
- 1960:** The Commission's mandate and legislative authority are reinforced in the *Soldiers' Aid Commission Act R.S.O, c. 377*.
- 1970:** *The Soldiers' Aid Commission Amendment Act* revamps the Commission's mandate.
- 1975:** The Henderson Report calls for the SAC to be disbanded. Members of the Commission successfully advocate for its continuance.
- 1995:** Federal legislation integrates the Bureau of Pensions Advocates within Veterans Affairs Canada and creates a new agency, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board.
- 1997:** The Wood Task Force on Agencies, Boards, and Commissions recommends that the Soldiers' Aid Commission be retained but reviewed again in five years.
- 2006:** The Commission's mandate is extended to include Veterans who have served in Canada, not exclusively overseas.
- 2015:** The Soldiers' Aid Commission celebrates a century of service to Ontario's Veterans.

Introduction

Thirty-one words ably describe the basic, yet vital work that the Soldiers' Aid Commission of Ontario has done for the past 100 years:

"The Soldiers' Aid Commission of Ontario provides, in exceptional circumstances, emergency aid to eligible World Wars I, II and the Korean War Veterans who have exhausted all other sources of funds."

"She just held onto me and wept. And it just broke my heart because...we got a chance to play such a wonderful role in this sad situation. She was able to go and do what she had to do for a Veteran that had given service to Canada."

What this single sentence does not tell us is the story of the difference that the Commission has made in the lives of thousands of Ontarians and their families. Here is just one such story from Patricia Rollox, the Commission's Operations Assistant, about the passing in 2010 of a Winnipeg veteran. His estranged spouse lived in Toronto.

 She was in geared-to-income housing and it seems, how we don't know, the Veteran passed and I guess he didn't have any ID on him or anything. But they were able to track his wife down, here in Ontario and they needed her to come and identify the body. And she didn't have the funds to get to Winnipeg. So she contacted the Veteran Affairs counsellor at the Scarborough office on a Friday afternoon about quarter to four.

"I received a message from the counsellor and she says, 'I know it's almost the end of the day, but this is what's happening, we need to get this widow out as quickly as possible to identify the body of this Veteran.' I knew that work couldn't stop at that hour..."

“If we have an application that is urgent, we need two Commissioners to review it. They approved the funds that we needed to give and it was 8 o’clock when I returned to the office that night...The Security wouldn’t let me up because the office is closed at that time. But I needed to get the cheque to this widow... They called the Chair and he approved – he let them know that yes he knew that I was going to be coming back to the office...

“First thing Saturday morning I appeared at her door and delivered that cheque. She was just a mess. She just held onto me and wept. And it just broke my heart because...we got a chance to play such a wonderful role in this sad situation. She was able to go and do what she had to do for a Veteran that had given service to Canada.”

Relatively little has been published on the Soldiers’ Aid Commission. While the Commission serves a somewhat limited role in easing financial constraints, it has made a vital difference to thousands of Veterans and their families over the past century. It has done this work with very little public fanfare and with limited expense to Ontarians. A major theme emerging from the research that went into this history is the Commission’s efficiency and remarkable effectiveness over the past 100 years.

While this book’s focus is the history of the Commission, its takes place in the broader context of the social, political, and economic history of Canada and Ontario. Many of the ideas that have impacted Ontarians over the past 100 years were based on philosophies and practices from a much earlier time. These ideas have been shaped by both labour and capital and put into practice by all levels of governments,

by charitable organizations, and by other stakeholders. The resulting patchwork of social policies left large gaps in the support available to the province's most needy citizens – never a small minority in the past 100 years. These gaps in social policy remain a critical issue in 2015 and for the foreseeable future.

Here are the major questions that drive this book:

- ➲ What were the conditions in Ontario in the lead-up to the creation of the Soldiers' Aid Commission in 1915? Why was it established?
- ➲ What has the Commission meant to Ontario Veterans and their families throughout the past 100 years?
- ➲ How has the Commission changed its role over time? How has it interacted with other Veterans' associations?
- ➲ Where might the Commission go from here?

*Despite challenges,
the Commission has
forged ahead with its
mandate to support
Ontario Veterans
and their families in
times of hardship.
In many ways, these
needs remain as
acute as they were
100 years ago.*

In researching this history, we consulted newspapers, magazines, and government reports archived at the Commission's current offices within the Ministry of Community and Social Services, as well as the Ontario Archives, which house the bulk of the Commission's archival materials. Secondary sources included books, monographs, and journal articles focusing on Ontario's social policy, political economy, and military history over the past century. Finally and importantly, personal interviews have cast light on the Commission's vital role over the past thirty years.

The book's six chapters are arranged chronologically.

Chapter One focuses on Ontario's social policy history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the origins of the Commission in 1915. Chapter Two focuses on the First World War and its impact on Veterans and their families as soldiers returned to civilian life. Chapter Three looks at the interwar years, 1919-1938. These twenty years, which include the Great Depression, were some of the most tumultuous and challenging years in history for all Ontarians, and especially for Veterans.

Chapter Four is concerned with World War II, as Ontarians once again served in large numbers in Canada's Armed Forces. At the same time, the welfare state began to take shape as a result of intense pressure – fuelled in no small way by working-class people and war Veterans. Chapter Five deals with the post-World War II era, which included the Korean War. Despite the growth of the welfare state, the Soldiers' Aid Commission continued to fill an important role for Ontario's Veterans and their families.

Chapter Six looks at the most recent period from 1980 through 2015. Despite challenges, the Commission has forged ahead with its mandate to support Ontario Veterans and their families in times of hardship. In many ways, these needs remain as acute as they were 100 years ago.

Hard times, Prices
Lane, Toronto, 1914



Chapter One

Support for Those in Need in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries

The Soldiers' Aid Commission was created at a time when economic and working conditions were changing rapidly for Ontarians, and social policies and programs were failing to keep up.

For most of the 19th century, Ontarians were predominantly a people living directly off the land. Public assistance, when needed, was informal and community-based. Compensation for soldiers came in the form of land grants. The Crown paid off thousands of British Veterans after the War of 1812 with hundred-acre parcels. This practice ended with the second South African Boer War, fought from 1899-1902. The government of the new Dominion of Canada took no responsibility for the volunteers returning from South Africa, not even for people with disabilities.

Traditionally, Ontarians considered the sick, the aged, and people with disabilities as both a family responsibility and a legitimate concern of the entire community. Support was informal. Ontarians who needed assistance during this era received what was called “local outdoor relief,” which had its origins in England’s Elizabethan Poor Laws dating back to the early 17th century. The relief came in the form of cash, food, fuel, small household goods, and clothing that

Traditionally, Ontarians considered the sick, the aged, and people with disabilities as both a family responsibility and a legitimate concern of the entire community. Support was informal.

neighbours would bring to the recipient's home. In some cases, local municipal or township councils might formally provide such items to those in need, but largely it was friends and neighbours, as well as religious institutions.

At the time of Confederation, four out of five Ontarians still lived on farms. But in the final decades of the 19th century, there was increasing immigration and rapid population growth. Accelerating industrialization drew people away from the countryside. By 1914, half of Ontario's population lived in towns and cities. Most were wage labourers.

With rising levels of literacy, we see diaries, newspapers, and journals that document the lives of working-class people. They allow us to know how difficult conditions were for many.

The movement to the cities and the harsh conditions of early industrial capitalism put a strain on the local communal relief systems. The provincial government began to implement more institutional policies. For example, workhouses segregated the unemployed who were able to work from the rest of the community.

Impoverished children,
Toronto, 1913



Increasingly, the wealthy blamed the poor for their predicament. For example, jails were often indistinguishable from poorhouses. In 1890, the Prison Commission of Ontario was investigating the county poorhouses, industrial schools, gaols, prisons, and penitentiaries. *The Globe* reported "Mr. John White, gaoler for 20 years of the United Counties of Leed and Grenville, said it was impossible to classify the prisoners in his gaol. He favoured a poorhouse, which they [prison administrators] had not favoured. (Sheriff Smart said subsequently that the gaol was largely used for the purposes of a poorhouse.)"

The Canadian Expeditionary Force and the Canadian Patriotic Fund

When Great Britain entered the war in the summer of 1914, Canada, as a member of the British Empire, joined the fight automatically. With not much in the way of armed forces, the initial task was to gather and mobilize a huge number of volunteers to send overseas. Working-class men would form the majority of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. This had serious consequences for the families they left behind.

At this time, support for soldiers' families was not considered a public responsibility. But on August 18, 1914, just two weeks after Britain declared war on Germany, the Canadian Patriotic Fund was unveiled to huge fanfare in Ottawa. This was a private initiative spearheaded by Herbert Ames, a millionaire businessman. It was a national effort to support the dependents of the men who would serve with the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

The fund established branches across Canada. Its proceeds were used in Canada's poorest quarters, where they were needed the most. It provided allowances to soldiers' wives, arranged jobs and housing, and dispensed advice to mothers and families. The women were under intense moral scrutiny, and investigators could deem "undeserving" recipients ineligible, with no room for appeal.

The paternalistic and charitable nature of the Canadian Patriotic Fund's activities was in keeping with traditions established in Ontario in an earlier century. Nevertheless, it was an early forerunner of publicly supported social programs, such as

Soldiers Leaving
Grand Trunk Railway
Station, World War I,
Hamilton, Ont



At the beginning of the war most people believed it would be a limited military engagement both in duration and in numbers of troops. Just a few months later, Canadians began to realize that the devastating effects of this war would far outweigh anything experienced previously.

workers' compensation and mothers' allowance. These more comprehensive programs would come to Ontario as a result of a great clamour from women, Veterans, and working-class people generally.

The Military Hospitals Commission

At the beginning of the war most people believed it would be a limited military engagement both in duration and in numbers of troops. Just a few months later, Canadians began to realize that the devastating effects of this war would far outweigh anything experienced previously.

The Military Hospitals Commission (MHC), a national agency, was established in June 1915. It was headed by the Conservative leader of the Senate, Sir James Lougheed, a wealthy lawyer who was born in Brampton and practised in Calgary. The Commission's mandate was the physical rehabilitation of wounded soldiers. This was not a period when the mental health of returning soldiers was given much thought. A return to military service or civilian life and work was the primary goal. For those no longer able to serve or to take up their previous occupation, the Commission offered vocational training to restore them as self-sufficient and productive members of the community.

The prevailing notion was that productivity and hard work would return the Veterans to normal. No one foresaw the scale of what was to come, both on the battlefields and in the legions of wounded men who returned from the most devastating war in Ontario's history.

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Chapter Two

The Great War and the SAC's Beginnings, 1915-1918

The European battlefields of the First World War were the site of the highest casualty rates in recorded human history. The numbers still stagger us. Worldwide, nearly 10 million combatants died. Almost three times that number were wounded, missing in action, or prisoners of war.

Ontarians made up more than 230,000 of the 538,283 soldiers recruited in Canada. This meant that a province with 31 per cent of the population had provided 43 per cent of the troops.

43%
of Canadian
soldiers
were from
Ontario.



Beginning early in 1915, wounded men began to return home. Over the course of the war, the returning wounded would

number more than 150,000. Thousands more returned with undiagnosed mental and emotional injuries. Almost half of them returned to Ontario, a young province with virtually no social programs.

