

OPO Perspectives

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150 Years of Procurement: Canada at War

With the onset of the First World War, demand grew for a more timely and transparent procurement system in Canada. In response to a lack of centralization and oversight of the procurement process, the Government of Canada established the Imperial Munitions Board and the War Purchasing Commission in 1915. The Board coordinated British contracts with Canadian businesses and developed a network of factories to create products for the war effort, while the Commission provided greater oversight of the procurement process by monitoring all Canadian war purchases.

While important advancements were made, several challenges in the field of Canadian military procurement showed that the country still had a ways to go. An early attempt at military procurement during this time was that of the Ross Rifle. The country attempted and succeeded in developing and purchasing its own weapons. However, the Ross Rifles were not well received by the Canadian military because of their tendency to jam, making them unreliable for use in the trenches. Another attempt made in 1936 to develop the Bren Gun resulted in issues regarding how the contract was awarded.

The onset of World War II in 1939 brought about the development of the War Supply Board, later named the Department of Munitions and Supply, which was intended to centralize defence procurement under a single banner. Under the Government of William Lyon Mackenzie King, Minister Clarence Decatur (C.D.) Howe was selected to oversee the Department. Howe, who had made his fortune in producing grain elevators in the Prairies, was tasked with mobilizing industries for the war effort. Howe rallied Canadian businesses for the cause, and these in-turn produced half a million vehicles, more than 600 ships and millions of military products – all high quality, all produced in Canada and all purchased by the Federal Government. The large-scale manufacturing of these military products resulted in increased demand for workers within the country, which brought women to the forefront – many of them worked in factories producing munitions for the war. Throughout the war, the number of women holding permanent jobs in these industries doubled from 600,000 to 1.2 million workers.

At the war's conclusion in 1945, the Government shifted its focus toward reconstruction efforts. Howe continued to oversee the newly formed Department of Reconstruction and Supply, this time under the Government of Louis St. Laurent. Procurement in war was characterized by the centralization and specialization of duties, while procurement in times of peace evolved in a different direction: improving the procurement system through legislation and technology.

Next Chapter: Procurement in Peacetime



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