BARRAGE

The RCA Museum News

THE RCA MUSEUM
CANADA'S NATIONAL ARTILLERY MUSEUM

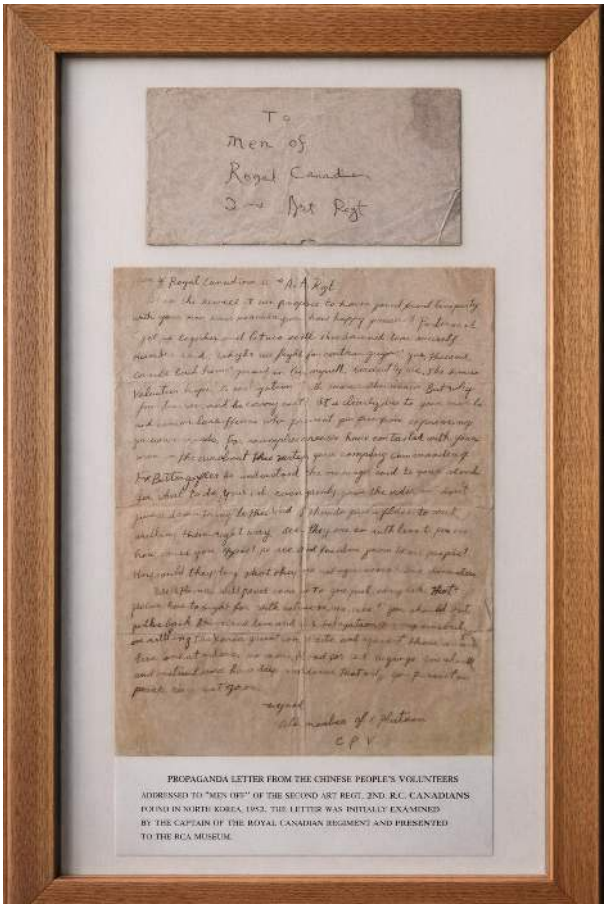
LE MUSÉE NATIONAL DE L'ARTILLERIE DU CANADA
LE MUSÉE DE L'ARC

January 2026

Preparing for Summer: A Korean War Exhibit and a Rare Letter

Staff at the RCA Museum are preparing our next temporary exhibit on the Korean War, opening in summer 2026. They are selecting artifacts, researching stories, and designing displays that highlight both the combat and daily experiences of Canadian soldiers. Visitors can look forward to seeing how strategy, equipment, and personal moments shaped the war.

One artifact that stands out is a small letter. Its paper is browned and marked with water stains, yet it provides a rare window into soldiers' experiences during the conflict. Written by a Chinese People's Volunteer soldier and intended for distribution to the men of the 2nd Regiment, Royal Canadian Horse Artillery, it came into Canadian hands in late 1951 when the soldier carrying it was captured. Roughly 8½ by 10½ inches, folded and worn from handling, it was meant to be carried, not displayed.



Unlike mass-produced propaganda, the letter is personal. The writer mentions "Fox Battery" of 2 RCHA, showing apparent knowledge of the unit and a sense of shared experience. Its message encourages Canadian troops to question orders while emphasizing a desire for peace—a quiet form of psychological warfare directed at individual soldiers.

After the war, the letter was transferred to the RCA Museum and officially accessioned in 1984. With the upcoming exhibit, it will return to public view, allowing visitors to experience a small taste of frontline life. This single sheet reminds us that the Korean War was more than combat; messages like this shaped daily life and morale.

Next summer, visitors will see this letter alongside other artifacts, illustrating both the personal and operational sides of the Korean War. It shows how ordinary soldiers lived, worked, and faced the challenges of war.