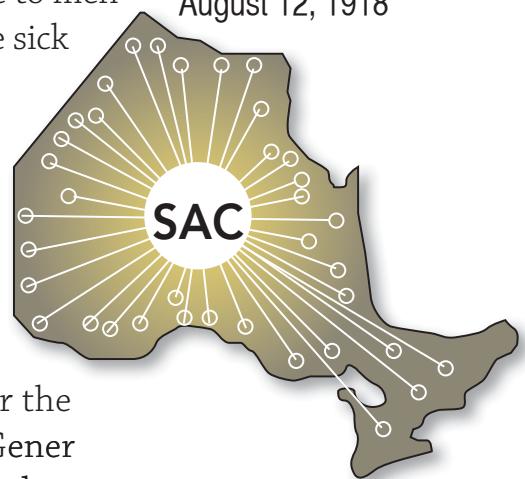
In the context of this tremendous need, the province established the Soldiers' Aid Commission through an Order-in-Council on November 10, 1915. The SAC was initially set up as a sub-committee of the Military Hospitals Commission. Its mandate was to provide emergency financial assistance to men returning from "the theatre of war," with a focus on the sick and wounded – and, in some cases, their dependents.

The Commission's first headquarters were in the Parliament Buildings in downtown Toronto. It was conceived essentially as a service bureau to address Veterans' needs that were not being met by other organizations. *The Soldiers' Aid Commission Act of 1916* established a series of local boards under the administration of the Department of the Attorney General. Their job was to review applications and disburse funds to Ontario Veterans and their families.

By mid-summer of 1916, beyond the central branch at Queen's Park, 37 Commission branches were operating in the province, with more soon to form at Kingston, Brockville, Guelph, Alexandria, and St. Catharines.

37 Commission branches were operating in the province by mid-summer 1916.

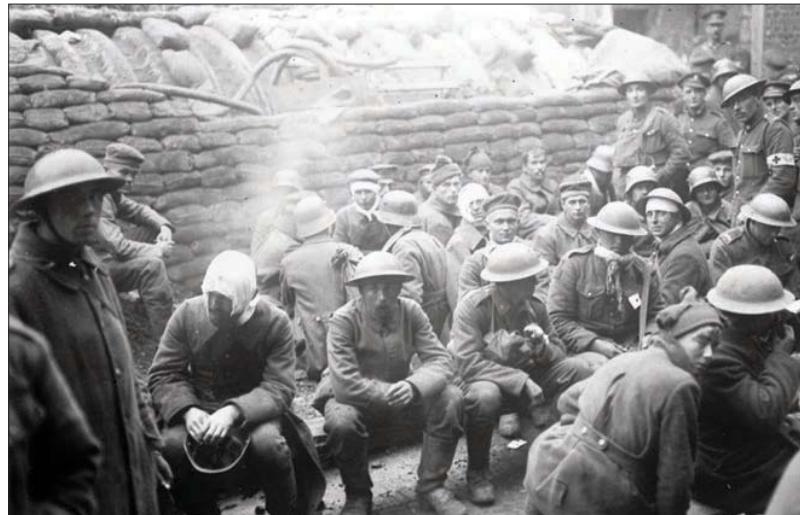
Source: *The Globe*, August 12, 1918



Wounded Canadians and Germans at a Dressing Station. Battle of Passchendaele, November, 1917.

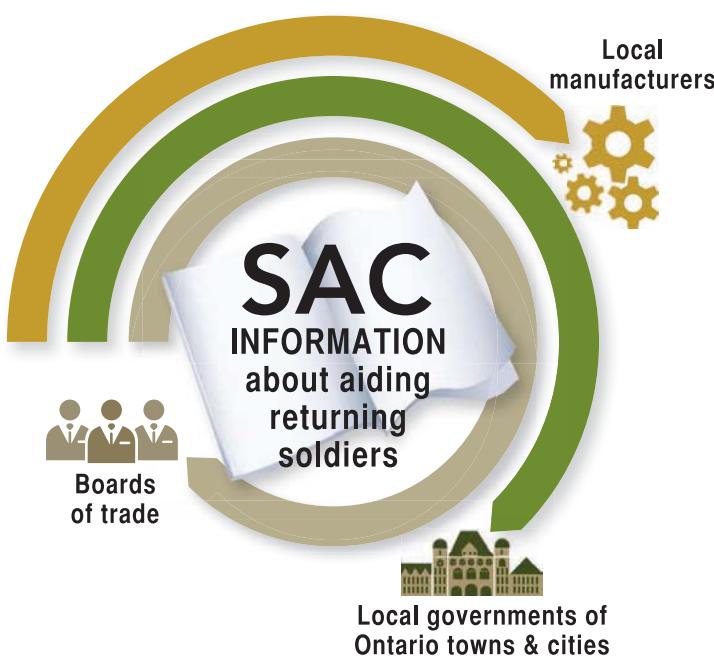
The Commission begins its work

The administrators and staff of the new Commission did not have the luxury of an 'easing-in' period.



Soldiers were returning in great need within months of the war's outbreak. In November 1915, *The Globe* reported that a number of applications had been received from returning men looking for light, yet regular work.

By early December of 1915, about 400 soldiers had returned to Ontario. The Commission opened an "outdoor branch," hiring two returned soldiers to canvas employers under the direction of a Major Curran. With so many men serving in the armed forces, companies were often struggling to find employees. But many returning soldiers were not able to do regular work, such as one mentioned in *The Globe* who had lost both his legs. There was also an instance of a Veteran who had lost an arm in combat seeking technical education to become a telegraph operator. Many soldiers needed re-education. And with no social safety net in existence, it was becoming clear that some soldiers would require assistance beyond securing employment.



The Globe reported that Mr. C.N. Cochrane, the first Secretary of the Commission, "is issuing circulars to manufacturers, Boards of Trade, municipalities, etc., pointing out the desirability of caring for the returned soldier, and asking for cooperation." These circulars emphasized the need to accommodate returning soldiers. The SAC's volunteers and staff members were certainly filled with compassion, but the real focus was on re-training and restoring these Veterans to productivity as quickly as possible.

Early debates about the mandate

Throughout the SAC's history, questions have been raised about the scope of its mandate and activities. Veterans, commissioners, bureaucrats, elected officials, and the public in general had strong opinions on what Veterans' organizations should be doing for soldiers.

For the SAC, one of the earliest public debates, reported on in *The Globe*, was whether or not to pay returning soldiers while they were seeking work. A regular soldier's pay rate in 1915 was \$1.85 per day. Some believed the Commission had a duty to assist soldiers financially as well as to help them in seeking to secure employment. Others argued that the returning soldiers' independence also had to be respected. Ultimately, the commission decided not to have a set sum and to administer help on a case-by-case basis.

The SAC also focused on directly employing, at least temporarily, returning soldiers who were unable to do "regular" work. As 1915 came to an end, the SAC proposed a "commissionnaire" system, which placed a staff of men in a central bureau. They were available as messengers to anyone who might require their services, but were paid an "adequate" salary by the SAC, with any additional revenues going to the bureau. This system remained in place until 1918.

A social enterprise employing adults with disabilities had never been attempted in Ontario before. In the late 19th and early 20th century, charities and social reformers advocated on behalf of children with disabilities, and there was a limited form of compensation for injured workers, but adults with disabilities were still

World War I, Fifth & Seventh Batteries, C.F.A. arriving in Montreal, P.Q. for demobilization, 1919.



largely marginalized. The hundreds, soon to be thousands, of soldiers with disabilities returning home could not be so easily disregarded. Most Veterans with disabilities were young and otherwise healthy men.

Extending the mandate beyond the Canadian Expeditionary Force

W. D. McPherson, the SAC's first Chair, told *The Globe* in a November 1915 interview that the scope of the Commission needed to be widened:

“ Among the cases mentioned yesterday was that of a Canadian who was in hospital in Toronto suffering from a tubercular complaint. When the war broke out he went to the old country and joined a British regiment. Since then he had returned to Toronto, where his wife and family resided. Mr. W.D. McPherson, K.C., questioned whether in such a case, a Canadian in a British regiment, the Commission would have power to deal, but stated he could go to the Government and ask, as in other instances, to have the scope of the Commission extended.”

In the end he was successful in this, aided by Commissioner W. F. Nickle, who was also a Member of Parliament for Kingston.

Tuberculosis was the one of many medical issues that did not fit neatly into the category of “wounded on the battlefields of the Great War.” Mental illness was another, as was venereal disease. Veterans’ groups like the SAC also had to address situations where lax enlistment practices had allowed soldiers to serve when they should have been disqualified for health reasons (Morton and Wright 1987).

Coordinating services as the need mounts

The various bodies that served returned soldiers wished to avoid duplication. At a conference in May 1916, branch representatives of the Canadian Patriotic Fund concluded that both advocacy on behalf of, and finding work for Veterans, were outside its scope and should continue to fall to the Soldiers' Aid Commission. The Commission also remained active in securing back pay and pension shortfalls. These shortfalls were caused by government's failure to budget sufficient money to compensate returning soldiers (*The Globe* 1916).

Many of the Veterans' organizations and emerging municipal charities did not have the administrative infrastructure to deal with the volume of cases. The Great War Veterans' Association, created in 1917, found itself unable to respond to the numbers of Veterans' families in dire financial straits as winter was coming on. The Association began to levy fees of 25 cents monthly from its members for emergency aid. These funds would be administered by both the Association and the Soldiers' Aid Commission (*The Globe* 1917).

By the end of 1917, the Great War Veterans' Association claimed to have grown from 15,000 to 25,000 members across Canada. The SAC was growing at a similar rate, and moved its head offices from the Parliament Buildings to the former residence of Lieutenant-Governor John Hendrie at St. George and College streets. This spacious house would be able to accommodate the inspectors who were doing the bulk of the SAC's work.

At a conference in May 1916, branch representatives of the Canadian Patriotic Fund concluded that both advocacy on behalf of, and finding work for Veterans, were outside its scope and should continue to fall to the Soldiers' Aid Commission.

Tuberculosis Hospital of the Royal Ottawa Sanatorium.



Also by the end of that year, the Military Hospitals Commission controlled more than 50 convalescent hospitals and nineteen sanatoria for tuberculosis. In addition, it had secured space and beds in more than 20 general hospitals across Ontario (Morton and Wright 1987).

The Hammond Fund

In 1915, a young bride named Kathleen Hammond was widowed when her husband died in the sinking of the Lusitania. She herself died four years later and in her will left about \$50,000 to young, First World War widows in Ontario. There was some debate within the Ontario government as to how to administer the money, but eventually, an act of the Ontario Legislature gave the fund to the Soldiers' Aid Commission. It was designated as the Hammond Fund.



Canadian wounded are placed in an ambulance during the advance on Lens, October, 1917.

Finding work for returning soldiers

In January of 1916, *The Globe* broke down the status of the more than 1,000 soldiers who had returned to Ontario:

300 returned to their previous positions and 137 obtained new positions.



300

284 were in the Convalescent Home on College street.



284

193 were in the “unable to locate” class.



193

150 continued limited military duty in roles such as guard.



150

15 were deemed “undesirables.”



15

Finding some form of work for returning soldiers was a central function for the early SAC. *The Globe* reported that by early January of 1916, the SAC had facilitated employment for 150 returned soldiers. However the scale of returning soldiers was becoming such a concern that W.D. McPherson brought the issue directly to Premier William Hearst.

Advocating for fair wages

Many employers were generous and accommodating toward returning soldiers, but this was not universal. In late 1916, a group of Veterans complained to the Commission that

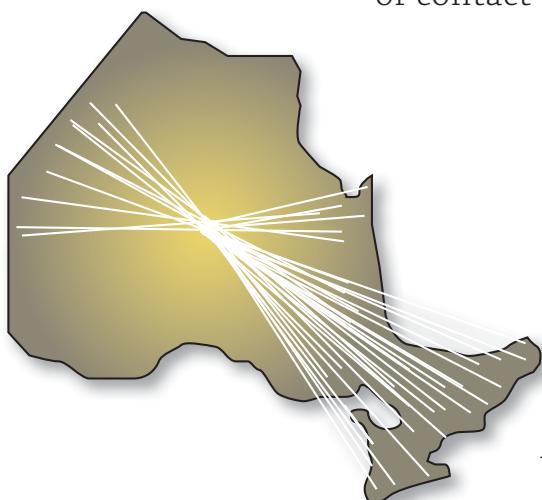
Hamilton-area employers were treating them poorly. Some said that they had been paid at a rate of \$0.33 per hour before enlisting and had been offered \$0.20 per hour upon being invalided home. The SAC managed to secure the old rate and handled many complaints of this kind (*The Globe* 1916).

