

Recruitment and Conscription (Canada)

By [Christopher Sharpe](#)

Summary

Critical analysis of Canada's recruitment for the war effort can be grouped around three main themes. The first is the government's attempt to raise an expeditionary force that proved too large to be maintained by voluntary enlistment. As a result, conscription for overseas service had to be imposed, creating enduring rifts between regions and linguistic groups. The second is the insufficient level of enlistment among Canadian-born men. The third is the low enlistment rate among French-Canadians, which was a national embarrassment. This paper examines the regional patterns of enlistment, evaluates the arguments advanced to explain French-Canadian ambivalence to the war, and concludes that conscription was necessary.

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Introduction

Critical evaluations of [Canada](#)'s military contribution to the First World War generally deal with three major themes. The first is that in an unsuccessful attempt to acquire a greater voice in imperial affairs, the [Canadian government](#) promised to raise an expeditionary force too large to be maintained by voluntary enlistment. Conscription for overseas service was the inevitable outcome, and this caused lasting damage to national unity. The second is that too few Canadian-born men enlisted, and the third is that the failure of voluntary enlistment to fill the need was largely the fault of the [province of Quebec](#). The following paper addresses these themes.

The Commitment

On 1 August 1914, the Governor-General of Canada promised the [British government](#) that “if unhappily war should ensue, the Canadian people will be united in a common resolve to put forth every effort and to make every sacrifice necessary to ensure the integrity and maintain the honour of our Empire”.¹ The country did make sacrifices, but there was no common resolve. A Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) was authorized on 6 August 1914 with a proposed strength of 25,000 men. Less than two months later, 31,200 Canadian soldiers and [nursing](#) sisters, the largest military force that had ever crossed the Atlantic as a unit, set sail from Quebec.² By January 1917 the authorized strength of the CEF had been increased to 500,000, although the government had no clear idea where the men were to be found or how they were to be enticed to enlist. Sir [Thomas White \(1866-1955\)](#), the Minister of Finance, explained that “we simply went on faith, feeling instinctively that means could be found to carry it out”.³ Means were found, but they left an enduring and bitter legacy. The pressure to “redeem the pledge” of raising and maintaining a force of half a million armed men inevitably led to conscription.⁴

The Resources

In 1914 Canada had a regular army of only 3,110 men and a volunteer militia of 74,213, which was more of a social than a military institution. An army could have been raised under the 1904 *Act Respecting the Militia and Defence of Canada*, which stipulated that:

All male inhabitants of Canada, of the age 18 years and upwards, and under 60, not exempt or disqualified by law, and being British subjects, shall be liable to service in the Militia; the Governor General may require all the male inhabitants of Canada, capable of bearing arms, to serve in the case of a *levée en masse*.⁵

However, the Act was not called into play and the existing militia structure was bypassed: the CEF was assembled, organized and outfitted amidst the chaos of a newly-constructed base at Valcartier, Quebec under the personal supervision of the controversial minister of militia and defence, Colonel (later Sir) [Sam Hughes \(1853-1921\)](#).

The war had different effects on the various parts of the country. One must consider its impact on, and the contribution of, its provinces, at the time totalling nine.⁶ A total of 619,636 men and women enlisted in the CEF. This included the men who enlisted voluntarily, those conscripted under the Military Service Act of 1917, and the volunteer Nursing Sisters. Tables 1 and 2 show the distribution, by birthplace, of the potential recruits (men aged eighteen to forty-five) in 1911, the last pre-war census. Table 3 shows the pattern of enlistments by birthplace.

	Canada	Britain	Foreign
Prince Edward Island	98.4	0.9	0.7
Nova Scotia	87.2	8.6	4.2
New Brunswick	93.4	3.5	3.4
Quebec	87.4	5.9	6.7
Ontario	70.6	18.4	11.1
Manitoba	40.6	32.4	27.0
Saskatchewan	38.5	24.5	37.0
Alberta	30.5	25.8	43.5
British Columbia	26.2	34.6	39.2
Canada	64.5	17.8	17.7

Table 1: Composition of the male population aged eighteen to forty-five years, by place of birth and province of residence in 1911⁷

