

Major-General G. R. Pearkes and the Conscription Crisis in British Columbia, 1944

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In the spring of 1943, the 6th and 8th Divisions in Pacific Command and the 7th Division in Atlantic Command, together with the units on garrison duty in both commands, had reached a total of some 60,000 other ranks. Of this number about 63 per cent were conscripted under the National Resources Mobilization Act, but this still left a large number of volunteers or General Service soldiers who could be siphoned into the overseas reinforcement stream when required.¹ During the year it became increasingly obvious that the large force at home protecting Canada was no longer necessary, and as a result the decision was made to disband the 7th and 8th Division and reduce some of the garrison units.

In the west, the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief was Major-General G. R. Pearkes, VC, DSO, MC, who had been appointed to that post in October 1942. In mid-September 1943 he had been informed that he would have available as operation troops three infantry brigade groups, each of four battalions, as well as Headquarters, 6th Division. In addition, for coastal defence, he would have four infantry and one reconnaissance unit. The reorganization of the 6th Division "was designed to permit the use of one or more of the brigade groups in 'further operations against the Japanese in the north Pacific area, in co-operation with United States forces'," ² an idea Pearkes had been promoting for almost a year. Indeed, at the time the new reorganization came into effect, the 13th Brigade, as part of "Greenlight Force", was in Kiska, where several

¹ Colonel C. P. Stacey, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, Vol. I, Six Years of War: The Army in Canada, Britain and the Pacific* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1955), p. 184. Although all volunteers, many of them, for reasons of health, age, et cetera, would never be selected for service overseas.

² *Ibid.*, p. 185.

months earlier it had been part of an American-Canadian assault force sent to seize the last of the Japanese-held islands in the Aleutians.

As a result of the new directives from Ottawa late in 1943, as well as further orders in the same vein in 1944, Pearkes stated later that

... the policy changed, as far as I was concerned, ... from keeping the 6th and 8th Divisions keyed up as much as we could against the possibility of an attack, to one in which the 6th Division was to prepare itself for any commitment which might occur in the Pacific. It therefore had to be at a higher standard of training. Up to that time my main interest had been to try and maintain the units and the divisions for the defence of this coast. Now I made a distinct switch as far as the 8th Division and other units were concerned to try and get men to volunteer. I went around to unit after unit ... urging the NRMA men to volunteer. I spoke to battalion after battalion on parade ... urging them to volunteer. [My theme was that] it was your duty now to volunteer. Reinforcements are urgently required, and while the government isn't going to take the step to order you overseas, as many men as possible should volunteer. This applied to all units other than the 6th Division during the winter of 1943-44.³

While working to have as many Home Defence men in part of his command to volunteer for overseas service during the winter and on into 1944, Pearkes was equally keen on training those who remained in the 6th Division for possible service against the Japanese. He had promoted in his command the Japanese Language School, the Jungle and Mountain Warfare Schools, and the secondment of officers to American and Australian formations in South East Asia to gain experience. He put considerable pressure on Ottawa, with some success, to enlarge the Combined Operations School at Courtenay and made sure that each of the brigades were trained in assault landing. Although with every passing week Pearkes felt the possibility of a Japanese raid on the British Columbian Coast became increasingly remote, he did not think it inconceivable that the 6th Division might be used in the Pacific Theatre. Thus the infantrymen in Pacific Command during 1944 reached a very high degree of training, even though the Prime Minister's decision on their eventual use remained somewhat vague.⁴

As the time for the allied invasion of France drew closer, and as a result of the steady stream of casualties arising from the operations of the

³ Interview with Major-General G. R. Pearkes, 21 September 1966, pp. 8-9. (Transcripts of this and other interviews are in the possession of the writer).

⁴ Speaking in London a few weeks before D Day, Mr. Mackenzie King stated: "Today our army awaits the word of command to join with their comrades in the liberation of Europe. The morrow will witness Canadian forces taking part in a final assault upon Japan." (*The London Times*, 12 May 1944, p. 8).

Canadian Corps in Italy, the pressure on the military Districts and Commands in Canada to convert more NRMA conscripts to volunteers for overseas service increased. More volunteers were taken from the 6th Division in British Columbia, although Pearkes warned Ottawa that the loss "would seriously retard the more advanced training of remaining personnel in companies and units."⁵ He was well aware of the need, however, and indeed he suggested to the Adjutant General, Major-General H. F. G. Letson, that one way to encourage the conscripts to "go active" might be to propose to a regiment that it would be sent over as a body if all the NRMA men in the unit became volunteers. Letson approved the idea, proposed it to the Chief of the General Staff, and it was decided to try it out on the 13th Brigade, which had returned a few months earlier from Kiska.

The attempt to get all the NRMA men in this brigade to volunteer can only be described here briefly. Pearkes regarded it as one of the best in his command, and the fact that he was enthusiastic that it should be used in an experiment which, if successful, would see it leave for the United Kingdom, was indicative of his belief that the call for reinforcements overseas must be given first priority. He knew that morale in the brigade was high both from reports he had had as well as personal visits he made to the units in the Aleutians. He also felt confident that, when the Home Defence men were told of the need overseas, there would be large numbers who would convert to General Service status.