Returning to the land

In a joint initiative in the spring of 1916, the SAC and the Toronto Rotary Club made land available to 57 returned soldiers along with a free supply of seeds, plants, and roots. The men plowed, harrowed, and fertilized the land, harvesting the produce for themselves and their families (*The Globe* 1916). This was one of the earliest attempts to have soldiers “return to the land.” Many would try their hand at farming in the years ahead through various resettlement schemes.

**130 SAC
branches were
operating in
the province
by early 1918.**

Source: *The Globe*,
August 12, 1918



Reaching out to soldiers' families

By early 1918, long lists of returning convalescent men appeared regularly in the newspapers. The SAC headquarters at 116 College Street became the main point of contact for inquiring after friends and family. There

than 130 SAC branches across the province and
ng had progressed to the point that, as soon as
soldier was reported in the papers, a member of
mission would call on the family to see what, if
g, was required by the wife and dependents. In
ities, the SAC had full-time, paid staff, while in
ller communities, people volunteered to help
out local Veterans.

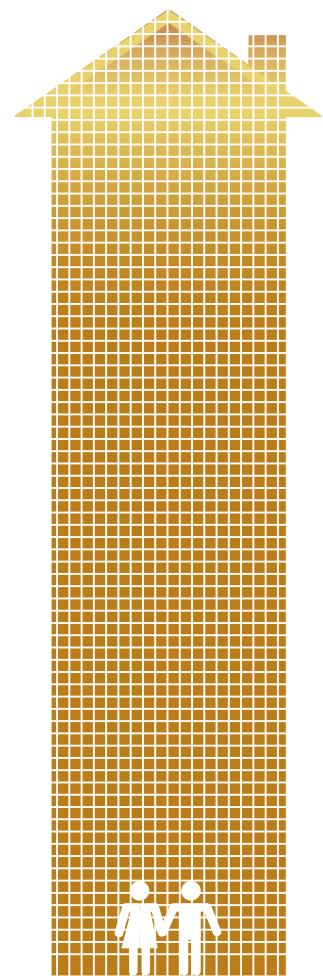
As Armistice Day approached, it was clear

that soldiers' children were also victims of the Great War. Prominent in the SAC's duties were motherless children whose fathers were still serving overseas. Helping to find temporary and supportive situations for Veterans' children became a key task – one that would only expand during the interwar years. Chair McPherson confirmed in October 1918 that the Commission had secured homes for 321 Toronto children. The Commission had also visited 5,942 Toronto homes between May 31 and September 30 alone (*The Globe* 1918).

321
homes
secured



5,942
Toronto
homes
visited



A shift in perceptions: From charity to entitlement

In a well-publicized address to the University Women's Club in early 1917, Miss Winnifred Hutchison stressed that the efforts of the Soldiers' Aid Commission to serve returning soldiers and their families were just as essential as assistance and sympathy for those still fighting overseas. In its first 18 months of activities, she reported, the Commission had initiated record-keeping systems for returning soldiers, aided military hospitals in supporting injured soldiers, and helped to provide an escort home for returning men. A returning soldier now received a welcome letter. It included a form upon which he could indicate his capacity for work and report any issues with pay or other problems (*The Globe* 1917).

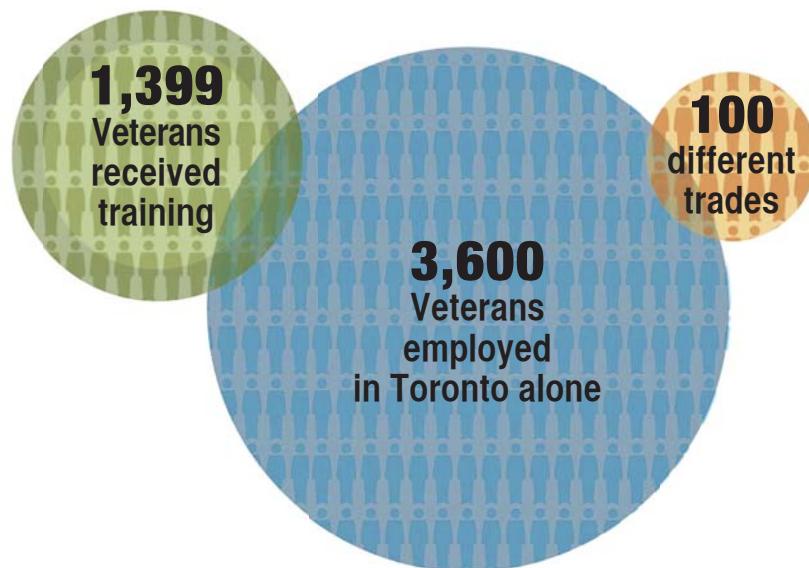
The shift away from seeing returning soldiers and their families as charity cases was even more apparent by the end of 1917. Charitable organizations and social services bodies like the SAC and the Great War Veterans' Association met regularly in Ontario during this period. Their representatives stressed that services and funds were a Veteran's right.

A December Globe article titled “Soldiers’ Aid Not Charity” argued:

“Their work was not charity. What was being done for the wives and dependents of soldiers was no more than what was right and proper, and, in the absence of the men, the women and children were only receiving their just rights.”

As the First World War drew to a close, the Soldiers’ Aid Commission was clearly having a profound impact on the lives of returning soldiers. There were more than 140 SAC branches across the province. More than 1,000 men had received vocational training by August 1918 and another 399 Veterans began similar training in mid-October. There were 75 to 80 paid instructors teaching 100 different trades and occupations. By mid-August 1918, the SAC had already helped to find employment for more than 3,600 Veterans in Toronto alone.

Source: *The Globe*,
August 12, 1918



The Armistice and the Pandemic

While the battlefields had been emptied by the fall of 1918, acute physical, psychological, and emotional issues would stay with Ontario's war Veterans. These issues would gravely impact their families, friends, and everyday lives immediately and in the future. For Canadian soldiers, the war was a deeply troubling and bitter experience (Read 1978).

As Ontario communities each began construction on a public cenotaph – a permanent reminder of the toll that the Great War had taken – another killer approached. Known as “Spanish Flu” or “La Grippe,” the influenza of 1918-1919 took the lives of tens of millions worldwide, including 50,000 Ontarians. The virus was unusual, in that it was most lethal in adults aged 20 to 40 – the prime of their lives. These premature deaths shattered even more families.

The work of the Soldiers’ Aid Commission had only just begun.

Known as “Spanish Flu” or “La Grippe,” the influenza of 1918-1919 took the lives of tens of millions worldwide, including 50,000 Ontarians.

Source: *The Globe*, August 12, 1918



Casualties just arrived,
No. 1 Casualty Clearing
Station, July, 1916

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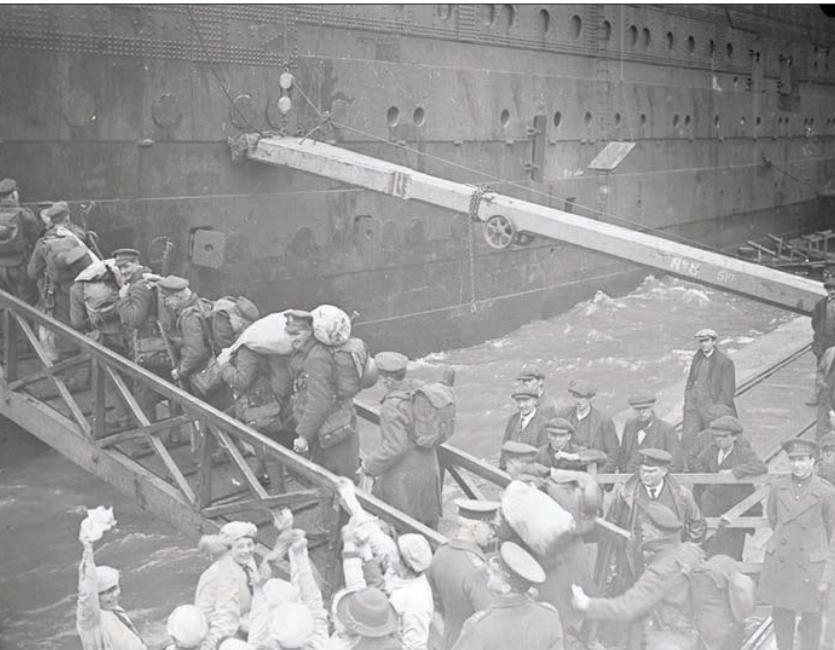
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Chapter Three

The Interwar Years, 1919-1938

The 1920s are often characterized as the ‘Roaring Twenties,’ a decade of good times, but that was not strictly true in Ontario. Right after the First World War ended, the federal government cut spending, and export markets shrank dramatically for Ontario’s manufacturing interests. Bankruptcies and unemployment rose rapidly, with many people moving to the United States, where the economic recovery began more quickly (Conrad 2012). A deep and persistent economic recession gripped the province from 1920 to 1924.

These were times of social change. Having held down the farms and factories for the war years, women pushed for more rights. Third-party political movements challenged the domination of the two main political parties and the economic elites that controlled them (Conrad and Finkel 2008). Between 1919 and 1923, a coalition government of United Farmers and Labour created Ontario’s first Department of Welfare. They brought in allowances for widows and children, a minimum wage for women, and standardized adoption procedures.

George Ferguson’s Conservatives regained power in 1923, and buoyed by a slowly improving economy, they invested public funds in an

Toronto children in a poor neighbourhood, circa 1930



More than 20 per cent of Ontarians were unemployed for much of the decade and there was not enough local relief to meet the needs of thousands of families.

expanding provincial highway system, promoting northern development with roads that linked the region's resource communities with southern Ontario.

With roadway expansion, the auto industry began to flourish. Ontario was home to profitable branch plants of Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors (Conrad 2012). The new roadways attracted American tourists. Urbanization continued and people found new sources of information and entertainment in radio and 'talking' motion pictures.

The buoyant sense of promise in the last half of the 1920s gave way to a decade of despair in the "Dirty Thirties." As the crisis deepened, radicalism on both the left and the right of the political spectrum intensified. More than 20 per cent of Ontarians were unemployed for much of the decade and there was not enough local relief to meet the needs of thousands of families. It was not until 1938 that officials believed they had a hold on the economy again. Just one year later, Canada was once again at war.

Amidst all of this turmoil, the Soldiers' Aid Commission both reflected and reacted to its times by championing the rights and needs of Ontario's returned soldiers, their spouses, and their often-orphaned children. This chapter explores how the SAC navigated this period in Ontario's history.

