

HEROES SHUNNED FOR 75 YEARS

Posted on May 25, 2012 by Keghart



Category: [Opinions](#)



Terrence Rundle West, [The Toronto Star](#), 24 May 2012



Quick, identify the Canadian battalion that celebrates its 75th anniversary this month. If you didn't guess the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion you're not alone. Few would.

Terrence Rundle West, [The Toronto Star](#), 24 May 2012



Quick, identify the Canadian battalion that celebrates its 75th anniversary this month. If you didn't guess the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion you're not alone. Few would.

Their founding date, May 1937, will go unheralded and the vets who served with them in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) won't be celebrating either. Of approximately 1,543 original members, only Jules Paivio is still alive and at 95, he's too frail to be kicking up his heels.

There was a time when Canadians held the Mac-Paps in high esteem.

In my high-school days in the 1950s, a classmate's father had served with them, leaving me and my chums awestruck. We knew the background — they were Canadian volunteers who had gone to Spain to fight the fascists.

For me at the time, with one brother dead at Dieppe in 1942 and a second a North Atlantic navy vet, the Mac-Paps were heroes of the highest order.

Hadn't they taken on Hitler and Mussolini in Spain two full years before World War II was declared? Hadn't they stood up to Franco's German and Italian-equipped fascists with nothing but leftover WWI arms? Hadn't the German Condor Legion tested their Stuka dive bombers and Messerschmitts on them, giving us Guernica in the process? Weren't 400 of them dead on Spanish soil — as many as in the Korean War that had just ended?

Defeated or not, the Mac-Paps were seen as heroes to the average Canadian in 1939. Not so prime minister Mackenzie King. He and his government were having none of it.

When the shooting stopped, the government tried to prevent their return. And when the soldiers did manage to limp home, battered and bleeding, the government set the RCMP on them. The harassment continued right up to the 1980s when the vets were well into retirement age.

Over the decades there was to be no officially sanctioned silent moments for these heroes, or parades to mark their valour. And even though the Mac-Paps had come home with valuable war experience, the Canadian military refused many of them enlistment in WWII, thus denying them another crack at the fascists.

Seventy-five years have passed, yet they still get no respect. To this day the government ignores their legacy. The National War Museum of Canada is completely silent on the subject: not one picture, artifact or plaque marks the Mac-Pap memory. It's as if they never existed.

So, what sin did these heroes of my youth commit to warrant 75 years of official shunning? Note that even before they volunteered for Spain the government was both enraged and terrified by them — enraged because they'd broken Mackenzie King's hastily passed law forbidding enlistment in a foreign conflict; terrified because they feared their politics.

Having been unemployed, forced to sleep in hobo jungles, travel in boxcars and chased from town to town for years, many had become unionists and Communists. In short, the authorities feared that not only would they return intent on fomenting revolution here, but with newfound war smarts to make it happen.

When the boys returned in early 1939, the government was in no mood to roll out the red carpet. But what the authorities failed to see was that the fire had gone out of the volunteers. Yes, many of them had been radicals and Communists, but the idealism and the quest for revolution they'd left with had been extinguished by the brutality, corruption and mismanagement of the cause they'd championed.

When WWII broke out a few months after their return, the government was still in a stew about what to do with them. In the end, they selected to send the Mac-Paps to Coventry rather than jail. It was to last all their lives. The RCMP hounded and kept dossiers on them well into old age.

Now, five years shy of 100, Jules Paivio is the only one left. As an idealistic young man, and three years before our government saw the need for it, he had risked his life to put a halt to the spread of totalitarianism. In the process he'd experienced bitter fighting, been cut off behind enemy lines, captured, lined up against a wall for execution only to be snatched away at the last second and left to rot in one of Franco's abominable prisons.

Paivio's story is typical of the Canadian veterans to Spain. For all their sacrifice, they came home to continuous snubbing and harassment.

Governments do not do mea culpa well. Still, most Canadians today would agree that standing up to Hitler and Mussolini in the early days might have prevented WWII and 44,093 Canadian deaths. The volunteers to Spain understood this and had the courage to back their convictions.

It's been 75 years: it's time to cut these men, their families and their memory some slack. It's time to accord them their rightful place in the history books and time to give them a thought come next Nov. 11.

Terrence Rundle West is an Ottawa writer whose latest novel, ***Not In My Father's Footsteps***, follows the journey of two young Canadians from the hobo jungles of Canada to the Spanish Civil War, where one fights with the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion.