When the 13th Brigade returned from Kiska the men were given thirty days' furlough, and it was not until the latter part of February 1944 that the last group returned to camp. Brigadier W. H. S. Macklin, who assumed command of the formation in February, soon became aware of a considerable drop in the men's morale upon their return. Quite a few men did not return at all, and in the Regiment de Hull, over 60 men were later classified as deserters. As Macklin wrote in May:

... the lowering of morale was not due to bad quarters, bad food, bad clothing or lack of amusement. It was almost entirely due to deep rooted belief among other ranks that they would never be sent to fight, and their intense desire to get out of the army and get back home to the farm or the factory. One padre said, accurately enough, that it was due to a complete absence of any spiritual or moral driving force.⁶

⁵ W.D., G.S., H.Q., Pacific Command, 7 February 1944.

⁶ N.D.H.Q., Directorate of History, file: "Report by Brigadier W. H. S. Macklin, May 2nd, 1944, Mobilization of 13 Bde. On An Active Basis."

There were other factors working on the brigade to shape its attitude during the early part of 1944. While in training for Kiska, and when in Kiska itself, the men had not been allowed to go on special leave to work on the farms or in the forests. This order was rescinded, and senior officers in the brigade were besieged with requests for compassionate farm leave. In March, Macklin received orders from Ottawa instructing him to gather together as many junior officers as he could who would volunteer to serve with the British Army as CanLoan officers. When this became known, it further reinforced the opinion of many soldiers that their regiments would never be called upon to fight. Despite these, Macklin agreed with Pearkes that the scheme to convert the entire brigade to active status should be backed to the hilt.

To say that it was an uphill struggle would be a massive understatement. Well over 80 per cent of the men in the brigade were NRMA soldiers, including a larger proportion of junior and senior NCOs. Transferring volunteers from other units in Pacific Command to the 13th Brigade gave impetus to the conversion rate, as did the transfer from the brigade of known "hard core" resisters to changing status. Three officers who had won the Victoria Cross — Lt.-Col. John MacGregor, Lt.-Col. Paul Triquet and Pearkes himself — spoke with all the eloquence they could muster to the battalions. So, too, did the padres in the units, the officers, and civilian speakers. By about mid-April, aside from the officers, there were almost 2,000 men in the brigade who were volunteers, but of that number almost half had been transferred from other units. Starting from a nucleus of 370 volunteers on April 1, the intensive drive during that month had resulted in a conversion of only about ten NMRA men per day by the end of the third week in April.⁷

By May 1, a few days before those volunteering for overseas service were due to go on embarkation leave, approximately 2,500 officers and men paraded for inspection. Of this number about half were reinforcements from other units, about one-third had converted from their former NRMA status, and the remainder had been serving as volunteers in the brigade group. Shortly after their parade, officers and men were sent on the first leg of their journey to Great Britain. The Minister of National Defence, the Hon. J. L. Ralston, sent Pearkes a telegram congratulating him for "a very excellent job" and appreciating that it had been "a piece of hard work for all of you".⁸ Pearkes was now more aware than ever

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ P.A.C., Ralston Papers, Vol. 81, Box 45, Telegram, Ralston to Pearkes, 2 May 1944.

before of the difficulties involved in getting "HD" men to convert to "GS" status, but he remained optimistic. As he wrote at the time:

While admittedly the going was much harder than we expected, I do not think we really did too badly, and an encouraging sign is that there is a feeling abroad amongst other units in the Command that more NRMA soldiers are likely to go active.⁹

During the late spring and summer of 1944 Pearkes continued both to maintain as high a standard of training in his Command as was possible and at the same time encourage a stream of conversions for overseas service. Not infrequently the two conflicted, and to add to the problem as the warm weather approached increasing pressure was placed on him to release men. As he put it:

The Department of Agriculture was always urging me to release soldiers for seeding and harvesting operations and at the same time the Department of National Defence was urging me to get these soldiers trained and to go active. . . . Time and again the Deputy Minister of Agriculture would ring me up [and say] 'we've got to have more men released; we've got to get this crop in.' Some men went practically for the whole summer. They went home for seeding, they stayed for haying and they were again granted leave for harvesting. They were only too anxious to come back in the winter because there was nothing to do on the farm. And these men never did get trained and they formed the hard core of the resistance movement against volunteering. . . .

The conflicting policies of these two Departments made it extremely difficult for me. Naturally I had Murchie and others urging me to get them trained men. . . . I put requirements of the Department of National Defence first, and [yet] Jimmy Gardiner [Minister of Agriculture] said that I never did understand the importance of producing food.¹⁰

While he continued to stress the need for overseas reinforcements to his commanding officers,¹¹ late in May Pearkes was informed by Ottawa that National Defence Headquarters had decided to conduct an intensified campaign both to recruit men into the army as well as to convert more NRMA soldiers to GS status. Once again he called his commanding officers together and emphasized the importance of the new campaign. "Success can be obtained," he said, "only by the concerted action, unselfish efforts and whole-hearted co-operation of all concerned. These I know you will give."¹²

⁹ Directorate of History, Pearkes to Macklin, Personal and Secret, 13 May 1944.

¹⁰ Interview with Major-General G. R. Pearkes, 29 September 1966, pp. 14-15.

¹¹ See, for example, W.D., G.S., H.Q., Pacific Command, 15 May 1944.