The SAC's challenges in the immediate post-war years

The volume of soldiers returning from the Great War was staggering. It soon became apparent that the problems they faced were varied and complex. Issues ranged from unemployment, to the need for various rehabilitations, to

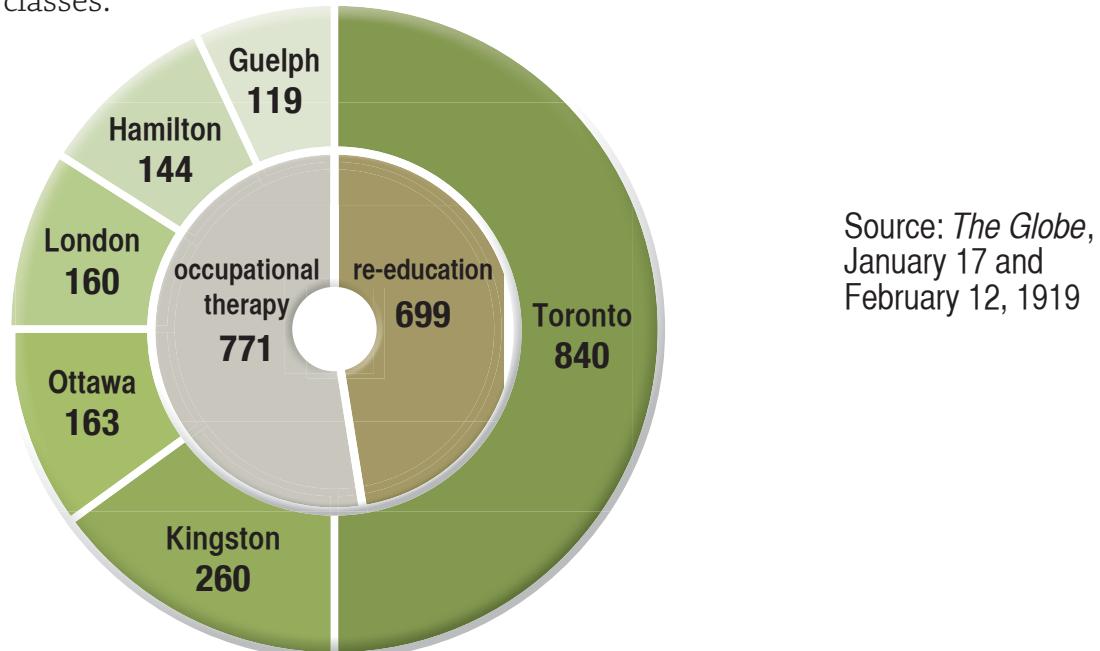
family problems. This was a period of tremendous growth in the field of psychology, and the focus of rehabilitation was to restore Veterans – socially, physically, emotionally, and psychologically – as productive and law-abiding citizens.

The primary goal of civil re-establishment had always been to reduce the state's responsibility for Veterans. From homestead loans to insurance, these programs and schemes were intended to reinforce individualism and self-sufficiency – expectations that were often difficult to meet (Morton and Wright 1987).

The vocational branch of the SAC was very busy in early 1919 with reeducation, convalescent care, and occupational therapy. While much of the work was done in the Toronto area, re-education for Veterans took place across the province.

Here is the breakdown of programs in January and February of 1919:

Toronto, 840; Kingston, 260; Ottawa, 163; London, 160; Hamilton, 144; Guelph, 119; 699 men were involved in re-education and 771 convalescents in the occupational therapy classes.



The resettlement initiative

The government of Ontario instituted a resettlement initiative, in which returning soldiers received grants, guaranteed loans, and homesteads, in an effort to start a new and productive life. Understandably, many wounded soldiers did not feel physically or emotionally equipped to uproot themselves and attempt farming in another, usually more remote part of the province. Once such program, for example, was in the Kapuskasing area, where poor soil and a short growing season combined to thwart the well-intentioned Veterans.

Other resettled Veterans met with fierce resentment, and even sabotage, from the surrounding farming community. One recalled:

“When I was discharged, I got the soldiers’ settlement award, and I go and take twelve months’ training for farming, because I was getting a farm under the soldiers’ settlement scheme. I got through in six months and I got the farm in the Parry Sound district. They boycotted me from the time we went in there. They thought I was getting something when I got this farm through the settlement. It cost me \$400 a year for rent there, you know...They wouldn’t patronize us at all...They boycotted our raising purebred stock and went about stealing some of the stock. I stayed for eight years and then I lost out” (Read, 1978).

Returning to the “Old Country”

This was a period when many, perhaps most, Ontarians had close ties to the British Isles. Many disheartened Veterans expressed a desire to return to the “Old Country,” either to gain employment or to rejoin their families. The Soldiers’ Aid

Commission was involved in advocating for the expeditious processing of their passports. In February 1919, Commission Secretary J. Warwick told *The Globe*:

“ The reason for doing this was that the returned man seemed to be in a constant stare of uncertainty while awaiting his passport which had been applied for. This made him nervous and apprehensive, as well as being a constant drain on his financial resources. However, the department has advised us that arrangements have now been made whereby all returned soldiers will be able to secure passports to Great Britain within a week after application.”

The needs of Veteran's children

Veterans' orphaned and abandoned children were one of the Commission's most pressing problems in the interwar period. The double scourge of war and influenza had robbed many children of both their parents, either killing them or rendering them incapable of their care. By the end of the war, the SAC had become more than just a temporary placement agency for children who were homeless or in inadequate care. The Commission took over a large home at 138 Avenue Road that had been the former Home for Incurable Children. Renovations at the home began in November of 1918 (*The Globe* 1918).

Legislative amendments in 1920 gave the Commission all the powers, duties, and privileges of a Children's Aid Society with respect to children of Ontario's First World War Veterans. Under this provision, 584 children became wards of the Commission and an additional 600 children were cared for temporarily due to illness in the family. The SAC established five hostels in Toronto

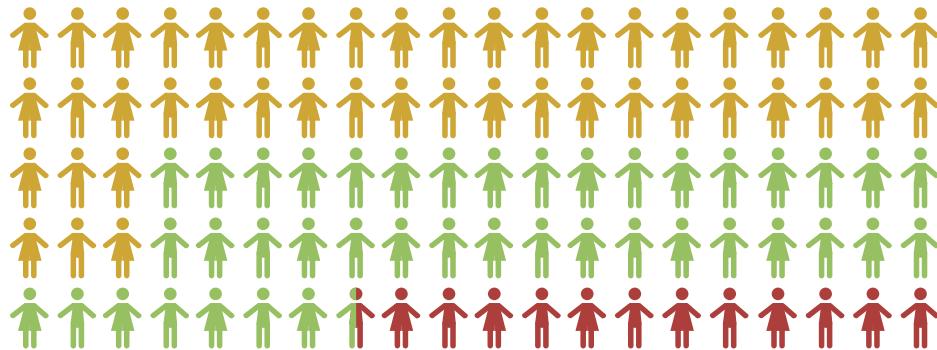
Veterans' orphaned and abandoned children were one of the Commission's most pressing problems in the interwar period.

Orphanage, Elgin Street, Ottawa, 1918



to house the children. For those children drawing pensions, funds were taken for their ongoing care and any additional funds were to be credited until their sixteenth birthdays (*The Globe* 1920). A SAC ledger indicates that 171 children were adopted while in SAC care in the 1920s.

548 children
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the SAC.



600 children were
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171 children were
adopted.

The stresses of the post-war period, both social and economic, tended to destabilize families. Many soldiers were coping with “shell shock,” known now as post-traumatic stress syndrome, and with other disabilities. And in an age before antibiotics and birth control, a woman’s life expectancy was considerably shorter than it is today. The SAC became responsible for abused and neglected children from Veterans’ families. Some desperate mothers and fathers agreed to make the children permanent wards of the province. In some cases, children were adopted when mothers died while fathers were serving time in a penitentiary. The main reason for committal in one 1924 case was noted as “the children are neglected, their mother being dead and their father having deserted them.” There are more than a handful of records detailing the desertion of husbands by their wives (with no reasons given). These husbands were unable to adequately care for the children.

The details of these cases are heartbreaking. The Commission became involved with a family in 1921 because the wife of a Veteran, along with her three children, aged one, six, and eight, were hospitalized due to an issue with drug use. The Veteran

was desperate to get help for her, and not have the children taken away. A Commission investigator sent to the home determined that the mother had been taking a daily mixture of morphine and laudanum for most of her adult life. She had given the same to her children. The children, when asked, said: "Mother used to give us medicine every day." (*The Globe* 1921).

For the most part, the SAC's involvement with children was a story of support and profound caring that would extend far beyond the end of the First World War. But there were then, just as there continue to be now, major flaws in the fostering system that left children vulnerable to neglect and abuse. We have, for example, the oral record of a girl who was separated from her siblings and moved around a few times. At twelve, she was placed on a farm near Chatham with a couple, both in their eighties, and their unmarried son in his forties (Raynsford 1986). She recalled:

“ I never went to school there, and the couple were kind to me and I didn't have to do much work. But one day the son asked me to go up in the hayloft and throw some hay down. After I got up the ladder, I heard someone coming up, so I hid on the other side, and after he got up I went down, with him after me. He chased me around and around the haystack. It was a good thing I was a good runner...I saw a loose board in the fence and got out and ran away around the barn to the house. I never went to the barn again. I talked to him but made sure I was never alone with him.”

For the most part, the SAC's involvement with children was a story of support and profound caring that would extend far beyond the end of the First World War.

The SAC's support for older children

In the instances where wards were too old for placement, the Commission arranged for their formal education and found employment for them. The SAC staff took their

responsibilities to help these young people transition to adulthood very seriously. The 1959-60 annual report of the Department of Public Welfare recalled that “Many of the girls were married and Mr. Seggie, who is still a valued member of the Commission staff, is said to have walked down the aisle in every church in Toronto to give a bride away.”

The Commission was also involved in influencing social policy regarding young people. In May, 1922, Commissioner A.W. Kaye resolved to make direct overtures to the provincial government to raise the maximum age under the *Child's Protection Act* from 16 to 18 years. He argued that many older teenagers were “going wrong” in the stage between boyhood and manhood. There remained opportunities, to Mr. Kaye’s mind, to mould these young men in a positive way, given some of the negative effects of unemployment and other difficult social conditions (*The Globe* 1922).

Children from the Commission's hostels spent the summer at Vimy Ridge, near Guelph, Ontario.



Into the fresh air

The 1920s saw a movement to get urban children, particularly poor youngsters, out of the cities and into the healthy fresh air of rural Ontario. The SAC established a campsite in Port Stanley, and in July of 1920, fifteen families, 47 people in total, made up the first group. George Reid, the president of the London Chamber of Commerce, offered his land for this purpose (*The Globe* 1920).



In 1922, Lillian Casselmann of Brockville wrote a song, “His Smile,” dedicated to the Prince of Wales. All proceeds from sales were earmarked for the SAC. Generous donations of land and money have marked all of the SAC’s 100 years.

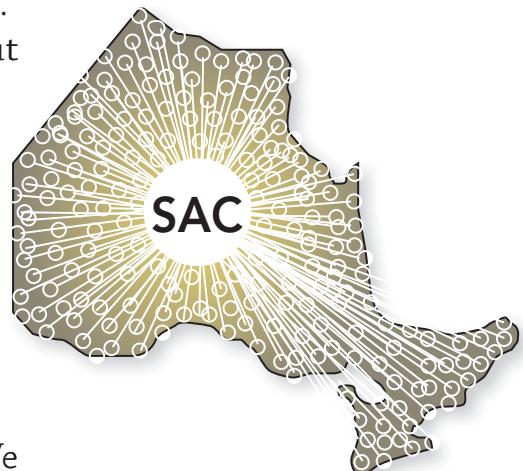
In the summer of 1924, the Commission took over the operations of Vimy Ridge Farm, just two miles outside of Guelph. It served as a working farm for Veterans, in the hopes of becoming self-sufficient. With a total area of 329 acres, a main residence, lodge and area for tent camping, it was also deemed a great spot for holidays for the children under the Commission's care.

Sixty girls and 40 boys enjoyed the farm that summer (*The Globe* 1924). Trips there, as well as to Camp Bolton and Bobcaygeon, emphasized programs of recreation, physical activity, and general health exercises.

The SAC grows and defends its mandate

By the early 1920s, there were 204 SAC branches. Local committees of volunteer citizens carried out much of the Commission's work. The exception was in the major centres where full-time secretaries were often employed. A hostel was also established in London to serve the needy Veterans of western Ontario.