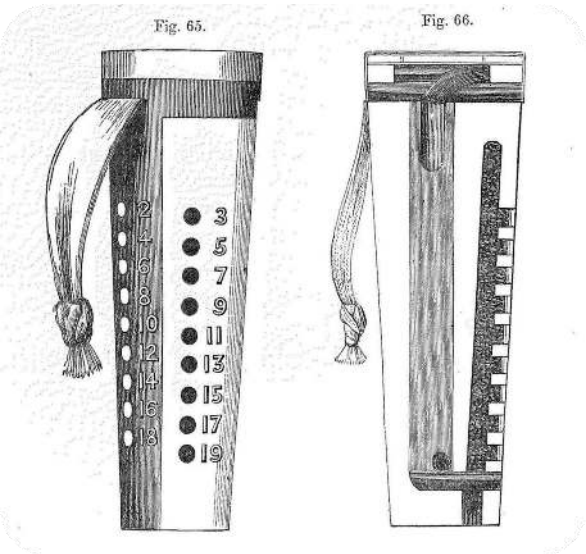
The Boxer Time Fuse

Fuses may not be the first objects visitors expect to encounter in a museum, yet they are essential to understanding how artillery functioned. Without a reliable fuse, even the most advanced gun and shell could not perform as intended, making these small components central to the history of artillery warfare.

In a modern display case, four Boxer time fuses are shown alongside their original manufacturer's tin, dated 13 October 1877. One fuse is displayed separately, while the other three remain housed in their well-preserved container, produced by the Royal Laboratory at Woolwich, England. All four are made of wood, rendered inert, and originate from the same production lot, as indicated by their sequential numbering. The tin lid is marked "5 Fuses Time Boxer 9 Secs ML," identifying their use with muzzle-loading artillery.

At the time of Canadian Confederation in 1867, Canadian artillery relied on smoothbore guns fitted with two principal types of fuses: time and percussion. The most common time-delay fuse in service was the Boxer fuse, developed in 1853 by Colonel Edward M. Boxer of the British Royal Artillery. Its introduction marked an important advance, allowing gunners to control when a shell would burst rather than leaving its effect to chance.

Earlier time fuses used less dependable ignition methods, often producing uneven burn rates and unpredictable results. The Boxer fuse addressed these problems through intersecting powder channels that burned more consistently and could be adjusted with greater precision. This reliability made it widely adopted throughout the British Empire and trusted in both training and combat.



Boxer fuses are conical in shape and contain a central powder train that burns at a standardized rate of approximately five seconds per inch. By piercing through the appropriate boring hole, the gunner could set the desired delay to match the shell's time of flight. The examples displayed here are set for a nine-second burn, after which they would ignite the shell's bursting charge.

These particular fuses are Mark III Boxer fuses, a pattern issued for general use with field, garrison, and coastal artillery. To preserve their effectiveness, the tin bears the instruction "not to be opened until required for use or special inspection." Printed instructions inside guided gunners unfamiliar with the fuse. Preparation required seating the fuse firmly into the shell's fuze hole, sometimes with a wooden mallet, and removing protective coverings to expose the primer before loading.

When the gun was fired, the propellant flash entered the fuze and ignited the powder train at the top of the time fuze. As the shell traveled downrange, the powder train burned for the selected interval. At the end of this delay, the flame reached the bursting charge, detonating the shell at the intended moment.

The Boxer fuse represented a significant improvement in controlled artillery fire. By allowing gunners to determine when and where a shell would burst, it played a key role in the effectiveness of both smoothbore and early rifled artillery during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

By Andrew Oakden

Bird Dog 706

Canadian Gunners have relied on Air Observation Posts (AOPs) since the First World War. The RCA Museum's collections reflect this role, from a 1947 Auster Mk VI aircraft to a Sperwer drone used in Afghanistan. While researching in our archives, the photograph below caught my attention.

The photograph dates to 1954–55 and shows a line of Cessna L-19A Bird Dog aircraft on a grass field. The one in front is marked 16706 on the tail—shortened to 706 on the fuselage—and I immediately recognized it as an aircraft in our collections. Our archives include some of the aircraft's maintenance logs and service history, allowing us to piece together much of its story.

The U.S. Army received Bird Dog 706 from the manufacturer Cessna as aircraft 53-8055, but transferred it to Canada while it was still new. Received at No. 6 Repair Depot, RCAF in Trenton on 18 October 1954, Bird Dog 706 appears in the photograph among the first batch of L-19s in Canadian service, which later totalled 25 aircraft.

