

# Le Régiment de Maisonneuve

## A Profile Based on Personnel Records

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with Christine Hamelin

The Régiment de Maisonneuve provided one of the 36 infantry battalions which served in the Canadian army during the campaign in Northwest Europe. It was one of four French-Canadian battalions raised in the province of Quebec during the first months of the war. Originally the Department of National Defence had intended to create a French-Canadian brigade but when it was decided that the Royal 22eme Régiment had to be included in 1st Division the plan for a French language brigade was abandoned. The Maisonneuves were ultimately linked with the Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment), an English-speaking Montreal battalion, and the Calgary Highlanders. Together these oddly matched units constituted the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade.

The Maisonneuves arrived in England in December 1940 and went into action on 19 July 1944 at the height of the battle of Normandy. On their first day of operations they had 17 fatal casualties. By the end of the war, 197 Maisonneuve other ranks had died in combat in France, Belgium, Holland and Germany.

Military historians are a bit like generals in that they tend to treat casualty figures as a piece of evidence about the intensity of battle and the problem of manpower wastage. This paper attempts to redirect historical enquiry towards other issues. Who were these men whose names are listed on the honour roll? How old were they? Where did they come from? What was their family, educational, occupational and military background? Why were they in the army? Did they volunteer or were they conscripted? These and many other questions may be answered through an examination of the personnel records

retained in the National Personnel Record Centre, a division of the National Archives in Ottawa.<sup>1</sup>

As part of the research for a book on the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade,<sup>2</sup> the files of all soldiers killed in action with the brigade in Northwest Europe, more than 1,000 men, have been examined. Regrettably the computerization of these records is not complete and this draft paper, while offering a detailed investigation of the Maisonneuves, does not develop systematically either comparisons with other units or correlations within the battalion itself.

The 197 fatalities in our Maisonneuve sample constitute 17 percent of those who served with the battalion during the seven-month campaign. On 15 July a total of 774 other ranks (ORs) were on strength. Losses due to death, wounding, battle exhaustion and sickness quickly reduced the Maisonneuves to a two-company battalion. The shortage of French-speaking infantry meant that the battalion remained sadly under strength throughout the battles of Normandy and the Scheldt. In November reinforcements re-established the normal battalion complement and thereafter the "Maisies" were never seriously below strength. A total of 397 other rank replacements joined the Maisonneuves, making a total of 1,171 ORs in the regiment during combat.<sup>3</sup>

Casualties in Northwest Europe were usually the result of indirect fire, especially mortar and artillery.<sup>4</sup> It seems unlikely that death was anything other than random, a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It would therefore be reasonable to argue that a 17 percent sample derived from the records of those killed



*Scout platoon of Le Régiment de Maisonneuve sit by a barn near Ossendrecht, Holland, 17 October 1944.*

*Sitting (l. to r.): Pte. Rheal Allare, L/Cpl. Richard Ouelette, L/Cpl. Wilfred Gaudette, Sgt. Louis Frechette, Cpl. Gerrard Desruisseaux, Pte. Alphonse Laliberte, Lt. Louis J.A. Woods. At back, standing and sitting on fence (l. to r.): Pte. Louts Fortier, Pte. Marcel Pelletier, Pte. Caliste Robichaud.*

*Photo by MM. Dean; NAC PA 176834*

in action provides a statistically valid basis for generalizations about those who served in the rifle companies of the battalion. If the killed-in-action sample is random then any factor characteristic of between one quarter and three quarters of the sample would be characteristic of the battalion 19 times out of 20  $\pm$  6.4%. When the full brigade sample is available it will have a much higher degree of validity.<sup>5</sup>

Let us begin by examining the basic data about the Maisonneuve other ranks.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 1**

Age	Number
19	20
20	20
21	18
22	11
23	25
24	13
25	15
26	9
27	13
28	6
29	11
30	8
31-35	20
36-41	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>197</b>
Mean = 24.6 (Bde Mean = 26)	
Median = 23 (Bde Median = 24)	

The Maisonneuve group is slightly younger than the rest of the brigade owing, it appears, to the relative youth of the reinforcements.

The next table records place of birth and residence at the point of enlistment.