¹² *Ibid.*, June 1944, Appendix 1-2: "Intensified Recruiting Activities, Pacific Command, May 29th, 1944".

The campaign during the summer and autumn of 1944 to recruit men for the army as well as to convert NRMA soldiers was the most intensive ever taken. In almost every newspaper recruiting advertisements urged young men to volunteer, and newspaper editors added their voice on the editorial page. On the radio there were regular half-hour recruiting programs with a mixture of martial music, patriotic songs and appeals stressing the need to maintain the pressure on the enemy. On June 6, when the allies invaded Normandy, there was tremendous enthusiasm from which recruiting officers benefited, but the pace never slackened. There were window displays in stores, military ceremonies and mobile recruiting vans at town fairs, parades and band concerts in towns and cities, and honour roll ceremonies in villages. Restaurants printed recruiting messages on their menus and public utilities enclosed them in their monthly bills. Theatres showed recruiting "clips" to their audiences. Recruiting posters and cut-outs were placed in as many public buildings as possible, while in rural areas army projectionists showed army films to service clubs and any other audience they could gather. Militia regiments put on military tattoos and displayed equipment in public parks. With the co-operation of civic officials, street decorations and sidewalk stencils carried the message to every passerby. Newspaper men and journalists were urged to visit training centres in the command and encouraged to write up what they saw. Recruiting stickers were carried on automobile bumpers and windshields, and if a person travelled by bus or tramcar, he or she was bound to see advertisements with a recruiting theme. In the churches many of the clergy spoke out in no uncertain terms about the necessity to defeat the dictators who flaunted their contempt for the Christian religion. Special speakers, including labour union officials, businessmen, journalists, academics and others, used the public platform or the radio to proclaim the army's need for men, and on every occasion when there was a parade, rally, fair, sports match or any other affair likely to gather an audience, one was bound to see an army float, plastered with displays, with a nearby sound truck adding the vocal to the visual message.

Pearkes himself, of course, was as involved in the campaign as deeply as anyone. Each week he had a detailed report made to him on all these activities and held a conference with his staff and heads of services to discuss the drive and to plan ways of improving the campaign. He spoke to as many groups and clubs as he could, in Vancouver as well as around the province. He gave his support to "The Green Patch",¹³ a command

¹³ Named after the green, diamond-shaped patch worn on the sleeves of all members of Pacific Command.

publication designed to give information about recruiting and stimulate the conversion of NRMA men. By July 11, he was able to advise Ottawa that a little more than 2,000 soldiers had converted during June, but as the summer months went by and the casualties in Italy and France mounted steadily, the imbalance between the reinforcement need and those available permitted no let-up in the campaign. With the training season at its height, Pearkes, using RCAF aircraft and taking advantage of the numerous airfields which had been built in British Columbia, found himself busier than ever. Despite his frequent trips, he kept the campaign under very close scrutiny. Towards the end of August, at one of his weekly conferences, Pearkes warned his staff that "the supply of reinforcements is precarious. Every effort must be made to meet these needs [for reinforcements]," he added, "regardless of a Commanding Officer's feelings towards his unit."¹⁴

The drying up of the reinforcement stream was becoming a very critical matter to Colonel Ralston, the Minister of National Defence. The enthusiasm engendered by the Normandy landings had resulted in 3,259 NRMA men throughout Canada converting to GS status. This figure had been reduced by about 60 per cent in July, and by October there were only 967 conversions. General Service enlistments also dropped, though not as dramatically. It is not the intention here to go into details regarding the optimistic forecast made in mid-summer about the ability of the Canadian Army to provide sufficient reinforcements to meet the anticipated needs of the formations in the field. Sufficient it is to say that the forecasts regarding infantry reinforcements were soon proved to be inaccurate, as were other forecasts regarding the early collapse of Germany. Increasing complaints from formations in the overseas theatres regarding the difficulties they were encountering to maintain infantry battalions up to their proper strength resulted in Colonel Ralston's decision to visit Italy and France late in September. After touring both battle fronts for over a fortnight, Ralston returned to Canada on October 18. When he cabled the Prime Minister a few days prior to his return intimating the results of his investigation, Mr. Mackenzie King felt that Ralston would suggest the conscription of NRMA soldiers. If this was the case, then he would face the same crisis which he had seen rip apart the Liberal Party in 1917. That evening he recorded the depth of his feelings in his diary:

... I could not bring myself to being the head of the Government which would take that course — a course which might, after five years of war in

¹⁴ W.D., G.S., H.Q., Pacific Command, August 1944, Appendix 1-25: "Notes on staff conference held by G.O.C.-in-C., Pacific Command, 21 August 1944."