The L-19 Bird Dog served with the Canadian Artillery primarily for aerial spotting in the AOP role. It was a versatile aircraft that could take off and land on small, unprepared airstrips or on lakes using floats or skis. The Bird Dog was unarmed but had wing pylons that could carry 2.75-inch marking rockets, an aerial camera, paraflares, or up to 1,000 lb of supplies for air drops.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Bird Dog 706 served in AOP Troops with 1 RCHA in Germany, 4 RCHA in Petawawa, and 5 RALC in Valcartier, as well as the Canadian Joint Air Training Centre in Rivers, MB, among other postings. In 1964, it had a Category B crash, signifying very serious damage to the aircraft, but it was repaired.

Following the unification of the armed services in 1968, the Canadian Armed Forces redesignated the L-19 as the CO-119 and renumbered this example as 119706, the number currently on its tail. The last AOP Troop stood down in October 1970, with air duties transferred to the RCAF. The Air Force retired the L-19s on 19 June 1972 in favour of helicopters. Some L-19s continue to serve as glider tow aircraft with the Royal Canadian Air Cadets. This was not the fate of 706.

Bird Dog 706 was placed in storage in Saskatoon in 1972, but moved that December to CFB Borden to be used as a training aid for Indigenous technicians. On 16 September 1983, a teletype from NDHQ in Ottawa instructed CFB Borden to disassemble 706 and ship it to the Mountain View detachment of CFB Trenton. In doing so, mechanics replaced some working parts with non-serviceable ones, including its rudder and horizontal stabilizer. On 10 December 1983, technicians at Mountain View struck Bird Dog 706 off the RCAF's fleet and shipped it to CFB Petawawa to be used as a monument. Repainted in its olive drab Canadian Army colours, it remained on outdoor display there for many years.

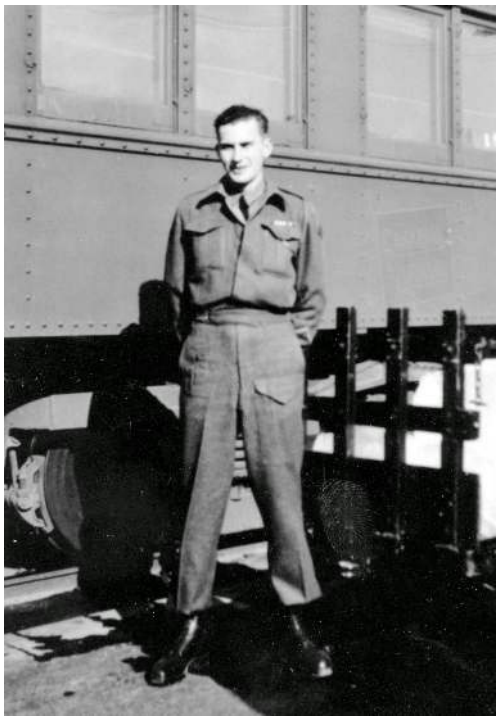
By the early 2000s, Bird Dog 706 was removed from display at CFB Petawawa and it is now at the RCA Museum, in climate-controlled storage. Many seasons of exposure to the elements mean that restoration would be a challenge, but this 70-year-old photograph of a brand-new 706 shows the potential for its future.

By Jonathan Ferguson

Private Noble Fenwick and the Crerar Caravan

The notes and photographs preserved in the RCA Museum archives tell the story of Private Noble Russell Fenwick, the soldier who drove General Harry Crerar's caravan during the Northwest Europe Campaign of 1944–1945. His service as one of the General's drivers offers a personal view of how the First Canadian Army functioned and highlights the important work of Canadians whose contributions took place behind the front lines.