	Canadian	British	Foreign
Prince Edward Island	1.5	0.05	0.03
Nova Scotia	7.7	2.8	1.4
New Brunswick	5.8	0.8	0.7
Quebec	30.8	7.5	8.6
Ontario	37.0	34.9	21.2
Manitoba	4.5	13.0	10.9
Saskatchewan	5.5	12.7	19.3
Alberta	3.3	10.4	17.6
British Columbia	3.7	17.9	20.4
Canada	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 2: Percentage distribution, by Province, of the Canadian-born, British-born and Foreign-born male population aged eighteen to forty-five in 1911⁸

Place of Birth	Number enlisted	% of total enlistments	% of Canadian-born enlistments
PEI	7,168	1.2	2.2
Nova Scotia	32,580	5.3	10.2
New Brunswick	24,430	3.9	7.7
Quebec	67,892	11.0	21.3
Ontario	153,029	24.7	48.0
Manitoba	18,364	3.0	5.8
Saskatchewan	4,763	0.8	1.5
Alberta	3,330	0.5	1.0
British Columbia	7,110	1.1	2.2
NWT	62	0.0	
CANADA	318,728	51.4	100.0
Britain and possessions	237,586	38.3	
USA	35,599	5.7	
Other	23,906	3.9	
Unknown	3,817	0.6	
Total	619,636	100.0	

Table 3: Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force by place of birth⁹

The number of CEF members born in the three prairie provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta) is low, but one had to have been born in 1896 or earlier to be eligible to enlist, and this part of Canada wasn't heavily populated prior to the turn of the century. The number of men who enlisted in these provinces indicates how much growth had occurred as a result of westward migration and immigration (Table 4).

	Eligible Males ¹⁰	% of Eligible	Total Enlistment		Voluntary Enlistment		Conscription		Conscripted Men Attested	
			Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
PEI	16,824	1.1	3696	22.0					777	4.6
N.S.	95,760	6.2	35,723	37.0					4,665	4.9
PEI/N.S.	112,854	7.3	39,151	35.0	60,533	27.1	8,886	7.9	5,442	4.8
N.B.	68,097	4.4	27,061	39.7	20,132	29.6	6,929	10.2	5,157	7.6
P.Q.	376,232	24.5	87,480	23.4	58,252	15.5	29,800	7.9	19,050	5.1
ONT	536,169	34.9	241,540	45.3	202,786	37.8	39,869	19.7	27,087	5.1
MAN	108,336	7.0	66,069	61.1	54,677	50.5	11,563	10.7	6,787	6.3
SASK	130,250	8.5	41,619	32.0	31,067	23.9	10,622	8.2	8,204	6.3
ALB	93,375	6.1	48,762	52.4	39,752	42.6	9,133	9.8	5,987	6.4
B.C.	109,448	7.1	55,427	50.8	47,784	43.7	7,786	7.1	5,641	5.2
NWT	2,681	0.2								
Canada	1,537,172	100.0	609,571*	31.6	484,983	19.7	124,588	8.1	83,355	5.4

Table 4: Manpower by Province of Enlistment

* There were 10,065 additional enlistments outside Canada, bringing the total to 619,636.

Several factors are responsible for the low enlistment numbers in Quebec. In general, married, Canadian-born men tied to the land, whether English- or French-speaking, did not enlist. The argument that enlistments were generally lower in predominately [rural provinces](#), where farmers believed that food production was a more important contribution to the war effort than military service, holds true in the cases of Saskatchewan, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, but not Quebec, where the level of [urbanization](#) was second only to Ontario. Only New Brunswick had a higher proportion of Canadian-born males of military age, and the proportion of married men aged eighteen to forty-five in Quebec (60 percent) was the highest in Canada. Finally, the anti-enlistment views of many local priests in a predominately Roman-Catholic province cannot be ignored. The question facing most Canadian men contemplating enlistment was “why not?”; for those in Quebec, it was generally “why?”.