Europe, and preparation of another year and a half of another war in the Pacific — lead to spurts of civil war in our country. It would be a criminal thing, and would destroy the entire war record, as well as help dismember the Empire, for I am certain that its after effects would be all in the direction of demand for complete independence, if not annexation with the U.S. Anything to be separated from being in wars because of Britain's connection with them. I want to see the Empire endure. It can only endure by there being complete national unity in Canada. This is going to be a trying experience for me. Indeed, Ralston has been a thorn in my flesh right along.¹⁵

Any hopes that Mr. King may have entertained that his Minister of National Defence might have found some means of providing reinforcements other than by conscription were soon shattered. Ralston did feel that conscription was necessary and during the last week of October the issue dominated the attention of the cabinet. King's attitude from the beginning was summed up in his diary notes dealing with the cabinet meeting of October 24: "... If we are driven to extremes indicated [i.e. conscription], the Liberal party would be completely destroyed and not only immediately but for indefinite time to come. That the only party that would gain would be the C.C.F. who would be handed ... complete control of government."¹⁶

The Prime Minister made every attempt to avoid the crisis which loomed higher day by day. He and his supporters made a variety of suggestions, coupled with dire warnings, to the conscriptionist element in the cabinet. There was the suggestion that, with certain financial inducements, more NRMA soldiers might be persuaded (bribed would be a better word) to volunteer. King suggested that he might make a personal tour of the NRMA camps, and at one point even proposed that the gaps in the ranks of French-Canadian battalions overseas might be filled with Frenchmen. He stressed the danger a conscriptionist policy would have on Canada, that not only would national unity be shattered but there might even be civil conflict. He suggested that there should be reductions in the establishment of the Canadian forces in the field. He cabled Churchill enquiring about the possible length of the war and the need to impose conscription, but his hope for a reply which would undermine the arguments propounded by Ralston was not forthcoming. No matter which way King turned, there seemed to be no denying the need for trained infantrymen, and the greatest source of these was among the numerous

¹⁵ C. P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939-45* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1970), p. 443.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 446-447.

battalions in Canada which were filled with NRMA men who had been trained for years but had no desire to go overseas.

The Prime Minister's desire to avoid having to impose conscription by any means open to him was so intense that it led him to seek out General A. G. L. MacNaughton, who had relinquished the command of the Canadian Army in December 1943 and who had been living in Ottawa since that time. While King was secretly conferring with the former army commander, Ralston was wondering whether a massive but short campaign to get more men to go active might possibly work. Late in the morning of November 1, he called Pearkes and inquired about the possibility of getting a substantial number of conversions in the next few weeks. Pearkes told him that, through the efforts already made, the officers in the Command "... had gotten much of the cream away already". He added that most of the units had been stripped of their General Service NCOs, and that the men had a very negative attitude and wanted only to return to civil life.¹⁷

A short time later, when Ralston was discussing the matter with his colleague, the Hon. A. L. Macdonald, Minister of Defence for Naval Services, presumably Ralston told him about the depressing news he had received from Pearkes. Macdonald decided to phone Pearkes himself, since Pacific Command contained the greatest number of NRMA personnel. It was two o'clock in the afternoon in Ottawa, a little more than an hour before the cabinet was to meet. An outline of the telephone conversation between Pearkes and Macdonald was kept, and is given below as recorded:

MACDONALD — Would an appeal of ten days be long enough?

PEARKES — doubts whether it would. The camps are scattered. One would have to go to Vernon, Prince George, Terrace and Nanaimo.

MACDONALD — Have there been any appeals by civilians?

PEARKES — No. The men question if the army is giving them the true picture. There is a feeling that the army officers may be exaggerating. There will be no mass conversion among the men. They will take time to talk it over.

Within a week after the visit most of the men would have made up their minds.

Assuming you started your appeal on the 6th November and finished, say on the 15th, you should know the results by November 30th.

Thinks it would be dangerous to have the Prime Minister make an appeal. If the Prime Minister came, they could not allow the appeal to fail. Col.

¹⁷ P.A.C., Ralston Papers, Vol. 43, Box 31, Loose-leaf notebook.

Ralston might get better results. You might get 2,000 - 3,000 in three weeks. At present getting 10 - 20 recruits a day.

It might be well to say that if this appeal fails, we will resort to conscription, but Pearkes doubts it. If this were said, the men would say "We will hang back and wait until the government tells us."

It would be well for the Prime Minister to make a radio address or a written appeal supporting the appeal made by Col. Ralston at the camps.

Re question as to attitude of the men towards active service.

PEARKES — In the first place most of them will not be moved by any desire to go active.

They will say the war is nearly over; "We have been told that there are enough reinforcements for this year. Some people don't want us anyhow. We want to go back to civil life as quickly as possible and think the chances of getting back are much better if we do not go overseas".

Most of them say, "If the government tells us to go, we will go".

If we said we intended to invoke a conscription there would be no trouble in the camps. There would be a few deserters but probably less than there were before the departure of the Kiska operation. In fact the men would heave a sigh of relief and say, "Well, that has been settled for us."¹⁸

At the time this conversation was going on, the Prime Minister was putting the final touches on his plan to get rid of Ralston should the Minister of Defence not agree to withdraw his demand for conscription. Ralston, having questioned Pearkes and presumably others on the merits of the last appeal, was still unable to see any way of meeting the requirements of the soldiers fighting overseas in the time to meet the need. Shortly after three o'clock the cabinet met, and in one of the cleverest manoeuvres in his political career the Prime Minister managed to dismiss Ralston and replace him with MacNaughton without splitting his cabinet.

Probably, as his biographer states, MacNaughton really did think the voluntary method would work if he told the nation how great the need was. At the same time, when he accepted his new position, he had not studied the situation. Ralston, in suggesting conscription to the cabinet, had not only visited the war front but acted on the considered opinion of his advisors and his general staff. MacNaughton, as one shrewd observer pointed out at the time, "... has said that he does not agree with the military authorities."¹⁹

After only one day in office, MacNaughton came to the conclusion that the 15,000 or 16,000 trained reinforcements needed in Europe by the

¹⁸ Ralston Papers, *op. cit.*, It should be noted that Pearkes thought in terms of a conscription order which would affect *all* NRMA men, not a portion of them.