**Table 2**  
**Place of Birth and Place of Residence at Enlistment**

	Birth	Residence
Montreal	56	77
Other Quebec	101	92
New Brunswick	19	14
Ontario	13	8
United States	3	2
Prairies	3	2
Nova Scotia	2	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>197</b>

The degree to which the Maisonneuves remained a Quebec battalion is striking in view of the frequently expressed fears that the regional identity of regiments had declined during training and combat. We might guess that French-Canadian units were exceptional but in fact the Calgary Highlanders show a similar continuity as a western Canadian battalion drawn chiefly from southern Alberta and British Columbia.<sup>7</sup>

The statistics on schooling suggest a higher level of education than might have been expected. There are no illiterates in our sample.



*Support Company of Le Régiment de Maisonneuve in the line near Nijmegen, Holland, 8 February 1945.*

Photo by M.M. Dean; NAC PA 153088

**Table 3**  
**Years of Schooling**

	Total	Mean	Median
Regiment de Maisonneuve	197	6.3	6
Calgary Highlanders	394	5.5	8

The schooling levels of the Calgaries are skewed by the presence of a large number of individuals who reported no formal education.<sup>8</sup>

Information on the occupation of the soldier's father is available for 102 of the Maisonneuve sample.

**Table 4**  
**Father's Occupation**

Skilled or semi-skilled	24
Labourer	15
Farmer	17
Clerical	5
Father Deceased	38
<b>Total</b>	<b>102</b>

The proportion of Maisonneuves with deceased fathers is quite extraordinary. Other family characteristics are noted in Table 5.

**Table 5**  
**Selected Family Characteristics**

Median Family Size	7 (5 children)
10+ children	27
7+ children	43
4-6 children	40
1-3 children	78
one parent families	48
no parents	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>188</b>

Fully a third of those killed in action came from families without one or more parent, a very large proportion.

Information on the soldier's occupation at enlistment is available for all 197 men.

**Table 6**

Labourer	93
Farmer	13
Lumberjack	11
Factory (semi-skilled)	25
Skilled workers	42
Clerical	10
Unemployed	2
Student	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>197</b>



Photo by M.M. Dean, NAC PA 151022

**Above:** Private Harvey Lalonde and Sergeant Raymond Gosselin on a winter training exercise near Cuyk, Holland, 23 January 1945.

**Right:** Three Maisies, Privates J.R. Ratelle, F. Gignac and G. Bergeron, looking at photographs near Zuid-Beveland, Holland, 1 November 1944.



Photo by Ken Bell, NAC PA 17

The fact that only two men reported that they had been unemployed and had no particular occupation calls for comment. It is a convention in Canadian history that the army was initially recruited from among the ranks of the unemployed, especially in 1939. This particular bit of folklore has a curious twist because such statements seem to imply that being unemployed in 1939 was the consequence of personal failings, not the Depression. However, the notion of a correlation between unemployment and enlistment is not supported by the available evidence.

The General Advisory Committee on Demobilization and Rehabilitation undertook an analysis of 347,900 occupational histories of men in the armed forces and determined that "eighty-five percent of the men who joined Canada's armed forces in the first three years of the war left gainful employment to enlist."<sup>9</sup> Approximately ten percent were unemployed, the balance students or self-employed. These figures include members of the air force and navy and it might be expected that unemployment figures for army recruits would be higher. Descriptive and oral interview evidence certainly suggests the Maisonneuves, who were one of the first regiments in Canada to reach full strength, enlisted large numbers of unemployed men in 1939.<sup>10</sup> If so, and if they were unsuitable soldiers, they were discharged from the army in the period between enlistment and 1944. As we can see in

Table 7 two-thirds of the Maisonneuves who were killed in action were recruited after 1940, more than one-half after 1941.

**Table 7**  
**Year of Enlistment**

1939	31
1940	36
1941	29
1942	29
1943	43
1944	29
1945	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>197</b>

It would be interesting to know what happened to the large number of Maisonneuves who went to England in the fall of 1940 but were not with the battalion in 1944. This may apply to all units in 1st and 2nd division.

The personnel records permit us to learn about a number of other characteristics of the men who joined the Canadian army. Sixty percent of the Maisonneuves were bilingual at enlistment, or at least at the point of preparation of their personnel record. A correlation between ability to speak English and willingness to join the army is clearly suggested but the 40 percent who spoke no English point to the utility of a French-language unit for the army.