Difficult economic conditions also influenced rates of enlistment. There was nationwide unemployment by 1914 and summer drought seriously reduced prairie farm income. Railway construction had slowed and the urban construction industry was stagnant.¹¹ The war led to a

cutback in public works spending by all levels of government. Widespread unemployment undoubtedly contributed to the initial rush of volunteers, but became so serious by the summer of 1915 that there was talk of sending unemployed munitions workers to [Britain](#) where jobs existed.¹²

The complaint that Quebec didn't "do its share" in terms of enlistments was heard as early as 1916. A quarter of the nation's eligible men lived in Quebec, and the enlistments in the province made up 23 percent of the Canadian-born men in the CEF – almost a proportional share – but only 11 percent were Quebec-born. The crucial question is: how many were French-speaking? The question will never be answered. In 1935, the deputy minister of national defence said, "There is not, nor ever can be, any precise, accurate or authentic statement as to the number of French Canadians who served in the Canadian forces in the World War 1914-1919."¹³ A table showing that French-speaking men represented just over 3 percent of the 36,267 men in the First Contingent is of dubious quality because the mother tongue of recruits was not recorded on their Attestation Form.¹⁴

It has been suggested that the enlistment rate among the Canadian-born was lowest among groups with the longest history in the country. This would certainly include the French-Canadians. A classic argument is that their response to the war can be understood only if one distinguishes between active and passive [nationalism](#), where the latter is demonstrated by people prepared to defend their country only when it is actually threatened. Many French-Canadians were in this group and believed that Canada should concentrate on solving its own internal problems – which included fierce debates over language rights – rather than trying to shape Europe's destiny.¹⁵

Many critics of French-Canadian enlistment fail to give the school question the importance it deserves. Ontario's Regulation 17 of 1912 effectively prohibited the use of French as a language of instruction beyond the first two years of school. Coupled with earlier restrictions on French-language instruction in the Prairies, this led many French-Canadians, who made up 10 percent of the Ontario population, to believe that the first line of defence of what they considered their inalienable rights was not in Flanders, but in Canadian schools.¹⁶

Many British-born men enlisted in the CEF. Why was there not a similar French-Canadian commitment to their "mother country"? Perhaps there was no longer a sentimental tie to [France](#) strong enough to justify dying for her. More than a century of neglect and separation had broken any remaining bonds of intimacy,¹⁷ so that neither Britain nor France was a "mother country" for French-Canadians.¹⁸ Finally, it should be remembered that the CEF was

an English-speaking force. At a time when many in Quebec were unilingual, this posed a significant deterrent to enlistment.¹⁹

The Failure of Voluntary Enlistment and the Introduction of Conscription

By August 1916, the Canadian Corps, four divisions strong, was in France, and a fifth division was being trained in Britain. To this point voluntary recruitment had provided sufficient reserves to maintain unit strength in the field. However, the successful attack against Vimy Ridge on Easter Sunday 1917 exposed the weakness of the voluntary recruiting system. Taking the ridge cost the Corps 10,602 casualties, almost half the month's total of 23,939. Enlistment brought in only 4,761 men. The government now faced a serious problem. In December 1914 Prime Minister Sir [Robert Borden \(1854-1937\)](#) had categorically assured the country that "there has not been, there will not be compulsion or conscription". He reiterated this promise in January 1916. But with voluntary enlistment now insufficient to replace the losses, he had to choose from three alternatives: reduce the size of each division; disband one or more of the four combat-hardened divisions and redistribute the men; or introduce selective conscription (Figure 1).

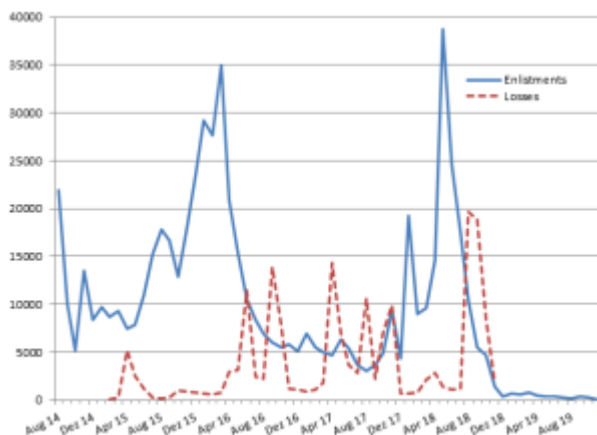


Figure 1: Male Enlistments and Casualties, Canadian Expeditionary Force, August

1914 – May 1920.²⁰

Because the government never seriously considered the option of reducing the overall size of the CEF, the Prime Minister was left with only one choice. Buoyed by a groundswell of public support for conscription, he announced on 18 May 1917 that conscription would be imposed. The refusal of Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie (1875-1933), the commanding officer of the Canadian Corps from June 1917 to the end of the war, to yield to War Office pressure in

early 1918 and remove four of the battalions from each division maintained the effectiveness of Canadian units, but ensured that conscription was necessary.

