

## ENGINEERS IN THE "DIRTY THIRTIES"

The year 1929 ushered in the start of a decade-long world-wide economic depression that became known as the "Dirty Thirties". Large-scale unemployment and a disastrous drought on the Canadian prairies created particularly severe hardship in the nation. The Federal Government, recognizing that the problem was beyond local control, initiated the Unemployment Relief Program in 1932. In 1934 the administration, management, construction, and erection of large projects that had been handled by Department of Public Works was transferred to the Department of National Defence.



The Royal Canadian Engineers were the obvious choice to be the Office of Principal Interest for this program as their mandate included: *"To execute and supervise the engineer services throughout Canada [and] Any other military duties which they might be called upon to perform."* While the RCE had been reduced to a skeleton force following demobilization after World War I, they were able to use their skills to properly supervise the projects. Construction of the unemployment relief camps was the initial activity and then typical projects undertaken were barracks and training area construction, airfield construction, reforestation, operations, fortification repairs, and highway construction. The majority of the projects employed unskilled labour.

Dundurn, SK, was the site of a typical relief camp construction project. Dundurn had been first used in 1928 for Militia training but without the benefit of permanent structures for habitation or operations. The land had begun to be cleared for a permanent militia training camp by local labour in 1930 and the 26,000-acre forest reserve was transferred to DND in 1932. The relief camp included barracks-style accommodation for up to 2,000 men, a hospital, a recreation hall, and a water and sewer utility system.

The federal relief camps were phased out in the summer of 1936. During their existence, employment and experience was provided for over 170,000 workers while the gross expenditures were \$24.5 million. One unexpected benefit of the RCE responsibilities for this project was the planning skills and management experience it gave for the home-front construction work that would be required for the mobilization and training for WW II.

During World War II, Camp Dundurn became a major training centre and the largest military training base in Saskatchewan. An extensive training area was established and facilities were expanded to accommodate an advanced engineer training centre and then an armoured corps training school. The RCAF operated a bombing range and the camp also included a large hospital, a nurses' residence, a Canadian Women's Army Corps barracks, and a fire hall. More than 50,000 soldiers trained at Camp Dundurn before being assigned to duty overseas.