Amidst this growth, challenges to the mandate and existence of the Soldiers' Aid Commission continued. Much of this debate focussed around Ve changing needs, as well as the struggle to cope with huge war debts and rehabilitation costs. There was a well-publicized discussion in January of 1920 at a conference that featured the SAC, the Dominion Soldiers' Civil Re-establishment, the Department of Labour, the Repatriation League, and the Canadian Patriotic Fund. It was decided there that all groups should continue in their work until at least the spring, and a decision would be made at that time on whether or not they should continue to exist (*The Globe* 1920).

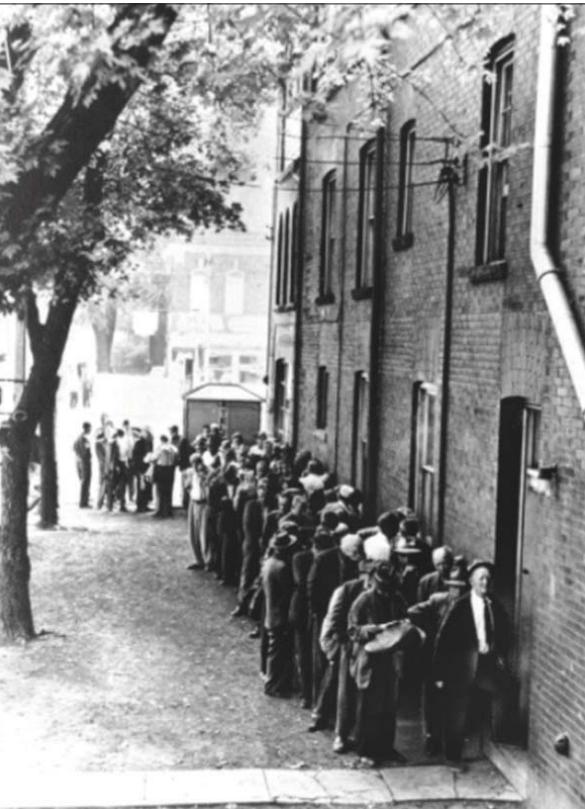


**204 SAC
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Source: *The Globe*
1920

From late 1923 through the summer of 1924, 400 cases were handled by the SAC's Pensions and Treatment Claims Branch. They secured over \$200,000 for Veterans and their dependents.

Lineup at a Toronto soup kitchen, 1934



This news caused local branches of Veterans to go public with their support for the Commission. The Galt members, for example, expressed the importance of their branch in supporting the unemployed Veterans. Veterans used the Galt Memorial Hall basement as a meeting place where the unemployed could gather, get out of the cold, and spend some social hours (*The Globe* 1921).

The push for pensions

Increasingly, Veterans and their families looked upon the SAC as an advocate. In a 1921 letter to the editor entitled, “To Him That Hath,” there was a call for the Commission to pressure the provincial government to offer further support to Veterans and their families, in the form of paying insurance premiums for unprotected Veterans’ wives and children. The writer considers the province “the body that feels such interest in the health of its young people, in the education of its young, and generally in the quality and standards of our citizenship” (*The Globe* 1921).

Securing pensions was an ongoing issue. From late 1923 through the summer of 1924, 400 cases were handled by the SAC’s Pensions and Treatment Claims Branch. They secured over \$200,000 for Veterans and their dependents (*The Globe* 1924).

By 1925, 62 staff members were carrying out the Commission’s work. Mrs. Gertrude Van Koughnet was appointed as Chair at the end of 1926. It was unusual for a woman to be in a leadership position of a fairly high-profile Veterans’ organization. Mrs. Van Koughnet had a very distinguished record. She organized Soldiers’ Comforts in 1914 and worked

to ship goods overseas to soldiers. In 1915 she had been made Honorary Superintendent of Soldiers' Comforts for Canada in the Department of Soldiers' Civil Re-establishment.

In spite of the mid-decade improvements in the economy, many Veterans still struggled. Social agencies were not equipped to help them. *The Globe* reports on the SAC's efforts to help one unemployed Veteran nearing destitution in February of 1925. His friend recalls that the "Soldiers' Aid Commission was the only agency to help...It would take all day to tell you the adventures we had after that. The SAC said they would send an investigator to see what could be done about the rent, but we would have to go to the House of Industry for supplies...to make a long story short, the Soldiers' Aid has given him a month's rent and I have persuaded him to take the other half as a loan."

At a conference in May 1927, imperial pensions were a major topic, because Veterans with disabilities were aging prematurely. Old age pension was instituted in Canada in 1927, but it was only in 1930, after years of intense and difficult lobbying by Veterans' organizations, that one group of Veterans – destitute men over sixty years of age – began to receive a fixed pension. It paid \$20 a month for single men and \$40 a month for married men. This indicated another small shift toward the belief that social welfare spending was not a form of charity, but a right for Ontarians.

In the 1930s, unemployment ravaged the country, with more than 20 per cent of eligible workers jobless in Ontario.

Canadian soup kitchen, 1931

The Great Depression

In the 1930s, unemployment ravaged the country, with more than 20 per cent of eligible workers jobless in



Ontario. The numbers were even higher in some parts of the province. The Commission's annual reports from the 1930s are filled with Veterans' stories of hardship and challenge: Here is just one example:

“A Veteran with his family of five young children was living in a small cottage on a quarter of an acre of land... They had been living for the past few months practically on what they were able to grow, augmented by a sack of flour, some canned milk purchased last fall and the eggs from fourteen hens. Assistance was secured to help tide him over for the winter” (*SAC Annual Report 1931-32*).

The Single Men's
Unemployed
Association parading
to Bathurst Street
United Church, 1930

Premier Mitch Hepburn's response to the profound hardship was to cut services, spending, and staff in most government departments. Hepburn was in power in 1934 when the SAC's two remaining hostels for children were closed with limited notice. Foster homes were used for the remaining wards until they reached the age of majority, which for the youngest was not until 1945 (*SAC Annual Report 1934-35*).

Through no fault of its own, the Commission was the subject of a small scandal in late 1939. A First World War veteran, Mr. Arthur Smith, was charged with fraud for forging cheques, supposedly written by the SAC, to himself (*The Globe and Mail*, 1939). In this sad tale we can perhaps see the lasting effects of the Great Depression.



The SAC and the Ontario Canteen Fund

The SAC was tasked with distributing Ontario's \$900,000 portion of the Dominion Canteen Fund, which was originally disbursed by the British government. As a blend of public and private welfare, the Canteen was established with money primarily raised from sales of various items in overseas military canteens. The Ontario Canteen Fund was attached to the Department of Public Welfare in 1931.

The Canteen Fund was set up as a form of temporary emergency assistance for Veterans in limited financial circumstances due to injury or illness. It was administered by a group of trustees who were themselves war Veterans. The case files reveal the complex web of interactions between Veterans, their families, and welfare bureaucracy, as Veterans attempted to get financial aid. The files also illustrate the deep social, psychological, and medical problems Veterans faced.

Until this point in time, the Commission operated relatively independently. It reported directly to the Attorney General and received an annual grant from the Ontario government. Under the new Department of Public Welfare, the Commission joined with eight other social service departments (Raynsford 1986).

By the 1930s, still struggling with the effects of shell shock, gassing, or physical injuries, many First World War Veterans were moving into middle age. Some were too damaged to do the heavy labour typical of re-settlement schemes. Others suffered stomach and digestion disorders as a result of their war service, and needed extra money for special diets. The Canteen Fund was intended to give aid only to Veterans whose financial problems were related to a documented illness. Many applicants were rejected because their problems were deemed unemployment-related rather than illness-related (Campbell 2000).

By the 1930s, still struggling with the effects of shell shock, gassing, or physical injuries, many First World War Veterans were moving into middle age.

In spite of challenges to its mandate during the interwar years, the Commission had never ceased to assist and advocate for Veterans.

The Garden Land Settlement Scheme

As the depression wore one, the Soldiers' Aid Commission initiated the Garden Land Settlement Scheme at Barrie in early 1937. It featured farmland and cottages for the families to live in at a reduced cost. It was created in direct response to the decade's debilitating economic conditions and was designed to subsidize Veterans as they transitioned to self-sufficiency. Initially, eight Veterans, their wives, and 44 children were selected to farm the area in the Township of Innisfil.

The results were generally positive, although some Commissioners believed some of the Veterans were not working hard enough. There was an element of instability as families came and went. Drainage issues were an ongoing concern, but there were good crop yields in some years. In 1951, the land was sold and the money re-invested by the Commission for the general welfare of returned Veterans (Raynsford 1986).

Another war on the horizon

The Great Depression would leave deep scars on Ontarians, and the looming Second World War would mean more suffering and sorrow. In spite of challenges to its mandate during the interwar years, the Commission had never ceased to assist and advocate for Veterans. It was well positioned to continue that role.

There had been a shift in social and economic thinking during this period, one that the Commission had helped to bring about. Government was now expected to be more active in everyday lives than it had ever been before. Planning and state intervention came to be seen as tools for mitigating the boom-and-bust cycles inherent in the economic system. The seeds were sown for a much more expansive postwar suite of social policies designed to address poverty for both soldiers and civilians.

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Chapter Four

The Battle Continues – World War II, 1939-1945

Canada's 11.5 million people produced 1.1 million enlistments in the armed forces during the Second World War

Departure of a member of No.110 (AC) Squadron, Royal Canadian Air Force for overseas service, Ottawa, Ontario, 1940

To the Veterans of the Great War, the advent of a second world war just one generation after their own experiences must have seemed like the most vicious of historical cycles. But in many ways, World War II was a different kind of war. There was no challenge to convincing the majority of Ontarians that this was a just war. Hitler, the Nazis, and their allies were seen as a threat to the Canadian way of life. It was not simply about supporting “the Old Country,” as it was in 1914. Canadians took pride in their nation’s own armed forces.

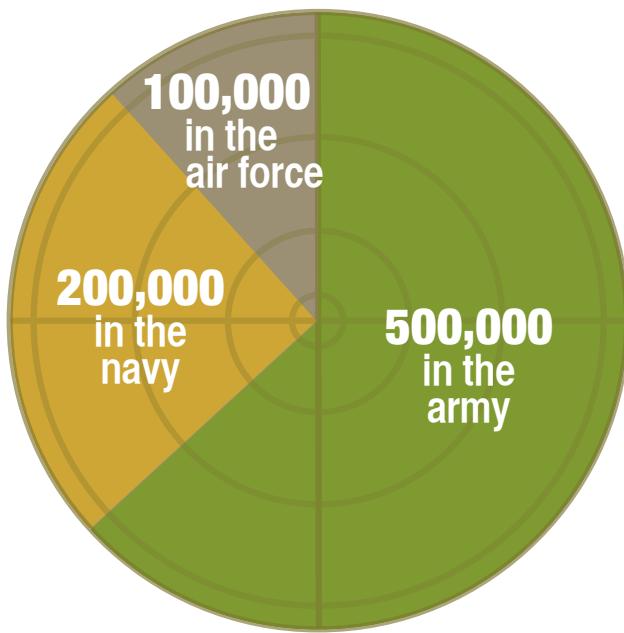
There had been great leaps in medical care since the first war, most notably the introduction of antibiotics that could save soldiers from dying of infected wounds or suffering amputation, not to mention war-related diseases such as tuberculosis and venereal disease. And there was a much more robust government response in terms of support for the

returning Veteran. All of these things would mean changes in the role of the Soldiers’ Aid Commission. Nevertheless, the Commission continued to help those most in need. That included its hundreds of wards coming of age in care, as well as aging Veterans of the Great War.



Canada's fighting force

Canada's 11.5 million people produced 1.1 million enlistments in the armed forces during the Second World War. At its peak, the army numbered about 500,000, including 15,000 women. The air force was just under 100,000 and the navy was around 200,000. Globally, these were large numbers, and by 1944, they placed Canada third among the Western Allies in military personnel (Bothwell 2007). About 36 per cent of these forces came from Ontario.