Only 21 men (ten percent) were married, five of them in the United Kingdom. Again folklore would suggest a much higher proportion of marriages and in this case it appears the Maisies were exceptional. Thirty percent of the Calgary Highlanders were married and 16 of the 113 men married in the UK.<sup>11</sup>

The Maisonneuves have been frequently described as much smaller than their comrades in the brigade and it is commonplace to find descriptive evidence about the smaller stature of French-Canadians in the army. The average height of a Maisonneuve OR was 5' 6", which was also the median. Nineteen men were under 5' 4" tall. No figures are presently available for the Calgarys but the Black Watch, with an average height of 5' 8" and a significant proportion of six footers, made a noticeable contrast to the Maisonneuves.<sup>12</sup>

The personnel records also permit the historian to catch a glimpse of the impact of four years of army life in England on the behaviour of other rank volunteers. Fully 60 percent of the

Maisonneuves were Absent Without Leave (AWL) at least once during their stay in England and ten percent were AWL four or more times. On the other hand infractions other than AWL are very few in number, only 13 men were charged with minor crimes in a four-year period. This incidence of AWL is slightly higher than in the Black Watch but the Maisonneuves reported fewer minor infractions.

A small number of men accounted for a very high proportion of the disciplinary problems. To take but one example, number 13 in our Maisonneuve sample was 20 when he enlisted in Montreal. He went AWL three times before the unit embarked for England and was placed under close arrest on arrival in the UK for the same reason. He was AWL seven more times in the next 12 months and managed to get VD. A young woman from Sussex wrote to his Commanding Officer seeking assistance claiming that he was the father of her child. However, from the spring of 1942 until his death in August he was a satisfactory soldier serving as a driver in the support company. A Black Watch private who

*Personnel of "B" Company, Le Régiment de Maisonneuve  
passing through Bons-Tassilly, France, 16 August 1944.*

Photo by D.I. Grant, NAC PA 135955





*Private Marcel St. Laurent preparing to throw a hand grenade during a winter training exercise near Cuyk, Holland, 23 January 1945.*

Photo by M.M. DeGru, NAC PA 151023

was AWL ten times and also had four minor charges on his sheet appears to have led the Brigade in such misdemeanours.

Most Canadian soldiers who enlisted in the Second World War were subjected to a form of IQ exam known as the "M" test. The "M" test was based on the US Army's infamous Alpha and Beta tests used to classify American recruits in World War I.<sup>13</sup> The Canadian version consisted of six verbal and four non-verbal tests which could be given to soldiers in relatively large groups of 50 or more. The English-language version of the test was crudely standardized<sup>14</sup> but it is not clear whether the French-language version, which became available in 1942, was subjected to any such check.

Only 94 Maisonneuves took the test and it is apparent that a number of them took it in English and were not subsequently retested.<sup>15</sup> The average "M" test score of the 94 men, 112, was below the army average of 130 and the brigade average of 125. Not much can be learned from such data except that as in so many other areas of military life, little provision was made for the specific needs of francophones.

The personnel records allow us to make firmer statements about the accuracy of assumptions about the volunteer character of the Canadian army. The following table analyses the circumstances of enlistment of the Maisonneuves, 1939-1945:

**Table 8  
Circumstances of Enlistment**

Volunteered from civilian life	130
Volunteered when conscription notice received	3
Volunteered after serving in NRMA unit	27
Conscripted	22
No information	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>197</b>

The category "volunteered from civilian life" almost certainly understates the impact that the National Resources Mobilization Act had on the behaviour of young men after 1941. The choice facing them during the war was not simply to remain a civilian or volunteer for the services. The probability of being conscripted under the

NRMA for service in Canada must have been a significant factor in the decision of those who volunteered from 1942 to 1945.

An analysis of those who enlisted in 1943-44 certainly suggests the enormous importance of the NRMA in securing soldiers for the Maisonneuves.

**Table 9  
Circumstances of Enlistment,  
1943 & 1944**

Volunteered from civilian life	23
Volunteered when notice of call-up received	3
Volunteered after serving in NRMA unit	16
Conscripted	18
No information	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>

One issue of considerable interest to military historians may readily be settled by examining the personnel records. The notion that large numbers of poorly trained men, often hastily converted from artillery, service corps and other

branches of the army were sent forward as reinforcements in Italy and Northwest Europe is widely held. For example, the recent book *Rhineland: The Battle to End the War* by Denis and Shelegh Whitaker argues from interview evidence that large groups of such men "who became cannon fodder" were sent into combat in the later stages of the war. The statistics in the following tables suggest that this impressionistic view is not correct for the Maisonneuves.

