

Military Engineers at the Throttle

Canada had provided overseas railway troops for the Great War and anticipated that a similar request would come from Great Britain for the Second World War. The fall of France delayed the request, but Canada continued planning. Eventually, the request came, and Canada mobilized No. 1 Railway Operating Group, Royal Canadian Engineers on 19 March 1943. Comprising two railway operating companies



and a railway workshop company, the unit was mostly staffed from employees of the Canadian Pacific and Canadian National Railways. The total strength including the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals element, was approximately 1300 all ranks. The unit embarked for England on 23 July 1943.

No. 1 Railway Operating Group had both diesel and steam crews and trained and operated on military and civil railway lines in England until it moved to the Continent in 1944. The initial stages of their employment focused on learning the technical aspects of railroading in England as they were expected to operate British-manufactured equipment once on the Continent. The tasks of the group covered all aspects of railway operation from constructing and maintaining rail lines, operating trains, controlling scheduling and signaling, and repairing and rebuilding rolling stock. This even included learning to hand-stoke the firebox of a locomotive as most Canadian equipment had automatic stokers by then.

After D-Day, the first elements of the Railway Operating Group arrived in France on 2 September 1944. They moved forward with the advance and created a reliable operating rail system that helped to supply the mass of stores needed to support the Allied advance. Rail beds needed to be repaired and damaged rolling stock brought into service. The rolling stock was assembled from France, Belgium, Germany and US sources. As an indication of the pace of activities, No. 1 Railway Operating Group moved 165,104 net tons on 11,715 wagons in 699 trains in October 1944.

By the time they ceased operation on 31 August 1945 the Railway Workshop Company had assembled 6000 railway wagons of 15–30-ton size. Local French and Belgian railroaders were pressed into service as the rail lines extended eastward into Germany. After the ceasefire, German railroaders also contributed as the unit became involved in the move of thousands of displaced persons following the cessation of hostilities. The magnificent effort by No 1 Railway Operating Group in support of the Allied armies ended in October 1945 when the group was disbanded.