The Military Service Act (MSA) was signed into law on 29 August 1917 and on 13 October 1917, all unmarried men or widowers aged twenty to twenty-four years were ordered to report “for the defence and security of Canada, the preservation of our Empire and of human liberty”. However, 94 percent of those called immediately applied for an exemption. The requests for exemption came from men from all walks of life and all parts of the country. By the end of the year 404,395 men had registered, but 380,510 had sought exemption. In Ontario, 118,000 of 125,000 sought exemption; in Quebec, 115,000 of 117,000.²¹

The local tribunals rejected anywhere from a few to many of the requests; furthermore, many of the exemptions already granted were cancelled on 19 April 1918. Consequently the MSA provided 124,588 men for the CEF, surpassing its planned objective of 100,000 (Table 5) but leading to what has been characterized as one of the great tragedies of Canadian history.

Status of Men	Number
Class I Registrations	401,822
Granted exemption	221,949
Liable for Military Service Unapprehended defaulters24,139 Available but not called26,225	179,933
Reported for Military Service	129,569
Permitted to enlist in Imperial forces*	8,445
Taken on strength CEF	124,588
Performed no military service and struck off strength upon being found medically unfit, eligible for exemption or liable for non-combatant service only	16,300
Available for service with CEF units	108,288
Discharged prior to 11 November 1918	637
On strength CEF, 11 November 1918	99,651**
Proceeded overseas	47,509
Taken on strength units in France	24,132

Table 5: Men Raised Under the Military Service Act, 1917²²

* RAF, Royal Engineers Inland Water Transport and other units.

** The most commonly-reported number is 83,355 which appeared in European War Memorandum #6 (Sessional Paper 179, tabled 28 May, 1920). However, an important statement following the table containing this number is generally overlooked or ignored. In addition to the 83,355 “there were also 24,933 on leave without pay under the Orders in Council relating to compassionate leave and hardship cases, or subsequently discharged, making a total of 108,288”. Furthermore, the Report of the Director of the Military Service Branch notes that none of the reported figures included 26,225 men whose applications for exemption had finally been refused, and who were, therefore, available for call-up at the time of the Armistice.

The Great War could have been a powerful nation-building force, as it was in other [Dominions](#), but conscription fractured the relations between English and French Canada.²³ To most Quebecers, conscription represented English Canadians’ ruthless determination to order young French-Canadian men to die for an exclusively English Canadian cause.²⁴ To many in English-speaking Canada, conscription was seen as a vengeance that would fall primarily on Quebec.²⁵

Critics argue that conscription was a pointless tragedy which divided the country along language, class, occupational and regional lines; destroyed the unity of both the Conservative and Liberal parties; and provided too few additional men to have any significant effect on the outcome of the war.²⁶ The opposing argument is that it was necessary because the country had an obligation to the men in the trenches. Men in understaffed units were at much greater risk in both attack and defence than in those at full-strength, and devastating losses could occur suddenly and capriciously.²⁷ For example, between 15 and 18 September 1916, the 22nd Battalion lost a third of its men in the battle for Courcelette. Two weeks later it lost another third at Regina Trench. Replacing so many lost men would have been difficult for any unit, but was especially so for the only French-language battalion in the line of battle. Conscription was the only means of providing the necessary reinforcements.

In 1917 nobody could have predicted when the war would end. Nor could anyone have imagined the scale of the casualties that Canadian forces would suffer during the last hundred days between the start of the [Battle of Amiens](#) on 8 August 1918 and the Armistice. During this period the Canadian Corps suffered 45,835 casualties, nearly 20 percent of the

total number of CEF casualties and still the highest casualty rate in the nation's history.²⁸ The 24,132 conscripted men who reached the front lines by the time of the Armistice helped the Corps achieve its greatest successes of the war. Had the war continued into 1919, as everybody expected it would, the conscripts would have been sufficient to keep the Corps up to strength.