¹⁹ *Vancouver Sun*, 7 November 1944, p. 1.

end of December would have to be obtained from among the NRMA personnel. Apparently considering that the strongest weapon available was his own reputation, and that if he told them of the need the NRMA men would surely respond, he decided that he would speak on November 5 at Arnprior and on the following day to an Ottawa branch of the Canadian Legion. Neither speech was well received, nor was the speech given by the Prime Minister over the national radio system two days later. MacNaughton's next move was to call together in Ottawa all his senior army officers and order them to approach the Home Defence soldiers once again. MacNaughton knew almost every one of the senior officers personally, and, as his biographer relates, he counted on inspiring them with some of his own zeal and enthusiasm.

A few minutes after nine o'clock on the morning of November 14, MacNaughton walked into the Defence Council Chamber where the senior district and command officers had gathered to meet him. He was followed by his senior staff officers in Ottawa.²⁰ After a brief welcome, the Chairman introduced MacNaughton. He was blunt and to the point. He outlined the need for trained infantry reinforcements, and stated his intention of reducing the size and number of units in Canada and of cutting to the bone the number of soldiers working temporarily in civilian occupations. The main thrust of his speech, however, was his announcement that it would be government policy to continue to reinforce the army overseas with volunteers, and that obviously it was the duty of the senior officers to use "... every means ... to enlist the support of the public and to emphasize to NRMA personnel the opportunity and public responsibility which is theirs in this time of national emergency."²¹

Having completed his speech, in which he drew attention to the Prime Minister's recent appeal on the radio, MacNaughton put his papers in his dispatch case and began to leave the room. For a moment there was a complete silence. Other officers, as well as Pearkes, must have wondered whether or not MacNaughton had any idea of what had been done already to get the NRMA soldiers to go active. It appeared, as one District Officer Commanding put it later, that "MacNaughton thought he could tell us what to do and we'd do it and it would be alright."²²

²⁰ The Chief of the General Staff (Lt.-Gen. J. C. Murchie), the Adjutant-General (Maj.-Gen. A. E. Walford), the Quarter-Master General (Maj.-Gen. H. A. Young), the Master General of the Ordnance (Maj.-Gen. J. V. Young), and the Vice-Chief of the General Staff (Maj.-Gen. R. B. Gibson). Murchie acted as Chairman.

²¹ Directorate of History, HQS 20-6, Vol. 81; "Minutes of a Conference ... 14 November, 1944".

²² Interview with Major-General A. E. Potts, 15 October 1971, p. 14.

He had just about reached the door of the room when several officers rose from their seats. Among them was Pearkes, who called out: "Don't you wish to hear the reports from the District Officers Commanding?"²³ MacNaughton hesitated but turned back and heard some of the comments his senior officers made. They told him briefly of the tremendous efforts which had already been made to get the Home Defence men to volunteer, the limited success they had and the poor prospects for the future, as only the hardened cases remained. They gave him some indications of the difficulties encountered in trying to overcome the influences on the NRMA men from their families and other sources. They pointed out, too, that time and again, in answer to pleas to go active, the NRMA men would respond that if the government really wanted them, it should compel them to go, and if this were the law they would go willingly.²⁴ MacNaughton listened, repeated his former declaration that the generous leave to NRMA men to work on the farms and in the forests would be restricted, and then departed. Certainly his senior officers left him in no doubt whatever about the chances of getting a quick, substantial response which would somehow make the "new" government policy a success.

After the Minister had left, the Chief of the General Staff made further comments on the new policy. The main worry of most of the officers there was the problem of how to carry out successfully a policy which, for the past six months, with the exception of June, had shown consistently decreasing returns. Pearkes, perhaps, was especially concerned. MacNaughton had made pointed reference to the fact that in his Pacific Command were the greatest number of trained NRMA infantrymen. Pearkes and all his officers had been working on them to volunteer since April. They had met with a fair measure of success, and possibly, given time, more could be coaxed or cajoled to volunteer. But the shortage of reinforcements overseas would be extreme by December, and this left only a few weeks. However, as Murchie pointed out to the rather disgruntled gathering later, "it was not for them to discuss the government policy . . . but rather to apply themselves to implement the policy."

Immediately the conference was over, Pearkes sent a wire to his head-

²³ Interview with Major-General Pearkes, 21 September 1966, p. 27.

²⁴ "One of the most outspoken was Maj.-Gen. H. N. Ganong. He asked MacNaughton: 'Sir, do you want us to let our hair down and tell you what we really think?' I remember MacNaughton said, 'Yes, Hardy, certainly I do.' Then Hardy swore and said, 'We have done everything and we have tried everything. . . .' In other words he spoke as Pearkes had except in rather less courtly language." (Interview with Lt.-Gen. H. D. Graham, 24 September 1970, p. 16. Graham was an observer at the meeting, not a participant.)

quarters instructing his staff to call together all his senior officers in his command to meet in Vancouver, on Monday, November 20. He knew that it would take at least two days by train for the officers in such places as Terrace and Prince George to reach Vancouver. In all likelihood it might take them longer since the train services operated only three days a week. Some would probably try to make the connection by steamer from Prince Rupert, but whatever the method, the sooner he let them know the better.