**Table 10  
Corps Served With**

Infantry only (RCIC)	179
Artillery (RCA)	9
Armour (RCAC)	1
Engineers (RCE)	1
Ordnance (RCOC)	2
Medical (RCAMC)	2
Service (RCASC)	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>197</b>

Of the nineteen men who were transferred from other Corps, eight had joined the battalion before it went to France in 1944.

*Privates Raoul Archambault and Albert Harvey practicing on the 2-inch mortar, Cuyk, Holland, 23 January 1945. Private Harvey was killed in action a month after this photo was taken. His death occurred during the opening stages of Operation Blockbuster on 26 February 1945, the bloodiest day of battle for the Maisonneuves in 1945 when a total of 13 were killed and 33 wounded.*



Photo by M.M. Dean, NAC PA 151019

**Table 11**  
**Length of Service with**  
**Regiment Before Death**

1 - 4 years	61
6 - 12 months	34
3 - 6 months	36
2 - 3 months	13
1 - 2 months	11
less than one month	19
less than one week	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>197</b>

The 25 men who had served with the battalion for less than one month turn out to have been a normal collection of trained infantry reinforcements. Seven of them were sent to the Maisonneuves from other infantry regiments as part of the pre-Overlord attempt to provide French-speaking soldiers to the three French-language battalions and were killed in the costly battles of July. Four others were from the division's reinforcement unit in France. None of the remaining 14 really fit the description of poorly-trained cannon fodder. Perhaps a full study of other requirements will tell a different story but a first look at the Calgary Highlanders and Black Watch suggests a pattern similar to the one found for the Maisonneuves.

This brief article has attempted to demonstrate that a good deal can be learned from the personnel records of those killed in action during the Second World War. We hope it will encourage other historians, especially those who are more statistically and computer-oriented, to explore these records. It will not be possible to undertake the kind of research Dr. Jean-Pierre Gagnon engages in until well into the next century. In the meantime there is much to be learned through methods similar to the ones used in this paper.

One last note. The co-author who examined the Maisonneuve records, Christine Hamelin, is a short-story writer and graduate student in English literature. She approached the research with a strong desire to understand the individual rather than the group. The records often allowed her to learn a good deal of personal information about the young men who were killed in battle. Let us meet a few of them.

"Bernard" was born in St. Anne de Sabrevois, Quebec in 1916. He was 5' 6" tall, 135 pounds with hazel eyes and brown hair. He was the sixth of eight children and left school after Grade 3. His father died when he was six. Bernard joined the Maisonneuves in July 1940 after the fall of France. He told the recruiting officer that he joined "for adventure." He went to France with the regiment and was a model soldier. He died on 25 July 1944 on the slopes of Verrières ridge along with hundreds of equally unremarkable young Canadians.

"Jean-Paul," of Longueuil, Quebec was 21 when he was conscripted. His father was an accountant, he a mechanic. The personnel selection officer noted that he left school in Grade 7 after having been "truant to the limit." He then started a newspaper delivery business but had to quit after seven months "because his customers did not pay regularly." He did not like army life but he told an interviewer attempting to persuade him to volunteer for overseas service that he would "try to adapt himself if he has *to go*." Jean Paul, who had scored very highly on the "M" test, was self-conscious about his lack of formal education. He was recommended for the armour corps but was still with the Régiment de Hull when he agreed to convert to General Service in the fall of 1944. After a refresher course at an infantry training unit he was sent to the UK and in early December joined the Maisonneuves in the Nijmegen salient. He was killed in action on 24 February 1945 in the battle for Calcar Ridge, part of the struggle for the Rhineland. His mother, who was immediately informed of his death, received flowers from him a month later and wrote asking whether it was possible that he was still alive. It was discovered that he had sent the flowers just before he was killed.