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The construction of the social safety net

To a much greater extent than in 1914-18, the government mobilized Canada's economic resources to meet the demands of the coming war. There were stringently high tax rates for the rich. Increased government planning over a five-year period, much of it very successful, had come on the heels of the Great Depression. Company profits were controlled, in a well-publicized effort to prevent war profiteering (Bothwell

2007). Compulsory collective bargaining in early 1944 meant significant gains for Ontario workers that would help them benefit from the prosperity that followed the end of the war.

Unemployment Insurance was introduced in Canada in 1940. It was the country's first national social insurance program. When faced with unemployment, many Canadians could now claim the UI benefit rather than having to go begging to their local welfare office. However, many people were excluded from the benefit, including fishers, farmers, nurses, domestic servants, casual, and part-time workers. These gaps meant that the SAC still had an important role to play in supporting Ontario's Veterans.

During the Second World War, Canadians became accustomed to rationing. They used coupons to purchase commodities that the government had designated as scarce.

Premier Mitch Hepburn, feeling that provincial welfare would be lessened with Unemployment Insurance established, spearheaded changes to the Municipal Affairs and Welfare departments. They had operated as twin departments since 1935. Eight linked branches (including Children's Aid and the SAC), homes for the aged, mothers' allowance, old-age pensions, pensions for the blind, relief, and departmental administration, were moved under a single umbrella (*The Globe and Mail* 1940).

In 1943, *Plan D on Social Security for Canada* (known more popularly as the Marsh Report) gave a blueprint for a social-security system built upon a foundation of full employment. It promoted the

use of contributory social insurance to protect the worker against a range of risks to income. It coupled with a vision for a universal system of public health insurance. Although the



report caught the imagination of many, it was too radical for the federal government of the day, which aborted it. These elements would be adopted more slowly.

In 1944, Family Allowance legislation was passed – Canada's first “universal” social program, given to all families, regardless of income. It was a monthly allowance paid to mothers, for each child under age 16. The impetus for this was to help married women quit their wartime jobs once the men returned, and get back to working in their homes.

Government benefits for returning Veterans

The various levels of government were much better prepared to cope with returning Veterans following the Second World War than they had been after the first. The presence of state support meant that the WWII Veterans were less marginalized than the Veterans of the Great War had been, and were not perceived as a risk to social stability (Keshen 2006).

In 1941, the federal government announced Veterans' pensions and post-discharge payments for soldiers that were much more generous than what was offered after the Great War. Veterans were guaranteed the right to return to their former jobs or jobs “no less favourable” with the same employer at war’s end. They had the right to free university education or vocational training. They were to be given preference for civil service jobs. Upon return, they had eligibility for unemployment insurance for up to one year, and low-interest loans to go into business. These were substantial gains, and they demonstrated a much greater commitment to Veterans, who had been fighting for decades for similar rights and programs.

Veterans were guaranteed the right to return to their former jobs or jobs “no less favourable” with the same employer at war’s end. They had the right to free university education or vocational training.

**\$720
payment =
40%
of year's salary**



In 1942, under the Veterans' Land Act, loans were provided for those acquiring either commercial or hobby farms. The size of benefits kept rising as the war progressed, and the government's promises, along with an initial budget of \$750 million, were combined into a Veterans' Charter in 1944 (Finkel 2006).

About two-thirds of Veterans chose to pass on free education or the chance to start a small business, and opted instead for cash. A returning Canadian private, after two years' service in the Western Hemisphere and three years overseas, qualified for a \$720 payment. This was roughly 40 per cent of a year's pre-tax salary for a civilian male worker. In addition, there was a re-establishment credit of the same amount, which could be used to acquire, repair, renovate, or furnish a home or small business (Keshen 2006).

How the war shaped the lives of the Commission's wards

One young man served in the Black Watch Regiment, the famous Royal Highland Regiment of Canada. He served in Holland and was wounded.

Many of the hundreds of children that the Soldiers' Aid Commission had placed for adoption and in temporary and permanent homes participated in the Second World War, although the numbers that served are unknown. One young man served in the Black Watch Regiment, the famous Royal Highland Regiment of Canada. He served in Holland and was wounded. He worked in Toronto upon return, never married, but had a close relationship with his foster mother. He shared in her estate when she died. He passed away in 1984 in the Veterans' Wing of Sunnybrook Hospital (Raynsford 1986).

Another boy was adopted by the foster family he was placed in by the Commission, just before he enlisted. He was interviewed in the 1980s (Raynsford 1986):

“ When the war came, I enlisted at 21 and put my time in...Somewhere between 17 and 21 years, the Yorks went through the formality for adoption papers, etc., and that's when I found out I was born in the States. My adopted father passed away while I was overseas. He died from the effects of the First World War. My mother passed away about a year ago. She would have been 92. We had a long time together, and we also lived very close to each other even after I got married and had my own family.”

Joe, another ward of the SAC, joined the Canadian Army in 1941 and survived the Italian campaign (Raynsford 1986):

“ Was again wounded and taken prisoner of war in the battle for Coriano Ridge just outside of Rimini. I was held in Stalag VII-A at Munich. I was listed as missing in action. I had been attached to a Major who won the Military Cross posthumously. I was shot by a sniper. I was in the Intelligence section, looked after maps, codes, etc. At the end of the war I was freed and returned to Canada in August, 1945. I went back to work at Massey Ferguson as a welder and retired after 32 years.”

Gladys, another former ward, had a different story about how the war affected her life. Unlike many Commission wards, her father had retained custody of her, at least initially, and she visited with him while under the SAC's care. It was not unusual for members of the Commission to get informally involved as 'matchmakers' for young wards. In this case, Gladys knew very little about her future husband. She came to learn that he had never worked prior to their marriage. Her family had to go on welfare in the early 1930s, despite her taking a job with her

Administration of plasma to a casualty,
No.15 Canadian General Hospital, Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps (R.C.A.M.C.), El Arrouch, Algeria, 1943



Nearly 30 years of care for orphans and other children of First World War Veterans came to an end. Much of the work went unheralded, but it was so vital to many.

mother-in-law in a medical students' fraternity house. She recalled (Raynsford, 1986):

“ Ten years later, in 1939, my husband just up and left. He had gone to join the Army. My three children and I moved into two rooms in London. Then I moved to Toronto and got myself a job in a war factory. Soon I was able to buy some furniture, such as beds, a dresser, table and chairs. I was making good money working seven days a week on shifts, and had a woman to look after the children. I soon had a home for them. My children were my whole life. I was given custody of them after the marriage ended in divorce.”

As the war ended, so did the SAC's formal relationship with its wards, as the youngest of them turned 21. Nearly 30 years of care for orphans and other children of First World War Veterans came to an end. Much of the work went unheralded, but it was so vital to so many. It was not a good experience for all, but the Commission had taken on this work with the best of intentions.

Many Veterans returned from the war with physical challenges.

Peace & some prosperity on the horizon



Canadians had begun to worry about the nation's post-war agenda shortly after the war began. Memories of the Great Depression and of the major recession that had followed the First World War led some to believe that the end of this war would usher in another

period of hard times. But wartime government economic planning, including price controls and rationing, had resulted in a higher standard of living for ordinary people (Conrad and Finkel 2008).

For the SAC, First World War Veterans and their families remained a concern, as aging complicated many of the issues that former soldiers faced from lost limbs, gassing, old shrapnel wounds, mental illness, and addictions. Thousands of Ontario's Second World War Veterans required assistance once they returned to the province as well. And in just five years, the Korean War would produce another set of Veterans who needed the SAC's help.

Although the state, at all levels, was much more responsive to Veterans' needs at the end of this war, and although Ontario became Canada's wealthiest province in the postwar period, it did not hold riches for all. Once again, the Soldiers' Aid Commission was there to address the gaps in social policy.

Thousands of Ontario's Second World War Veterans required assistance once they returned to the province as well. And in just five years, the Korean War would produce another set of Veterans who needed the SAC's help.



Of the 172,000 wounded Canadians, 3,802 survived the war as amputees.

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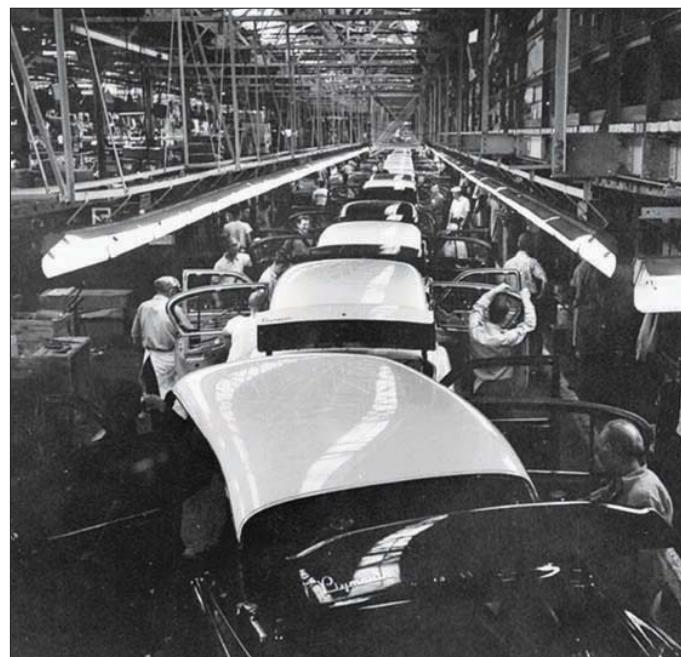
Chapter Five

Boom Times – Post-World War II and the SAC, 1946-1979

Contrary to the fears of many, the end of the war did not mean a return to the Great Depression. Canadians felt confident in the afterglow of a victorious and just war, and the demand for goods and services was very high, as returning Veterans used their cash payments and re-establishment credits to buy or build homes and small businesses. Left behind were the wartime savings plans and other restrictions. Gasoline rationing was abandoned, freeing Canadians to take to the roads. Government tax incentives encouraged manufacturers to convert their factories to civilian production, and none did so more readily than the automobile industry. Sales rebounded – nation-wide, 78,000 new cars sold in 1946; 159,000 in 1947 (Bothwell 2007).

The assembly line at the Chrysler plant in Windsor, 19539

Many Veterans entered university and vocational training with the help of government grants. They married and bought homes in Ontario's growing suburbs, commuting from there to the factory or the office. There was full employment in the 1940s and 1950s, which at that time meant full employment for men. In the labour force, the proportion of women actually rose slightly from 1941 to 1951, to 22 per cent.



But the period after the war created what we all know as the 'baby boom', and most young women stayed at home to raise families that were larger than in the previous generation.

Women joined the labour force in increasing numbers from the late 1940s through the 1970s. This included both single and married women, mostly in traditional, 'pink collar' jobs such as secretarial and retail work (Bothwell 2007). Increasing numbers of women also began to attend post-secondary institutions as the university and college systems expanded in the 1950s and early 1960s. York, Trent, Laurentian, Lakehead, and Brock Universities were just some of the new schools created in this era, as mass post-secondary education became a provincial priority.

In the Ontario election of 1943, the Progressive Conservatives had only narrowly defeated the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (or CCF, known today as the New Democratic Party). The Conservatives would remain in power for another 42 years. At the federal level, both the Liberals and Conservatives had begun to realize that they needed to embrace the less radical of the CCF's programs, especially social programs and a degree of state economic planning, in order to maintain their popular support (Finkel 2006).

Mother gives her 3-year-old a bath in the kitchen of their four-room apartment, 1947. 9



Throughout the postwar era, the labour movement concentrated on expanding the entitlements of "industrial citizenship" for its members through collective bargaining. They lobbied provincial and federal governments for more universal social programs in health, housing, pensions, and education (Struthers 1994).

Social policy expansion in the fifties

In the early 1950s, a universal old-age pension at age 70 was instituted. This replaced 1927 legislation that included the hated, invasive means test. A cost-sharing agreement to pay a needs-tested old-age pension to Canadians age 65-69 was gradually phased out.

