



## *War Junk: Munitions Disposal and Postwar Reconstruction in Canada*

by Alex Souchen.

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As the fourth largest Allied producer of military material, Canada was an arsenal for democracy during the Second World War; Canada produced 800,000 military transport vehicles, 50,000 tanks, 40,000 guns and artillery, 1.7 million small arms, 16,418 aircraft, over 4,000 ships, and a vast array of sundry components and kit items.<sup>1</sup> What happened to all this detritus of war once the fighting ceased is the subject of Alex Souchen's *War Junk*. Souchen (PhD, Univ. of Western Ontario, 2016) used government records and reports, contemporary periodicals, and other primary documents in this well researched work that crosses the boundaries of military, environmental, waste, and material histories.

This book argues that the death of war machines was really their rebirth.... In that sense, the death of war machines was not something to lament, nor was it the final chapter of an object's existence. Rather, it was a necessary reincarnation: between 1943 and 1948 Canadians fused the tools of war into the tools of peace. (5)

Swords refashioned into plowshares were just one of the contradictions Souchen discusses. He contends that the surplus military material, broadly defined, lived a second, peaceful life, and played a vital role in Canada's postwar political and social development. "In effect, the disposal of surplus assets became enmeshed in the early development of Canada's welfare state" (23).

Informed by their First World War experience and driven by a desire to avoid another Great Depression, the Canadian government established a system to slowly release surplus military items to the marketplace in a way that supported rather than hindered economic growth. By fall 1944, it had fashioned a legal framework to manage the transition to peace with a War Assets Commission (WAC) tasked as the responsible agency.

The government assigned the WAC three critical objectives. In the first place, to promote economic growth and recovery by preventing the glut of goods that occurred after the Great War. Secondly, regarding the budget, to recover as much of the enormous expense of the war as it could through sales of surplus military items. Ironically, as Souchen points out, taxpayers paid twice for the same item: first, to build it, and then to decommission, sell, or destroy it. Sales of surplus items brought \$500 million to the Canadian treasury. The third imperative was to dispose of ammunition, unexploded ordnance, chemicals, and other substances too dangerous for private use.

The WAC created strict regulations through licensed companies (priority holders) that used existing commercial networks to deliver items to the market in a controlled and efficient way.

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1. "Canadian Production of War Materials," Veterans Affairs Canada; "Canada and the War," Democracy at War, Canadian War Museum. Available online.

Although the WAC was confident in its plan, the enormity of rapid demobilization after V-E Day quickly forced it to decentralize and loosen its more rigid rules.

Sales of wartime buildings and properties caused a major storage conundrum. The stress on cost cutting and recouping money led to low wages, few benefits, and no pensions, which forced the WAC to rely on temporary workers. Rapid demobilization also limited the ability to draw on experts in the armed forces who were trained in several unique areas, such as explosives and the mechanics of military vehicles. At the management level, the return of the “dollar-a-year” executives to the private sector created a brain drain. Equipment scattered in out-of-the-way places and the handling of hazardous materials presented serious logistical hurdles. Being a governmental agency liaising between the military and private sectors put the WAC in an unenviable middle-man position.

The WAC sometimes failed to meet these challenges, but overall, Souchen gives it a favorable rating. He cites examples of fraud or mismanagement, but theft was small scale, consisting of isolated cases of warehouse break-ins.

*War Junk* is also part of an exciting recent merger of environmental and military history. Although the WAC moved as much surplus material onto the consumer market as it could, many items were unsuited for civilian purposes. These were abandoned in place, destroyed, or dumped. Seventy-five years later Canada continues to pay an environmental cost for its mishandling of this material. Ammunition was dumped in the ocean to prevent its finding a way into the international arms market. Souchen notes that over three thousand contaminated sites off the coast of Canada continue to leak harmful chemicals into the ocean. Other material was burned, releasing toxins into the air with little effort to protect workers or nearby population centers. Hardware, including vehicles filled with gas, oil, and other fluids in far off locations, particularly the Arctic, were deemed too costly to move. One can still see their rusted remnants where they were left seventy years ago. The attempt to redeem precious metals from ordnance led to long-term contamination in recreational areas like Simmes Lake and Georgian Bay, Ontario.

On the other hand, decommissioned surplus provided many long-lasting social benefits. Liquidation of buildings and properties benefited hospitals, schools, colleges and universities, and alleviated the postwar housing shortage. The healthcare system and Red Cross received valuable medicines and equipment. Educational facilities, small businesses, and farmers purchased furniture, tools, and many other surplus items at bargain prices.

With the third largest navy in the world at war's end, Canada's corvettes, frigates, mine trawlers, and other ships were transformed into fishing and merchant marine vessels and even yachts. Airlines purchased considerable amounts of materials and property. Large automotive firms acquired spare parts and components from tens of thousands of disassembled vehicles. Construction companies obtained both heavy equipment and parts like doors, windows, electrical wiring, flooring, light fixtures and switches, plumbing, grates, toilets, sinks, and a host of other objects sold from dismantled buildings. Manufacturers and suppliers of all types procured machinery and real estate from the WAC. In addition, radios, tools, wires, nuts, bolts, screws, and seats, lived another life refashioned as, or, made part of a new, consumer item. Even scrap dealers enjoyed a boom selling what others would not buy from “boneyards” of decommissioned airplanes, automobiles, and ships.

Individuals, too, could purchase items. The phenomenon of “barnyard bombers” offers a metaphor for the entire project of finding peaceful uses for war materials in Canada.

In fact, the acquisition of “barnyard bombers” became commonplace and an integral part of farm life in the late 1940s. Since these aircraft contained several thousand components, they were verita-

ble treasure chests of goods, materials, and technologies. When configured as an aircraft, the parts had little value for farmers, but if they were broken apart, the salvaged components could be reused for different purposes or integrated into new technological systems. In that sense, barnyard bombers (like many other surplus assets) were valuable to Canadians only if their forms and functions were transformed. (170)

Equipment left in Europe at the end of the war was given to allies, like the Netherlands, who used it in their attempt to re-establish its empire in the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia). Canada used some military hardware in Europe as assets to pay off war debt or exchanged them for war credits. Such an arrangement liquidated Canada's debt to Great Britain. Unlike the case in other nations, few of Canada's firearms made their way onto the surplus market. If not sold to nations for military purposes these weapons were broken to prevent future use.

With *War Junk*, Alex Souchen has made a well researched, interesting contribution to an emerging, very pertinent field of scholarship. The environmental problems caused by the destruction of surplus materials and the Canadian experience after its withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2013 in the wake of the 2009 Great Recession show that the lessons of 1945 remain relevant seven decades later.