Noble Fenwick was born on September 23, 1918, in Tessier, Saskatchewan, and raised in Riverview, Manitoba. He enlisted in the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps (RCASC) on January 20, 1942, at Portage La Prairie. After completing training in Portage and Red Deer, Alberta, he was posted to Debert, Nova Scotia, and sent overseas that August with the 4th Canadian Division. He first served as a driver with II Canadian Corps Headquarters before being transferred to 1st Canadian Army Headquarters. In March 1944, Fenwick was selected to join the personal driving staff of Lieutenant-General Crerar, a responsibility he carried through to the end of the war.



Private Noble Fenwick dated 9 Aug 1945.

The Crerar Caravan was a specially built mobile headquarters constructed in England in 1944 by Car Cruiser Caravans Ltd. It served as General Crerar's headquarters and living quarters during the campaign in Northwest Europe. Shortly after D-Day, the caravan moved to France and became the operational centre of the First Canadian Army. In the caravan, Crerar occasionally met with senior Allied leaders, including Montgomery and Eisenhower. Fenwick's duties centered on driving the General's personal caravan—nicknamed the "Viper's Den" by staff—and occasionally included chauffeuring Crerar himself as the Army moved through Northwest Europe.

The Crerar Caravan in Northwest Europe, 1945.

Fenwick later described General Crerar as strict but fair. When something went wrong, the General would simply clear his throat; at the end of each day, he always said "thank you." Fenwick also recalled unusual assignments, such as long trips to collect supplies ahead of visits by senior officials. These moments reflect how the steady, often unseen work of drivers and support staff kept the Army's command functioning. After the war ended, Fenwick returned to Canada and was discharged in November 1945. The following year, during a cross-country tour, Crerar personally greeted Fenwick in Brandon, Manitoba.

After the war, Fenwick returned to farming near Souris, Manitoba. He married Ileen Dane in 1948 and later worked for the Eaton Company in Brandon, retiring in 1979. His wartime service connects the Crerar Caravan to the people who operated it, showing how one vehicle can reflect a much larger story of Canada's involvement in the Second World War.

Today, the RCA Museum displays the Crerar Caravan in its "Command Post" exhibit. By sharing the stories of soldiers like Fenwick, the museum emphasizes how this vehicle was part of daily life and decision-making during the campaign. The Crerar Caravan is more than a historical artifact—it represents the dedication of ordinary Canadians whose work behind the front lines helped shape the success of the First Canadian Army. Through Fenwick's experience, visitors gain insight into the human side of command and the essential role played by those who kept it moving.

By Andrew Oakden

Refining the Story of General Crerar

A museum exhibit is never truly finished. Every display has room for refinement, and each revision offers a chance to sharpen its message. Over the past year, we have updated more than a dozen cases throughout the museum. One of the most telling examples of this process is the transformation of our display dedicated to General Harry Crerar.

When we first examined the case, it held just two artifacts: a 1907-pattern officer's tunic bearing the rank of major and a 1945 sports trophy. While historically interesting, neither communicated the central message about Crerar—that he commanded the First Canadian Army during the Second World War. The display lacked a clear narrative.

We began by reassessing our collection of Crerar's wartime artifacts. In the first update, we improved the mounts and presentation, adding his brown leather gloves—visible in many wartime photographs—and his Second World War beret. We also included ceremonial trophies and keys to the city presented to him by Canadian municipalities. These changes added visual appeal, but the case still felt unfocused.

The General Crerar Case on display at the RCA Museum.

Our next revision brought a more defined narrative. We removed most of the ceremonial items, kept a single key to the city, and replaced the beret with Crerar's wartime forage cap—his more characteristic headgear. Most importantly, we replaced the officer's tunic with his RAF-pattern Irvin Model 1940 flying jacket. This dark brown leather jacket, with its heavy-duty zipper, was worn by Crerar while commanding the First Canadian Army during the North-West Europe Campaign and on reconnaissance flights in his Auster aircraft. Favoured by several Allied generals, it became a recognizable symbol of command and confidence. Together, these artifacts present a clear and immediate message: these were the personal items of the Canadian Army's commander in Europe during the Second World War.