Pearkes was back in Vancouver by Saturday. On the previous day the local newspapers carried a statement by General MacNaughton which implied that, as a result of the conference on the fourteenth, the voluntary policy would provide the reinforcements the government was seeking. It had been made amply clear to him at the conference that the district officers commanding had grave doubts about the policy. They, as serving officers, could say nothing publicly, but a number of them were so incensed at the inference that they wired or wrote the Chief of the General Staff protesting the Minister's statement and requesting a retraction. The newspaper reporters in Calgary, Vancouver and elsewhere sought confirmation of MacNaughton's optimism from the district commanders, but they could say nothing except protest privately. On the face of it, it appeared to the public that MacNaughton was expressing the consensus of opinion of the group, and this was anything but true. Pearkes was among those who protested. A rather weak excuse sent him by telegram on the nineteenth was followed by a telephone call by MacNaughton on the same day during which he said he would clarify the situation by another press release on Monday. This reassured Pearkes and some, but by no means all, of the others.

Early on Monday morning, Pearkes went to the Seaforth Barracks in Vancouver to meet his senior officers. They had been gathering in the city during the weekend. Concentration of so much "brass" in the major hotels had not gone unnoticed by the local press who soon found out about the conference. When Pearkes arrived, he found to his surprise a number of reporters talking to officers in the hall outside the room where he was to present MacNaughton's policy. Pearkes had not called a press conference, nor did he particularly want them there at that time. However, Major G. Sivertz, the Command's Public Relations Officer and a former newspaperman, had acquiesced to the reporters' request that they attend and, indeed, they requested Pearkes, through Sivertz, to be allowed to attend the conference itself. Pearkes refused. Since they were there, and since the conference had not yet started, and since the reporters had

already been talking with the officers, Pearkes "said that they might ask the various camp commanders what the situation was in their areas insofar as recruiting had been proceeding." "I did not allow officers of the Pacific Command to criticize the government's policy at any meeting with the press", Pearkes added. "In fact, it was in order to avoid the possibility of policy being criticized that I allowed the press to talk with the officers regarding the situation in their own camps."²⁵ In view of subsequent events, it would have been wiser if Major Sivertz had arranged a formal and more controlled press conference later. As far as Pearkes was concerned at that time, however, the newspapers had been very helpful during the year in supporting recruiting drives. He knew he would need their help to promote MacNaughton's policy, and if the reporters wanted to get an idea of what the situation was like in the camps before he held the conference, he could not see how it would violate any security or confidence since, with a little bit of digging, they could have found out themselves without questioning the senior commanders. It was not a situation which he had either anticipated or would have planned himself, but at that point he could not have ordered the press to destroy their notes or their memories. It would have created a great deal of suspicion and adverse comment, and a sympathetic press was going to be needed in the weeks ahead.

On the following day there was an article in one of the Vancouver papers by Alan Morley which was picked up by other newspapers across Canada. The reporter stated that "at a press conference" a number of senior officers in Pacific Command, whom he named, intimated that NRMA soldiers would probably go active only if they were ordered to do so. In their opinion (and these were personal opinions the reporter quoted), the plan to reinforce adequately the overseas divisions could not be met through the voluntary method. This report, reproduced in the Ottawa papers on November 21, came as a thunderclap to King and MacNaughton. The political crisis was by means over, and King especially was aware of what might be read into the reports. MacNaughton, according to his biographer, was not only surprised but, believing what he read, began to feel that the army in Canada "was full of rotten stuff" and questioned the loyalty of some of his senior officers on the Pacific Coast.²⁶ He had his Adjutant-General wire Pearkes asking for an explanation.

²⁵ Pearkes Papers (in possession of the writer); file "Notes for Biography of Major-General G. R. Pearkes".

²⁶ John Swettenham, *MacNaughton, Vol. II* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1969), pp. 55-56.

Pearkes replied on the same day that there was no formal press conference, that he had "granted permission to officers concerned to state progress . . . in response to P.M. and Minister's appeals" and that he read no statements in the newspapers "which could possibly be considered improper".²⁷ His telegram was brief and he did not go into detail, which he doubtless would have had he appreciated the growing suspicions his actions aroused in the minds of King and MacNaughton.

MacNaughton had shown the Prime Minister copies of the telegrams which had been sent to him from some of the district officers commanding protesting the optimistic press release MacNaughton had given on the sixteenth. He told the Prime Minister that he had to handle these officers very carefully or "he might have a revolt on his hands".²⁸ He added that he thought Pearkes was at the bottom of it, presumably owing to his friendship with Lt.-Gen. Stuart, whose resignation MacNaughton requested,²⁹ as well as to "certain situations" which developed in the United Kingdom between MacNaughton and Pearkes. King, on his part, reminded MacNaughton that a day or so ago he mentioned to him that "our men were suspicious of Pearkes" and that "they felt he had never tried to make the voluntary system go". This feeling of suspicion, together with MacNaughton's growing belief that there was a conspiracy within the Defence Department not to make the voluntary system work, gave far greater weight to the news from Vancouver.