Governments at this time were simply filling in large holes in Canada's social security system, often in response to mobilized social groups. Pressures for social reform continued and the postwar federal government of Louis St. Laurent initiated public housing, federal hospital grants, and assistance programs for people with disabilities and people who are visually impaired. An amendment to the Indian Act in 1951 extended the application of provincial social welfare legislation to thousands.

For many, the 1950s is remembered as a time of widespread affluence. Rising revenues and rapid growth meant that governments had the economic tools to fight poverty. However, general prosperity and the influence of the Cold War eroded support for further experimentation with social planning and social security. As a result, standards of living for Ontario's poorest people slipped ever further behind the general population. Over the next decade, public interest in the reform of Ontario's welfare system would prove sporadic at best (Struthers 1994). This meant that for Veterans who remained in need in the postwar period, the Soldiers' Aid Commission remained an important resource.

Office workers, 1945



The SAC continues to work with Veterans of the Great War

While the Great War was a distant memory for most Ontarians, many of its Veterans still lived in destitution.

Veteran finds work in Toronto, overcoming the loss of his eye and hand in a bombing by Nazi planes at his RCAF base in England, April 1945.

The aftermath of World War One had taught governments lessons that led to better treatment of WW2 Veterans. But while the Great War was now a distant memory, many of its Veterans still lived in destitution. The Commission was noted during this period for its work with other organizations to help fill basic needs, such as food, glasses, dentures, emergency rent money, and heating fuel.

For example, in 1946, the SAC worked with the Red Cross and the National Society of Deaf and Hard of Hearing to obtain a hearing aid for a First World War veteran. When asked about what returning to work in the afternoon would mean, the interviewee said,

“No, this afternoon I am taking a Yonge Street car to the city limits, then the radial car as far into the country as it goes, and there I am going to listen to the song of the birds.” (*The Globe and Mail* 1946)

The SAC’s history is intertwined with many organizations. In the immediate postwar period, the Department of

Veterans’ Affairs and the Commission often worked together on important issues. In addition, the SAC’s clients were helped by tireless advocates such as Maurice Searle, a Veteran of the Canadian Expeditionary Force and a prominent lawyer and pensions advocate. Searle at times combined the functions of doctor, lawyer, and detective in obtaining pensions and other funds for Veterans. In one case he secured \$15,000 in retroactive pension payments for an Ontario Veteran. By 1948 he had been acting as an



advocate for Ontario soldiers for more than 28 years (*The Globe and Mail* 1948).

In 1953, *The Globe and Mail* reported that a 77-year-old Veteran named Mr. Edwards was found flat on his back, nearing starvation, in his Toronto apartment. He had long-term damage from First World War mustard gas, exacerbated by the effects of working as a chef over steam tables for most of his adult life. Mr. Edwards was surviving on \$40 a month. He told the reporter:

“ You eat for the first two weeks. I won’t say you eat well, but you eat. Toast and tea for breakfast, that’s 20 cents. I never eat lunch. And then some sausages for dinner, that’s 45 cents. Then it gets to be toast and tea, tea and toast, toast and tea. You eat for two weeks and then you whistle” (*The Globe and Mail* 1953).

A SAC investigator, alerted to his situation, got involved. He gave Edwards \$5 to hold him over temporarily, and then took up his cause to get him more necessary funding.

“You eat for the first two weeks. I won’t say you eat well, but you eat. Toast and tea for breakfast, that’s 20 cents. I never eat lunch. And then some sausages for dinner, that’s 45 cents. Then it gets to be toast and tea, tea and toast, toast and tea. You eat for two weeks and then you whistle”

– Great War Veteran, 77, in 1953

The SAC’s funding and administration in the post-war period

The SAC worked very closely with the Ontario Canteen Fund and the Ontario Rehabilitation Committee during these years. They began sharing an office in 1949, after Welfare Minister William Goodfellow proposed the consolidation of the Commission with the Canteen fund. The administrative amalgamation of these two organizations was fully implemented in 1950.

In the postwar period, the SAC received both an annual grant from the province and revenue from several estate

"J.B. Seggie who has been with the commission since 1918, has always felt it was better to make a mistake on the generous side than to take the chance of turning down a soldier in need."

The Globe and Mail

Hungarian refugees arrive in the Ottawa area, 1956.



bequests. These included the Hammond Fund, which was by far the largest, the Mabel Kennedy Fund, and a bequest from William Scott. The Hammond Fund, which the SAC had been administering since the 1920s, had always been invested conservatively. As result, it was worth about \$197,000 in 1953 – almost as much in contemporary dollars as the value of the original bequest, despite having paid out roughly its original value over the decades. The fund's robustness led to discussions about whether it should also be used for widows of the Korean War, and possibly future wars (*The Globe and Mail* 1953).

Altogether, the estate bequests totaled more than \$200,000 in net value. In 2015, that would be roughly \$1.7 million – no small budget by any measure. These funds were finally exhausted by the 1970s. A spirit seen throughout the SAC's history was reflected in a 1953 article in *The Globe and Mail*, which reported, "J.B. Seggie who has been with the commission since 1918, has always felt it was better to make a mistake on the generous side than to take the chance of turning down a soldier in need."

The Commission's work with Hungarian children

The postwar period would see the SAC involved directly, once again, with children. The Hungarian uprising against the Soviets in 1956 led many people to seek refuge in Canada. Some of these refugees were children who had lost their parents in the uprising. Others were not permanently orphaned, but had been sent to Canada for safe haven. Because of the Commission's experience with placing veteran's orphans during the interwar years, it was asked to provide the administration and organizing needed to

temporarily place between 50 and 75 of these children, as well as some Hungarian adults, in Ontario homes.

Ontarians provided a wide variety of incentives for the refugees to settle here. The Ontario Federation of Agriculture conducted a province-wide appeal to provide homes for 700. The University of Toronto offered to take 250 engineering students and staff from the University of Sopron. Finally, a number of Hungarian-Canadian communities in southern Ontario welcomed and assisted them (Papp 1979-80).

Social reform in the nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies

In 1964, the Ontario Federation of Labour released *Poverty in Ontario*, an incisive report that helped to fuel a ‘war on poverty’ in Ontario, modeled after President Lyndon B. Johnson’s initiative in the United States. Young, middle-class activists worked with the poor to lobby the various levels of government. Partly in response to this and also out of a need to maintain the political support of the New Democratic Party, Lester B. Pearson’s federal Liberal government presided over the introduction of three major pieces of social legislation:

- ➡ The Canada Pension Plan (1965) established a national compulsory contributory pension plan.
- ➡ The Canada Assistance Plan (1966) consolidated the Unemployment Assistance Act with legislation providing social assistance to people with physical disabilities. It also made federal funding available for assistance to single parents and for a range of social services, including day care.
- ➡ Medicare (1966) established a national system of personal health insurance.

A 1969 Senate inquiry revealed that 1 in 4 Canadians still lived below the poverty line.



In the five years that followed the establishment of CPP, the Guaranteed Income Supplement was added to the national system as a way of supporting seniors living on very low incomes. Also, the age of receipt for the universal pension was reduced to 65. All of these reforms taken together constituted the final building blocks of Canada's most advanced version of the welfare state.

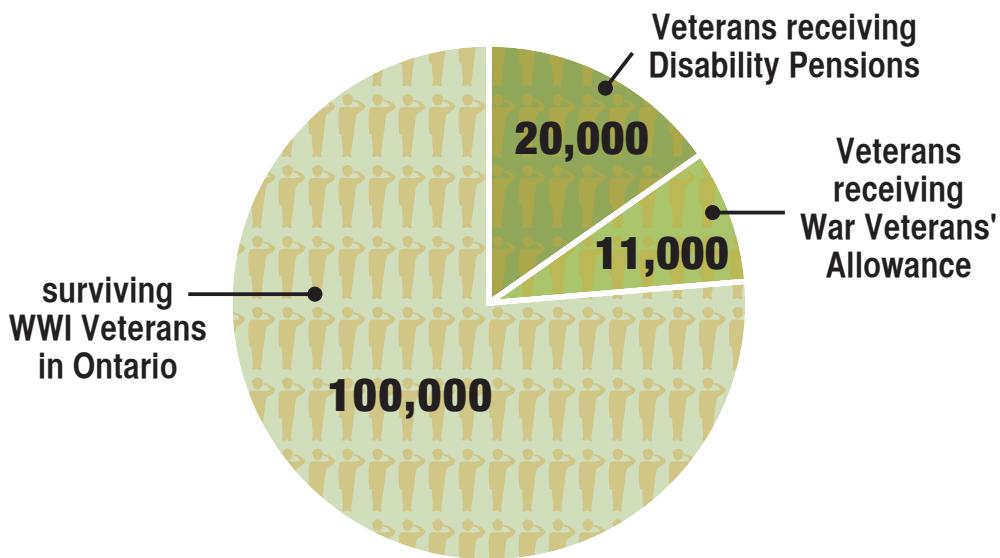
Despite considerable progress during this decade, a 1969 Senate inquiry revealed that one in four Canadians still lived below the poverty line. Close to 2 million of these were working poor – people whose income from employment was insufficient to lift them out of poverty. This statistic helped to counter the common argument that impoverished people were naturally lazy.

The tide of social-security advances in Canada reached its high point in 1971 with the revision of the Unemployment Insurance Act. This extended its coverage and liberalized its benefits. In the mid-1970s, there was a slowdown in the economy. Inflation kept rising, but government revenues did not, and debt grew. At the same time, there was increased state funding for health, education, and welfare.

There were loud calls for sharp cuts to public expenditure. A new ideology emerged, which discarded ideas such as universality in social programs in favour of selectivity and targeting. Taxes and other controls on business activities were viewed as restrictions of the free market, which, if unfettered, would resolve economic problems to the benefit of all. Such ideas would gain strength in the next decades.

Structural changes at the SAC in the sixties and early seventies

In 1960, the *Soldiers' Aid Act* reinforced the Commission's mandate and legislative authority. In 1961, there were roughly 100,000 surviving First World War Veterans in Ontario, with an average age of 68 years (*Canadian Encyclopedia* 1977). Slightly fewer than 20,000 were receiving Disability Pensions. More than 11,000 received War Veterans' Allowances payable to Canadian Expeditionary Force Veterans over the age of 60. These allowances were also available to Veterans under 60 years of age who were unable to work (Raynsford 1986).



In the late 1960s, the Commission was shifted into the Department of Social and Family Services (now the Ministry of Community and Social Services). The remaining funds in the Hammond Fund and the Mabel Kennedy Fund continued to be made available to Veterans and widows of the Second World War and the Korean War, in which Canada had participated from 1950 until 1953.

The SAC faces the chopping block

The Commissioners at this time were largely a group of older military men with contacts in government and the armed forces. They called anyone and everyone who could bring political pressure to bear.

1975 was a pivotal date for the government of Ontario, because it posted its first significant deficit since the end of the Second World War. Premier William Davis called on Canada's former Auditor General, Maxwell Henderson, who wrote a report that ushered in an era of cost containment. In the report, Henderson harshly placed the SAC in a group of programs and services that had "outlived their usefulness" and suggested that the commission be phased out (Henderson et al. 1975).

A legal opinion from the Ministry of Community and Social Services in 1978 suggested transferring all SAC property to the Provincial Treasurer. The Treasurer would then have the ability, through the Provincial Benefits Branch and "special purpose" accounts, to support war Veterans and their families. This transfer would have included the Kathleen Hammond and William Scott estate funds.

But, given the wording of the Henderson report, the Commission believed itself to be truly on the chopping block. Any attempt to move it or change it was seen as a threat to its independence and an attempt to fold it into government, where it would be absorbed and eventually wound up.