As director, I want every exhibit in our museum to tell a clear, compelling story. When a display is overcrowded with seemingly unrelated objects, its story is lost. What remains is a scatter of curiosities—attention-grabbing, perhaps, but without focus, connection, or lasting impact. The new Crerar case addresses this problem directly. By carefully selecting and refining the artifacts on display, we've given visitors a clearer, more immediate connection to the history of the Canadian Army—something they can experience, not just read about.

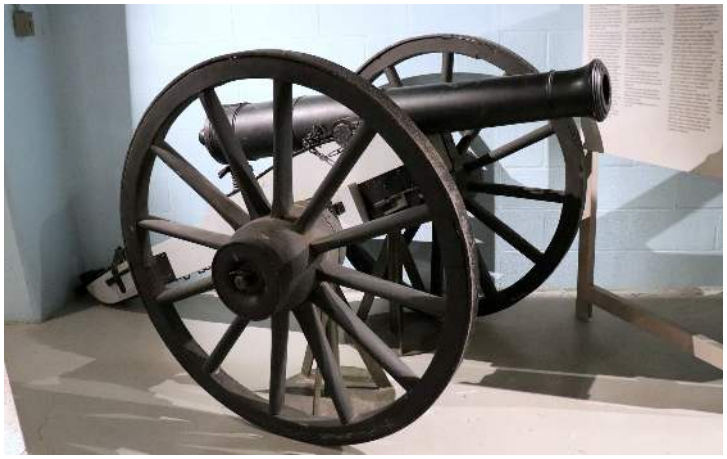
I don't see our exhibits as finished pieces—they're ongoing conversations with our visitors. They need care, fresh ideas, and sometimes a complete re-examination. Each time we update a display, we strive to be more accurate and respectful, to better honour the people whose stories we tell, and to help visitors see our military history with greater clarity and understanding.

By Andrew Oakden

The Origins of the 6-Pounder Smoothbore Cannon

A letter dated 4 October 1966 from Colonel J. S. Orton, Commandant of the Royal Canadian School of Artillery, to the Honourable Sterling R. Lyons, QC, Attorney General of Manitoba, documents the transfer of a brass 6-pounder smoothbore cannon from the Province of Manitoba to the RCA Museum. In his correspondence, Colonel Orton expressed appreciation for the donation and confirmed that the gun had been placed on public display, ensuring its preservation and accessibility.

Before its transfer to the museum, the cannon stood at Headingley Gaol, a correctional institution in the Rural Municipality of Headingley, Manitoba, which opened in 1930. Colonel Orton noted that during cleaning and inspection, a cannonball was discovered seated in the bore. No evidence was found to indicate when the piece had last been loaded. By the late 1860s, 6-pounder smoothbore guns had largely disappeared from active Canadian militia service.



Brass 6-Pounder Smoothbore Cannon in the RCA Museum.

In July 1967, Captain W. M. J. Wolfe, Museum Curator, corresponded with G. D. Crawford, a historian working with the Manitoba Government, to explore the possible origins of the gun. Crawford outlined three possible explanations for its presence in Manitoba, while noting that none could be confirmed with certainty.

The first possibility is that the gun was acquired by the Hudson's Bay Company prior to or during the early years of the Selkirk Settlement at Red River, established in 1812. A second is that it was transferred from Fort York (Toronto) in 1816. A third is that it arrived with the Royal Artillery detachment sent to Fort Garry in 1846.

Captain Wolfe favoured the view that the gun was among the artillery pieces obtained by Lord Selkirk in 1816. During the growing conflict between the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company—driven in part by competition over pemmican supplies and the arrival of Selkirk settlers—Lord Selkirk acquired significant quantities of arms and stores. Contemporary records show that in April 1816 he obtained more than a ton of gunpowder, approximately one hundred muskets with bayonets, four brass 6-pounder guns, and two 9-pounder guns from Fort York.

This period saw escalating violence between the rival companies. Early in 1816, posts in the Red River region changed hands amid raids and seizures, and in June North West Company supporters attacked Brandon House. On 19 June 1816, the conflict culminated in the Battle of Seven Oaks, near present-day West Kildonan, Winnipeg, where 21 men associated with the Hudson's Bay Company were killed. Hostilities continued intermittently until the companies merged in 1821.