"Henri Joseph" was 28 years old when he joined the Royal Regiment of Canada in Toronto. Born in Quebec, he was raised in Chapleau, Ontario where his father was a carpenter. At 5' 9" and 162 pounds he appeared fit and eager. The army examiner described him as, "very strong...a fine looking man" who had joined because of his sense of duty. He was "happy" in the army. On 28 July 1944 after a week of continuous battle stress he was evacuated as a battle exhaustion casualty. In the exhaustion centre he was alternately excited and withdrawn. The psychiatrist, who did not speak French,

found it difficult to evaluate him but on 7 August Henri Joseph "accepted the suggestion to return to his unit." When he reached the Maisonneuves he was not sent back to a rifle company but given a job at battalion headquarters. Unfortunately on 28 September he was struck by shell fire and suffered a traumatic amputation of his left leg. He died ten minutes after arriving at the Regimental Aid Post.

The personnel records provide an unique body of material for historians who wish to learn about the lives of such ordinary people caught up in war. Ms. Hamelin's notes include accounts of "Henri" who reported his pre-war job as "a solicitor for prostitutes" and "Hector" who "liked school especially math but had to leave to work on his father's farm." Then there is "Gerald" who "lived too far from school to attend" but wanted to acquire more education and learn to drive a truck. And "Joseph," 21 years old, 6' 2" "clean cut, steady girlfriend...collects stamps and is a Knight of Columbus"; "Napoleon" who joined to "defend his country," liked swimming, fishing and baseball. He was popular in the battalion because he played the "guitar and the mouth organ." No doubt he played the popular soldier's songs including the one with the chorus that begins:

Bless em all, bless em all  
 The long and the short and the tall  
 Bless all the sergeants and WO ones  
 Bless all the corporals and their loved ones.

The personnel records permit us to identify the long and the short and the tall and to place them in appropriate categories. The records also allow us to enrich our understanding of each of the ordinary young men who fought and died on our behalf.

### Notes

1. Lists of all casualties, fatal and non-fatal, for each Canadian Army Unit can be consulted at the National Personnel Record Centre. The lists may also usually be found in the June 1945 War Diary for each unit. (NAC RG 24) Gérard Marchant, *Le Régiment de Maisonneuve Vers La Victoire 1944-45* (Montreal: les Presses Libres, 1980) provides a list of Maisonneuve fatal casualties. The National Personnel Record Centre has files on all servicemen but access is limited to individuals who have been deceased for 20 years.

2. Terry Copp, *The Brigade: The Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade, 1939-1945* (Stoney Creek, Ontario: Fortress Publications, 1992).
3. Calculated from the Weekly Field Returns 8 July 1944 to 5 May 1945. The Weekly Field Returns for each unit are included as an appendix to the War Diary NAC RG 24.
4. Eighty percent of those Maisonneuves who received medical attention before death, half the fatalities, appear to have died as a result of indirect fire.
5. This calculation was made by Dr. Marc Kilgour, Professor of Mathematics, Wilfrid Laurier University.
6. The Brigade means are taken from Alistair Hain, *The Calgary Highlanders*, MA Cognate Essay, Wilfrid Laurier University, 1990 and for the Black Watch from the personnel file summaries prepared by Christine Hamelin.
7. Hain, Table 6.
8. *Ibid.*, Table 9.
9. Ian Mackenzie Papers National Archives of Canada (NAC) MG 27 Vol.61, file 527-62.1 wish to thank Shaun Brown for sharing this information with me.
10. In the course of research for my book on the 5th Brigade Lieutenant-Colonel Jacques Ostiguy, DSO, has served as my "research assistant." He has obtained memoirs and interviews from a number of Maisonneuves. Transcripts in possession of the author.
11. Hain, Table 7.
12. The Black Watch personnel records have not yet been analyzed. The 413 files were hand-counted for this and several other statistics.
12. I have discussed the Canadian army's personnel selection system in Terry Copp and Bill McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Canadian Army 1939-1945* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), Chapter 3. See also H.S.M. Carver, *Personnel Selection in the Canadian Army: A Descriptive Study*, Mimeographed Ottawa, National Defence, 1945.
13. See Carver, Chapter II, for a description of how the "M" test was standardized.
14. For example, Number 15 in our sample scored just 96 in his "M" test administered in 1942 when he was conscripted. When interviewed in England the Selection of Personnel Officer noted that he was "a co-operative, healthy, earnest man...would like to stay in the army. The man took his M test in English! and should have had it in French."

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