The SAC Commissioners were concerned about the SAC's future. The Commissioners at this time were largely a group of older military men with contacts in government and the armed forces. They called anyone and everyone who could bring political pressure to bear.

And the Soldiers' Aid Commission continued its work.

The Canteen Fund winds down

The Ontario Canteen Fund was finally exhausted in 1976 after more than five decades of benefitting Ontario Veterans.

The SAC had administered the fund for over 25 years, but at this time its balance of \$269 was formally subsumed within the SAC's budget. The Ontario Canteen Fund had helped thousands of Veterans over this period and was one of the most important financial resources for soldiers' social assistance in the twentieth century in Ontario.

As the 1970s closed, the Soldiers' Aid Commission was in a relatively healthy financial situation. In June of 1978, the Commission still had just over \$80,000 in cash in its savings account. That exceeded its annual requirements. Auditors recommended that the savings be invested in low-risk income securities to maximize earnings, and this was done.

The next 35 years would be marked by ongoing challenges and uncertainties for the Commission. These issues would be met head on by dedicated SAC Commissioners and staff.

The next 35 years would be marked by ongoing challenges and uncertainties for the Commission. These issues would be met head on by dedicated SAC Commissioners and staff.



Canadian members of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) on the border between Egypt and Israel, 1962.

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Chapter Six

Where We are Now – Today's SAC, 1980-2015

For the Soldier's Aid Commission, as for all public bodies involved in social welfare, the past 35 years have been filled with challenges. The Liberal/NDP "Accord" of 1985 began a social spending agenda that increased welfare and disability payments throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. But during these years, the federal Progressive Conservative government began massive cuts to provincial transfer payments, especially to Ontario.

Pressures to rationalize programs in the late 1980s led to an internal call to end the SAC. Only a call by Commissioner James. W. Smith to then-Treasurer Robert Nixon stopped the windup. Nixon had learned the importance of the Soldiers' Aid Commission from his father, Harry Nixon, who briefly served as Premier of Ontario in the 1940s.

Just as the NDP came to power under Bob Rae in 1990, the Ontario economy went into a deep recession. Manufacturing jobs were lost in the thousands and there were several consecutive years of double-digit unemployment in the province. Taxes were also very high. All of this, combined with the continuing cuts and limitations on transfer payments from the federal government, put the Rae administration in a difficult position. Its response was a "Social Contract" that would lead to severe budget cuts and public sector layoffs.

During this time, the SAC was once again under heavy scrutiny, but it survived the rounds of internal cuts. What saved it was the fact that it had its own legislation. It could not be silently killed. A Bill would have to be introduced to repeal it.

It is all a labour of love because none of them gets paid for what they do. And so to watch them, even at their ages, come with such joy and the gusto in them each month for us to have our meetings, and to discuss the different applications, and how generous they can be [up] to the limit to that they can go. It's a piece of the work that I wouldn't change.”

– Patricia Rollox,
SAC Operations
Assistant

The 1993 federal election of the Liberal Party did not help the Ontario situation. There were further deep cuts to federal transfer payments to the province. Then the Mike Harris Conservatives were elected in Ontario in 1995. Their “Common Sense Revolution” cut taxes and reduced welfare programs. They amalgamated municipal governments and downloaded many social costs to the cities. During 1996, a government task force reviewed all of Ontario’s agencies, boards, and commissions. Once again, the SAC escaped the axe. The task force acknowledged its need and value, but scheduled it for further review in five years.

By 2001, the meeting minutes of the Commissioners reflect a new, restrictive policy imposed by the provincial government that saw any “residue of funds...deducted from the next year’s grant” (SAC Minutes May 2001).

Early in the new millennium, the Eves government called for reviews of dozens of Ontario’s commissions, including the SAC. The report on the Commission concluded:

“Decisions about granting assistance may have been affected by an attitude of restraint, which is related to a felt lack of security for the ongoing provision of funding from the government. There has been a deliberate attempt to keep a low profile. It is felt that all other resources should be explored before coming to the Commission and that any attempt to advertise the service beyond the funding partners might lead to a demand for service that could not be met by the resources available” (Cornish & Associates 2002).

The Cornish report noted the high regard in which the SAC was held by the Canadian Legion, with the Commission receiving a 9 out of 10 rating in how well it carried out its mandate in meeting the needs of Veterans, especially aging widows with small incomes and higher needs (Cornish & Associates 2002).

The SAC in the present era

Regardless of these challenges, a high level of dedication and professionalism have continued to define the Commissioners and their staff. The SAC's current front-line Operations Assistant, Patricia Rollox, described the Commissioners as "unique":

“ Each one of them is unique in their own way, but they are invaluable and their service to the province, to the Veterans and to this ministry. It is all a labour of love because none of them get paid for what they do. And so to watch them even at their ages, come with such joy and the gusto in them each month for us to have our meetings, and to discuss the different applications, and how generous they can be [up] to the limit to that they can go. It's a piece of the work that I wouldn't change.”

The Soldiers' Aid Commission has enjoyed relative stability since 2003, its importance well-established within the Ministry of Community and Social Services. Hard work by individuals on both sides has strengthened the relationship between the SAC and the provincial government in

Dr. Clifford J. Williams,
SAC Commissioner, at
the 75th Anniversary
of the Ministry of
Community and Social
Services, 2005.



recent years. This, in turn, has allowed the Commissioners and staff to better focus on the needs of Veterans.

The Commission includes a maximum of seven volunteer Commissioners and a staff of one. The Commission's Chair is appointed by the Minister of Community and Social Services. The SAC continues to provide financial assistance to Ontario Veterans in need who served overseas and their surviving dependants living in the province. In 2006, the SAC's mandate was expanded officially to Veterans who served in Canada exclusively, not overseas. This issue had been broached as early as the First World War, and at various times since when investigators and Commissioners provided funds to soldiers who had been injured or were otherwise unable to serve overseas.

Applications for assistance are available through the Royal Canadian Legions (Ontario Command), Veterans Affairs Canada, and the Royal Canadian Navy Benevolent Funds. Officials at the Veterans Affairs offices in Ontario go through the requests, then make referrals to the SAC on a monthly basis. As of 2015, the Commissioners can approve up to \$2000 per individual case. The annual funds paid out approach \$200,000 – a minimal cost to the province.

The SAC provides assistance on a one-time basis, within a 24-month period, to resolve a specific problem when all other resources have been exhausted. (After that, Veterans or their families can apply again for a new issue.) Funds may be granted to assist with the purchase of health-related items, eyeglasses, and basic dental needs, home repairs, home utility costs, moving costs, rent payments, furniture and assistive devices such as hearing aids. The Commission is unable to support ongoing needs related to income deficiencies. But in reality, life events like falls in old age,

sudden illness, or involuntary family breakup often cause situations that prompt applications from people trying to live on inadequate resources.

A great deal of networking takes place among Veterans' organizations to maximize the aid given to qualified applicants. These networks, whether formal or informal, have been an integral part of aid delivery over the past 100 years. In the most recent two decades, agencies such as the Royal Canadian Air Force Benevolent Fund (established in 1934), have worked in tandem with the SAC to provide assistance.

The collective expertise of the Commissioners is also critical. Because many Commissioners have served with other Veterans' associations and various levels of government, they can often point the way to additional funding opportunities, such as unclaimed pensions for Veterans' widows and their dependants. James W. Smith, who served as the SAC's Chair up until his death early in 2015, put it this way:

“ And Al [SAC Commissioner Alfred H.L. Harris] makes them go and put in for it. They're getting one pension they're entitled to that they're not getting. And they don't know. Their husband never brought them in. He ran things and when he passed away, she's left out on a limb. So, it's amazing – Al spots these things right away and John [Commissioner John Stapleton] does too. I don't know anything about it at all. And so that's one part of our job is that I'm so proud of that these guys spot this.”

A great deal of networking takes place among Veterans' organizations to maximize the aid given to qualified applicants. These networks, whether formal or informal, have been an integral part of aid delivery over the past 100 years.

Deep gratitude and renewed hope

Gratitude is easy to find in the hundreds of letters that the SAC has received over a century. A woman in London, Ontario, expressed her thanks in 2003 for being released from her lack of mobility. She wrote: "After years of being relatively housebound, I will now be able to have a reasonably active life and thank you again for your care... It's a wonderful feeling of freedom to have the scooter and big relief to pay off the bank loan which I did yesterday. You have made an old lady very happy."

Former Chair J.W. Smith and MPP Madeleine Meilleur (then Minister of Community and Social Services) signing a Memorandum of Understanding between the SAC and the MCSS, 2007.

The Commission sees the effects of its work daily. The SAC's Operations Assistant Patricia Rollox emphasizes that "So many of them are in desperate need. And this is the great part of the work that the Commission does. Especially when most of our clientele are in their late 80s, early 90s; some are 99. We've had some old as 101. And they are in crisis, they need the help and we are able to help."

Some attitudes, now more than a century old, remain. There is a stigma attached to seeking social assistance in any form. As

a result, many applicants are concerned about discretion and privacy. Rolrox notes, "So many of them will tell you, 'I don't want you taking my application to the Legion. I don't want them to know that I'm in need. I don't want it to seem like I'm asking for anything'." This is no reflection on the Legion and its priceless work. It speaks more to the



stigma attached to citizens receiving public aid when in need.

Rollox says the level of gratitude is emotionally overwhelming at times. There is sadness too, that, despite the hopes of those who have been associated with the SAC over 100 years, more could not be done. She recalls this conversation with one Veteran's widow:

“I called her and out of her mouth one of the first things in tears she said to me, ‘One day I will be able to pay you guys back.’ And I had to tell her ‘There is no paying back. This is why we exist, to assist’.”

Because Ontario's Soldiers' Aid Commission exists to pay Veterans in need **back**.

"One day I will be able to pay you guys back.' And I had to tell her 'There is no paying back. This is why we exist, to assist".



Front row:
Commissioners
Al Harris, Colin Rowe,
and John Stapleton
Back row: Commissioner
William Earle Thomas,
Minister of Community
and Social Services
Dr. Helena Jaczek, and
Commissioner
Homer Brooks

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World War II
service medals



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CDOD	Canada Department of Defence
GC	Government of Canada
LAC	Library and Archives of Canada
NA	U.S. National Archives

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The History of the SAC

The Soldiers' Aid Commission was set up by Order-in-Council in 1915 and given Royal Assent April 27, 1916, as the First World War raged and Canadian fighting men returned from its horrors in great need of social supports.

The Commission was conceived as a service bureau to help with Veterans' rehabilitation, re-education, and workforce re-entry. It soon found itself called upon to support their families as well, providing assistance to Veterans' widows and taking orphaned and abandoned children into care. The Commissioners were also advocates, leading the fight for pensions.

The Commission's work has continued in ever-evolving forms up to the present day. It now receives its authority from the Soldiers' Aid Amendment Act of 1970. 2015 marks the centenary of the Commission, and this book tells the story of its century of service to Veterans and their families.

James Onusko has written articles on Canadian politics, the history of childhood, oral history, and Canadian history more generally. He has won several scholarships and awards during his academic career including the Queen Elizabeth II scholarship and an Ontario Graduate Scholarship. He earned a PhD in Canadian Studies from Trent University in 2014. His doctoral dissertation, which focuses on Canada's postwar suburbs through the lens of childhood and adolescence, will be published in book form in early 2016. He currently teaches history and gender & women's studies at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario. He lives in Peterborough with his wife and two children.

John Stapleton has been a Commissioner with the Ontario Soldiers' Aid Commission since 2003. He worked for the Ontario Government in the Ministry of Community and Social Services and its predecessors for 28 years in the areas of social assistance policy and operations. During his early career, John was senior policy advisor to the Social Assistance Review Committee. His more recent government work concerned the implementation of the National Child Benefit. John teaches a popular course on public policy for community advocates and is extensively published in local and national media. He is a fellow at the Metcalf Foundation.