In November 1967, Captain Wolfe contacted the Public Archives of Canada in Ottawa to obtain copies of relevant Selkirk Papers. These included a store list confirming the acquisition of four brass 6-pounder guns for the Selkirk Settlement in April 1816. While this evidence supports the presence of such artillery in the Red River region, it does not permit a definitive identification of the museum's gun.

The cannon itself is a Blomefield-pattern bronze 6-pounder smoothbore muzzle-loader, cast in 1796. Guns of this type typically weighed between 784 and 896 lbs (356 and 406 kg) and were widely used throughout the British Empire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is possible that the gun reached Red River in 1816 and later saw service with the Royal Artillery detachment stationed at Fort Garry in 1846, although no direct evidence confirms this sequence.

Following the Militia Act of 1855, 6-pounder smoothbore guns continued in use with Canadian volunteer militia units, though their distribution varied widely. By the late 1860s, such guns were gradually replaced by more modern artillery. Like many surviving Canadian 6-pounders, the early service history of this example remains unclear, reflecting the fragmentary nature of nineteenth-century militia records in western Canada.

By Andrew Oakden

Baby Gas Helmet

The advent of chemical weapons during the First World War was one of the many changes to warfare brought about in the twentieth century. The new deadly gases and chemical agents necessitated the creation of breathing apparatuses to be used on the front lines, many of which now have a home at the RCA Museum. The threat of chemical weapons wasn't exclusive to the battlefield, however, a fact which is illustrated by the existence of the Baby Gas Helmet.

The Baby Gas Helmet was the result of fears arising in Britain during the late 1930s that the looming threat of Nazi Germany would utilize chemical weapons against civilian populations during air raids. In response to these fears, the British government began issuing gas masks and respirators to its citizens, which could quickly and easily be equipped in the event of a chemical weapon attack. While adapting military gas masks for civilian use was accomplished relatively quickly, the unique challenge of preparing a gas mask designed to be worn by babies and infants under two years old proved to be more difficult. It wouldn't be until 1938, after multiple rounds of testing, that the Baby Gas Helmet was ready to be issued to the public.

Infant gas mask from the RCA Museum's collection.

The finished product consists of a rubber, bag-like apparatus which covers the entirety of the child except for their legs, allowing them to sit comfortably. Affixed to the front of the mask is a large window allowing the parent and child to see one another. Attached to the back was a metal frame that both prevented the mask from collapsing in on the wearer, while also allowing for the child to be carried by their guardian in a manner similar to a suitcase.

Creating a breathing apparatus for an infant comes with its own unique set of challenges. Along with the baby's limited ability to support the weight of a mask, their smaller lungs and airways made it difficult to breathe through the filters of a regular gas mask. To solve this problem, the baby's caregiver would be tasked with continually pumping a set of bellows on the side of the mask in order to circulate fresh air. Like many other early models of gas masks, the Baby Gas Helmet utilized an asbestos filter, before the links between asbestos and lung disease were fully understood.

As would be expected, during testing, many children and their mothers reacted negatively to the device. Despite this, the British government offered reassurance to the public, promising that "Most babies and children quite readily take to the Helmet and soon become accustomed to being inside; in fact, it is common for them to go to sleep." Fortunately for Britain's infants, the masks never saw use during the war. Their existence, however, along with that of similar devices such as gas-proof strollers, serves as a sobering reminder of the dangers endured by civilian populations during the Second World War.

By Carson Zavitz

The Story Behind C Battery's "Short Snorter"

In January 1985, a small envelope arrived at the RCA Museum. Inside was a French five-franc note, its paper yellowed with age and its ink beginning to fade. What set it apart were the dozens of signatures covering its surface on both sides, each written by a gunner of C Battery, 1 RCHA, during one of the most uncertain weeks of the Second World War. Captain (Ret'd) Eric "Zeke" Chamberlin had safeguarded the note for more than forty years before sending it to the museum, ensuring that the names written hurriedly at Le Mans, France, on 14 June 1940, would endure.