It is against this background of strong but completely unfounded suspicions of events in Vancouver that the next steps in the conscription crisis can be understood. Pearkes' brief explanatory telegram to Murchie was unacceptable to MacNaughton. He told Murchie to pursue the matter further, which he did on the following day, November 22, with the Adjutant-General and Judge Advocate General. As a result of this meeting, the Adjutant-General submitted a memorandum to MacNaughton stating that Pearkes' reply by telegram did not establish any basis for judgment as to the true nature of the incident and that no further action was advisable until they had further information. Aware that a military court of inquiry could not compel the attendance of civilian witnesses, they proposed that Lt.-Gen. E. W. Sansom be sent to Vancouver "to

²⁷ Directorate of History, Adjutant-General's file, BDF 45-34, Telegram, Pearkes to Walford, 21 November 1944.

²⁸ J. W. Pickersgill and D. F. Foster, *The Mackenzie King Record, Vol. II, 1944-45* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), p. 220.

²⁹ Stuart's resignation as Chief of the General Staff was in the mail as soon as he heard of MacNaughton's appointment as Minister, owing to strong differences between the two over policy matters.

prepare a report on all facts relevant to the determination of a firm course of action".³⁰ MacNaughton, who was under tremendous pressure that day, agreed with the suggestion. Major-General Walford wrote a rather lengthy letter to Sansom on the same day outlining the problem and adding that Sansom was being given the task as it was considered "that the desired information can best be obtained by an investigation . . . rather than through the medium of a formal inquiry".³¹

On the same day in Vancouver, Pearkes, having sent his telegram explaining the situation in brief, was engaged in writing a report in which he described the entire event in detail. Before it was completed, and naturally long before it could have arrived in Ottawa even by air mail, Pearkes received another wire informing him that Lt.-Gen. Sansom was flying to Vancouver to investigate and report on the "press conference" and interview the officers who had made the statements to the press. To Pearkes it was as if he had received a stinging slap in the face. "The circumstances connected with this investigation", he wrote later, "had been the most humiliating experience in my military career. . . ." He was so incensed that he offered to retire to pension immediately should the Minister of Defence find it embarrassing to relieve him as G.O.C.-in-C. Pacific Command and find him another appointment.

The decision to send Sansom on November 22 was but one of several weighty problems MacNaughton had on his mind. That morning he received the resignation of Brigadier R. A. MacFarlane, Commanding Military District No. 10. MacNaughton feared that this might be the first of a number of resignations, and if this happened ". . . the whole military machine would . . . begin to disintegrate and there would be no controlling the situation."³² What was more unnerving was the advice he received on the same morning from his chief military advisors in Ottawa. Two weeks had passed since MacNaughton and King had made their national appeal and the NRMA soldiers were not volunteering. Quite properly, Lt.-Gen. Murchie, backed by his senior officers, told the Minister this unpleasant news and, at his request, it was written and signed. MacNaughton immediately informed the Prime Minister. With the last possible alternative to conscription dashed from his hand, the Prime Minister now felt it expedient to use coercion to maintain reinforcements to the army overseas. That evening King informed his cabinet

³⁰ Adjutant-General's file, *op. cit.*, Memorandum, Adjutant-General to Minister, 22 November 1944.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Adjutant-General to Lt.-Gen. Sansom, 22 November 1944.

³² Stacey, *op. cit.*, p. 470.

and outlined the proposal he would announce publicly in the House of Commons on November 23 supporting MacNaughton's stand. By this act he saved the Liberal Party from splitting asunder, and presumably by ordering the conscription of only a limited number of men he prevented, according to him and to his Minister of Defence, a military revolt in Canada.

In Vancouver, meanwhile, Pearkes had acted immediately on the receipt of the message from the Adjutant-General on the twenty-second. He had held his conference on Monday. It was now Wednesday. The 130 officers who had attended his conference had all returned to their units or were still en route there. Some, such as Brigadier A. R. Roy, who commanded the 15th Brigade at Terrace, as well as his senior officers, were still on the train. Pearkes warned the Adjutant-General early on Thursday that it would be impossible to assemble all the officers Sansom wanted to see on Friday morning but he assured him that he would call them back immediately.

Shortly after noon, three hours after he had wired the Adjutant-General of the steps he had taken to comply with instructions from Ottawa, Pearkes received a telephone call from Lt.-Gen. Murchie. It was late afternoon in Ottawa and Pearkes was told that the government had passed an order-in-council making 16,000 NRMA personnel available for overseas service. Pearkes' reaction to this news may be imagined. He was concerned, however, with the repercussions which might occur in the various camps in his command when news of partial conscription reached them. He felt that the senior officers should remain with their troops at this time, so he wired the Adjutant-General asking that Sansom's investigation be postponed until the twenty-seventh. Sansom, however, was already en route to Vancouver by air and Pearkes did not receive a reply from the Adjutant-General in sufficient time to delay the departure of many officers from their stations and camps to attend Sansom's investigation. This was especially true of the senior officers in the more distant camps who, owing to train and boat schedules, did not have time to unpack from their original trip to Vancouver before returning. As a result, the investigation started on time on the twenty-fourth. At the same time, by both radio and newspapers, word of partial conscription had spread to all camps in the Pacific Command at a time when a large number of brigade and battalion commanders were absent en route to Vancouver. The scene was set for potential trouble, and trouble soon came.

