

The University of Ottawa and World War II (1939-1945)

By Michel Prévost

In September 1939, Canada declared war on Nazi Germany. It was the onset of World War II, which would rage until 1945. When the hostilities began, the Canadian government called upon universities to do their part in the war effort. The University of Ottawa quickly answered the call with a commitment to work towards an Allied victory and to help students directly affected by the horrors of the conflict. Just a few weeks after the start of the war, the University administration founded the University of Ottawa contingent of the Canadian Officers' Training Corps. Training for the first 195 recruits began in January 1940. The following year, the number of recruits climbed to 558, with the majority of enlistees drawn from the University and St. Patrick's College

In 1942, an air force officers' training corps (University Air Training Corps) was created, and the next year a naval training corps (University Naval Training Division) was created. While students were not required to go off to war before completing their studies, training in one of the corps was mandatory for all those over 18.

Students also supported the war effort by donating blood at the many blood donor clinics, buying Victory Bonds or by distributing ration books. In addition, funds were sent directly to student prisoners of war through the Catholic student federation, Pax Romana, and the League of Nations.

Evidence of a country at war, military barracks were constructed on the campus in 1942 to house approximately 400 members of the Canadian Women's Army Corps. The temporary wooden structures were officially inaugurated in 1944 by Princess Alice, wife of Canada's governor general at the time, the Earl of Athlone. In 1946, the University took over the barracks to house the faculties of medicine and science (the last of these buildings was demolished in 1972, 30 years after being built).

Throughout World War II, a total of 1,158 University of Ottawa students and alumni risked their lives by enrolling in the Canadian Forces to go to war. More than 60 of them would never return home from this bloody conflict that would kill 42,000 Canadians.

On November 1, 1998, then-Rector Marcel Hamelin dedicated a plaque at Tabaret Hall to commemorate the great contribution made by these men and women.

In 2009, a second plaque was installed that bore the names of all students and alumni that died during the war. Each year since 1998, wreaths are laid at the site of the plaques to remember the sacrifices these individuals made for freedom. Every November, we acknowledge the contributions of the University of Ottawa, its students and its alumni to restoring peace. They will never be forgotten.