Where were all the “Real” Canadians?

The criticism that too few Canadian-born men had enlisted was already being heard by the time the First Contingent sailed in October 1914 (Table 6).

First Contingent ²⁹			Conscripts ³⁰		Total Canadian Expeditionary Force ³¹					
Place of Birth					Service in Canada		Service Overseas		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Canada	10,880	30.0	92,302	75.6	119,076	61.0	199,652	47.0	318,728	54.4
Anglophone	9,635	26.6								
Francophone	1,245	3.4								
Newfoundland					1,008	0.5	2,288	0.5	3,296	0.5
England	15,232	42.0	9,106	7.5	29,126	14.9	127,571	30.0	156,697	25.3
Scotland	5,440	15.0	3,519	2.9	7,879	4.0	39,548	9.3	47,427	7.7
Ireland	2,176	6.0	1,756	1.4	4,791	2.5	14,536	3.4	19,327	3.1
Wales	363	1.0	339	0.2	946	0.4	3,773	0.9	4,719	0.8
Total Br. Isles	32,211	64.0		12.1	42,742	21.9	185,428	43.6	228,170	36.8
Other British			1,091	0.9	1,467	0.8	4,653	1.1	6,120	1.0
U.S.A.	130	0.4	8,139	6.7	15,633	8.0	19,966	4.7	35,599	5.7
Other	36	—	5,894	4.8	11,391	5.8	12,515	2.9	23,906	3.9
Not stated	2,010	5.6			3,730	1.9	87		3,817	.06
Total	36,267	100.0	122,146	100.0	195,047	100.0	424,589	100.0	619,636	100.0

Table 6: Composition of the CEF by Place of Birth

Critics didn't distinguish between British-born immigrants who had arrived as adults, and those who had been brought to Canada as children, but the fact that a volunteer's place of birth was considered important from the very beginning of the war indicates that Canadians believed that the distinction mattered.³²

The national distress over the perceived failure of the Canadian-born to “do their duty” may be rooted in the myth of the invincible “citizen-soldier” and the alleged superiority of the rugged Canadian lumberjack, farmer or fisherman over the effete subjects of autocratic, militaristic European nations. The British readily seized the image of Canadians as robust, free-spirited pioneers in spite of the fact that the image of the rugged outdoorsman as the backbone of the country’s army was false.³³ Only about 6 percent of the men who fought at Vimy were farmers or ranchers, 19 percent were clerical workers, and 65 percent manual workers. By war’s end, because of conscription, farmers, fishermen, hunters and lumbermen comprised 22 percent of the CEF and industrial workers 36 percent. Morton noted that “even white collar workers (126,387) outnumbered the 123,060 farmers”, although this is misleading since he included 15,023 students in the former number.³⁴

British-born men made a much greater proportional contribution to the CEF than any other group. Of the roughly 300,000 men born in Great Britain and British possessions, 72 percent volunteered their services, and 63 percent were posted overseas. The comparable figures for the eligible Canadian-born male population were 20 and 18 percent, respectively.

	Eligible	First Contingent	Total Volunteers	Conscripts	CEF Overseas	Total CEF
Canadian	1,113,244	1.0	20.3	8.3	17.9	28.6
British*	307,419	7.6	72.1	5.1	62.6	77.3
Other	116,509	1.9	42.3	12.0	28.0	51.1
total	1,537,172	2.3	32.6	7.9	27.6	40.3

Table 7: Components of the CEF as a percent of eligible male population by place of birth

* Including the British Isles and colonies

By the time of the Armistice, conscription had redressed the balance in favour of the Canadian-born. Just over half of the total enlistments in the CEF were Canadians, and they made up the largest national group of both the volunteers and the Overseas Force (Table 8), although their proportional representation in the overseas force was overshadowed by men from [Newfoundland](#), England, Scotland and Wales (Table 9).