News of the government's decision to conscript 16,000 soldiers for overseas service first reached the military camps in British Columbia in

the early afternoon of November 23. By dinner time of the same day, it is safe to speculate that there was not a single soldier in British Columbia who was not aware of the information which had been broadcast by both Canadian and American radio stations. With almost all of the brigade and battalion commanders either in or en route to Vancouver, with the normal complement of battalion officers away on leave, on course or on attachment, with many of the junior officers recently posted to the battalions owing to the call for experienced junior officers overseas, and considering the extremely low proportion of General Service NCOs and men in each unit, demonstrations against conscription were organized in Vernon, Terrace, Prince George, Courtenay, Chilliwack, Nanaimo and Port Alberni. In some instances the demonstrations were limited to the troops marching in an organized manner from camp to the nearby towns and carrying placards. In the more distant camps the demonstrations lasted for several days, and in faraway Terrace it resulted in a mutiny which, although non-violent, lasted for almost a week.

The story of the disturbances in the camps and the mutiny in Terrace need not concern us here. Sufficient it is to say that the situation in the camps returned to normal shortly after the various commanding officers returned from Vancouver. Since Terrace was farthest away, the situation there was ugly for a few days but it, too, was calmed by the time Brigadier Roy and his senior officers returned late on Monday evening.

In no small measure, such trouble as did arise in British Columbia came largely as a result of political decisions in Ottawa, not military decisions in Vancouver. It was MacNaughton's decision to investigate the so-called "press conference" in Vancouver which resulted in senior officers being absent from their units at a critical time. It was Mackenzie King's decision to switch suddenly from a voluntary to a conscription policy — so sudden, indeed, that in numerous instances the NRMA soldiers in barracks heard about it over the radio before their own officers. In passing it is interesting to note that only a few days earlier the Prime Minister had visions of American troops crossing the border to restore order in Canadian camps if conscription was imposed, and MacNaughton was extremely concerned that there were insufficient GS soldiers available to handle any mutiny among the ranks of the NRMA men should the need arise. It is remarkable how these dark and forboding thoughts were forgotten when political expediency demanded the imposition of conscription. One can only assume that these were phantoms of the imagination of both the men or surely they would have ensured everything possible would be done to prepare the draftees for the reception of the news.

Meanwhile, what about the outcome of Lt.-Gen. Sansom's investigation? Sansom had left Vancouver very early on Sunday, November 26, and arrived in Ottawa around midnight. He made his report to the Adjutant-General, who in turn reported to the minister on December 5. Walford, basing his memorandum on Sansom's report, pointed out that there was no formal press conference. Six senior officers were interviewed prior to the conference individually, and most of them said that they were either misquoted or that the press gave far more strength to their opinions than was intended. The newsmen present in the anteroom, it turned out, were there by Sivertz' suggestion. "It was clearly impossible under such conditions for him to ensure the protection of the officers present against the danger of being placed in a false position. It was to meet this situation that the G.O.C.-in-C. authorized the press interviews on which the newspaper reports were based."³³ He went on to say that the relations between the press and Pacific Command had been very cordial, that support and sympathy of the press for the coming campaign would be necessary, and "had the situation been less dynamic his action would probably have been quite normal."

Sansom reported further that "on arrival at the conference, the G.O.C.-in-C. found that press representatives had already been in conversation with a number of officers. Faced with this situation, he decided to authorize interviews which, he believed, would ensure a better and more accurate press report than the casual conversations which had taken place in the anteroom prior to the opening of the conference."

Although Walford felt that there were grounds for criticisms of both the G.O.C.-in-C. and the Public Relations Officer, Pacific Command, for failing to appreciate the state of public opinion on this subject, he wrote:

There is no evidence from Lt.-Gen. Sansom's report of any lack of loyalty on the part of the G.O.C.-in-C. or any officer concerned, to policy laid down by the Minister. On the contrary recruiting results subsequent to the District Officers Commanding Conference in Ottawa . . . testified to most energetic action. During the six weeks ended 11 November, Pacific Command secured an average of thirty-six conversions per week. This figure rose to 84 during the week ending 18 November and 170 in that ended 25 November. I feel that the officers should be fully exonerated from any charge or suspicion of disloyalty to the policy of the Department or of lack of cooperation.³⁴

³³ Adjutant-General's file, *op. cit.*, "Memorandum, Report on Press Interviews, Pacific Command, 20th Nov. 1944, Adjutant-General to the Minister, 5 Dec. 1944."

³⁴ *Ibid.*

In this paper I have attempted to show something of the background to the events leading up to the conscription crisis of 1944 west of the Rocky Mountains. One of the central figures in that crisis, and one whose name has frequently been connected with the so-called "Revolt of Generals", was Major-General G. R. Pearkes. He is frequently depicted in a number of books and articles as the prime mover in an attempt to undermine government policy with respect to both conversion and conscription. As we have seen, he was regarded with considerable suspicion both by King and by MacNaughton. The fact that he later became a Member of Parliament as a Progressive Conservative seems to have strengthened the conviction in some historians' minds that somehow Pearkes was either dragging his feet in implementing government policy or that, in some subtle ways, he was using his position to help force the government to bring in conscription for overseas service. The record shows that this was not true. No man worked harder or more consistently to bring about the results the government desired.