"Le Mans" appears at the centre, surrounded by signatures. Both sides are densely covered with the names of gunners from C Battery, 1 RCHA.)

Curator W. M. Lunan completed the deed of gift on 25 February 1985, adding the "short snorter" to the museum's collection along with two wartime banderoles (survey flags). Modest in appearance, the donation offers a glimpse into the earliest operations of the Canadian Artillery in the war—a period often overshadowed by later campaigns, yet crucial for understanding how Canada's soldiers participated in the initial phases of WWII.

Chamberlin understood the note's importance. He had served with C Battery in Winnipeg from 1936 to 1939 and later joined the 1st Field Regiment in Britain, France, and Germany from 1940 to 1945. Although his name does not appear among the signatures, his service gave him valuable context. He arrived in England in late August 1940, too late to join the regiment's brief deployment in France. The note later reached him through a fellow gunner, Fred Pennie, whose brother was among the signatories.

The story begins in May 1940, when Germany launched its rapid offensive against France and the Low Countries. The speed of the advance shocked the Allies and forced hurried revisions to defensive plans. Following the Dunkirk evacuation, British planners proposed establishing a defensive position in Brittany, committing the 52nd (Lowland) Division and the newly arrived 1st Canadian Division.

The Canadians had been in Britain only a few months. They were still receiving equipment, completing training, and adjusting to wartime routines. On 8 June, King George VI reviewed the division; within hours, orders arrived for embarkation to France.

The Canadian Artillery moved quickly to comply. The 1st Field Regiment deployed by road, rail, and sea. Its two groups departed Larkhill on 9 and 11 June and reached Brest, France on 12 June, preparing for their first operational task. Confusion met them at once.

Refugees crowded the roads, and Movement Control officers struggled to direct units. Orders changed frequently as headquarters attempted to respond to the rapidly collapsing French front.

(Left: Captain Chamberlin with C Battery at Camp Shilo in 1939. Right: C Sub-section, C Battery at Camp Shilo firing an 18-pounder.)

On 14 June, the regiment arrived at Le Mans. At some point that day, C Battery's men produced a five-franc note and signed their names. They likely did not intend to create a lasting artifact; instead, they followed a familiar tradition known as a "short snorter." Originating among early aviators and later adopted by ground forces, a signed banknote marked shared service and comradeship. A "snort" referred to a quick drink, and a "short snort" the smallest measure.

As the note circulated, the situation around the regiment worsened. By 15 June, France was collapsing. British headquarters ordered the withdrawal of the 2nd British Expeditionary Force, including the Canadians, and instructed units to destroy and abandon their guns. Lieutenant-Colonel J. H. Roberts, commanding the 1st Field Regiment, refused. His gunners had only recently received their 25-pounders, and he would not leave them behind. As German forces advanced and evacuation ports fell into disorder, the regiment destroyed vehicles to prevent capture but retained all 24 guns. On 18 June, they sailed for Plymouth, becoming the only Allied artillery regiment to withdraw from France with their guns intact.

The regiment's one-week deployment was brief, confusing, and often overlooked, yet it marked the Canadian Army's first operational commitment of the Second World War. That moment gives the five-franc note its meaning. Covered with dozens of names in varied hands—some clear, others squeezed into crowded spaces—it forms a spontaneous roster: Hoover, Southwell, Lowthian, McMahon, Murray, Nicholls, Pennie, Rayner, Seed, Slipetz, Shewchuk, and many more. Most were Permanent Force gunners from Winnipeg. Some appear rarely in photographs; others left little trace in official records. On this scrap of currency, however, each one remains.

When Chamberlin donated the note, the museum gained more than a rare artifact. It gained a fragment of lived experience, created amid exhaustion, uncertainty, and the real risk of capture. By entrusting it to the museum, Chamberlin ensured that it would not be lost to time. More than eight decades later, the five-franc note continues to speak, recording C Battery's first encounter with war and the camaraderie formed under pressure. This single worn bill preserves the names that might otherwise have faded and the story behind C Battery's "short snorter."

By Andrew Oakden

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