	Number of enlistments	First Contingent	Total Volunteers	Conscripts	CEF Overseas	Total CEF
Canada	318,728	34.0	45.5	75.6	47.0	51.4
Britain*	237,586	64.0	44.6	12.9	44.8	37.8
Other	63,322	6.0	9.9	11.5	7.7	10.8
	619,636	36,267	497,490	122,146	424,589	100.0

Table 8: Components of the CEF as a percent of men by place of birth

* Including the British Isles and colonies

Nationality	Total CEF	Overseas service	Home service	% of group overseas
Canadian	318,728	199,652	119,076	62.6
Newfoundland	3,296	2,288	3,296	69.4
English	156,697	127,571	29,126	81.4
Scottish	47,427	39,548	7,879	83.4
Welsh	4,719	3,773	946	80.0
Irish	19,327	14,536	4,791	52.2
Other British	6,120	4,653	1,467	76.0
Total British	237,586	192,369	47,505	81.0
American	35,599	19,966	15,633	56.1
Other foreign	23,906	12,575	11,391	52.4
Total foreign	59,505	32,481	27,024	54.6
Not stated	3,817	87	3,730	2.3
Total	619,636	424,589	195,047	68.5

Table 9: CEF by Nationality and Area of Service³⁵

Conclusion

Most of the men who flocked to the newly built armouries to enlist in 1914, and those who followed, were neither militiamen nor Canadians.³⁶ A century on, that hardly matters. The men and women who participated in the First World War were not concerned with how later generations would perceive them. They could no more foresee the future than we can. They made critical decisions in the midst of confusion and uncertainty, based on the information available at the time and their own personal assessments of what mattered.³⁷ Their actions cannot be properly assessed through the lens of a world removed from their daily reality. As one prominent Canadian historian remarked, "Canadians, as an immigrant people, wisely put more stock in commitment than birthplace".³⁸ There is no shame in the fact that the CEF, one of the country's first great national institutions, was dominated by the foreign-born. Wherever they were born, whatever their reasons for enlistment might have been, all the men and women in the CEF wore Canadian insignia and the headstones of those who died bear a maple leaf. Whatever they may have been before they joined the CEF, they were Canadians ever after, and their service and sacrifice is inextricably woven into the historical fabric of the country. It forms the foundation for the belief that their commitment enabled Canada to come of age and, for the first time, stand proudly in its own right on the world stage.³⁹

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Notes

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4. Nicholson, Canadian 1962, p. 217. ↑
5. An Act Respecting the Militia and Defence of Canada S.C. 1904 (4 Edw VII), c.23, s.11. ↑
6. Stacey, Age of Conflict 1981, p. 235. ↑
7. Canada Year Book 1918, Table 11 ↑
8. Canada Year Book 1918, Table 12. ↑
9. Includes 2,854 Nursing Sisters, and all enlistment to the end of May, 1920. ↑
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14. Duguid, A. F.: *Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War*, volume 2, appendix 86, Ottawa 1938. Inexplicably, having said that the “figures are taken from attestation papers on file at Record Office, Militia Headquarters,” Duiguid noted “Statement furnished 12 May, 1916 in compliance with an Order of the House of Commons dated 3 February, 1918”. ↑
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27. Granatstein, J. L.: *Face to Face on Conscription*, in: *Legion Magazine* (2014). ↑
28. Schreiber, Shane: *Shock Army of the British Empire. The Canadian Corps in the Last 100 Days of the Great War*, Westport 1997, p. 5. ↑
29. Nationalities were based on the answer to the question: “What is your country of birth?”. French Canadians were credited with the full strength of French Canadian units, and all men bearing French names and born in Canada were called French Canadians’. See: Duguid, A.F.: *Official History* 1938 Vol. II, Appendix 86, p. 58. ↑
30. Maj. Clyde R. Scott, Assistant Director Records for Adjutant General to D.O.C. Military District NO. 12, Regina. 9 March, 1928. HQ 64-1-24, Vol. 23 F.35. English-speaking

Canadians totaled 64,745, French-speaking, 27,557. ↑

31. These numbers include both Nursing Sisters (3,141) and enlistments outside Canada. Maj. Clyde R. Scott, Assistant Director of Records for Adjutant General to A.M. Anderson, Vancouver, B.C. 3 October, 1929. HQ. 64-1-24, Vol. 25, F.123. ↑
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