
ROBERT TREMAINE TAFT

Chief of Police (1954-1965)

*Written & researched by John Burchill
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My third installment in a series of articles looking for the most significant police officers to come out of Winnipeg – individuals who made sustained and substantial contributions to policing in Winnipeg and to their community – is Robert Taft.

Taft was born on February 22, 1904, in Sydney, Nova Scotia. His family moved to Winnipeg when he was a small boy. He attended Somerset School, Greenway School, Isaac Brock School, and Kelvin High School before taking one year of studies at the University of Manitoba.

After completing school, Taft worked in a variety of jobs, from stoking boats on the Great Lakes to working as a miner in Pickerel Lake, Ontario. Eventually, he joined the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps on November 5, 1923, where he stayed for three years before purchasing his discharge on June 30, 1926, to join the Winnipeg Police Force.

Taft worked as a uniform police officer from 1926 to November 1, 1935, when he was promoted to Detective. After the start of the Second World War, Taft earned his Commission as a Reserve Officer with the Royal Winnipeg Rifles, taking a leave of absence for military training from July 17-31, 1940; and again from August 13-26, 1941. He was called up for active duty on October 10, 1941, as a Second Lieutenant with the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles. He was sent to Gordon Head, B.C. for officer training and qualified as an Infantry Lieutenant.

On January 22, 1942, Taft was assigned to the Canadian Provost Corps and was posted to Oak Bay on Vancouver Island. He was promoted to Captain in June 1942 and appointed Deputy Assistant Provost Marshall (DAPM) at Esquimalt, B.C., where he remained until February 1944. From March 1944 to the end of April 1944, he attended the Royal Military College at Kingston for a course in Civil Affairs. On June 10, 1944, he sailed overseas, and his provost unit moved forward with the armed forces through France, Belgium and Holland into Germany. On July 2, 1944, Taft became an Acting Major and loaned to the 5th Civil Affairs Group attached to the United States and British Joint Staff Planning Program as one of two Canadian officers to participate in staff planning for the occupation of Germany.

Taft embarked for France in September 1944 and was attached to the 1st Military Government Administration Unit. He became a full Major on January 28, 1945. On or about April 15, 1945, he was among the first officers and liberators of the Bergen Belsen concentration camp, where soldiers from the British 11th Armoured Division discovered approximately 60,000 prisoners inside, most of them half-starved and seriously ill, and another 13,000 corpses lying around the camp unburied. Taft did not talk about this part of the war with his family other than to say that he and other officers rounded up the local towns' people and made them walk through the camp.



The Liberation of Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp, April 1945. No 5 Army Film & Photographic Unit, Oakes, H (Sgt). Imperial War Museum, BU4711

On August 29, 1945, Taft became an acting Lieutenant Colonel. The provost corps was called upon to do police work, from traffic control and handling prisoners of war in a battle zone to forming special squads for investigating serious crime and tracking down black marketeers behind the lines.

Taft was then transferred from the provost corps and loaned to the Allied military government, and then sent to Hanover. There he was the Staff Officer in the Public Safety Branch of the Military Government. After the collapse of Germany, it became necessary to reorganize the regular civilian police forces. The Canadian and British staff had earmarked a number of army officers with the combination of police experience and army training to reorganize the police forces, and Taft was one of the army officers chosen.

When Taft arrived in Hanover, there were no trains, no canal traffic, no bridges, and the city had no supplies of water, gas or electricity. By the time he left on March 21, 1946, all of the utilities were restored, and 92% of the streetcars were working.



Lt. Col. Robert Taft, 1945
Courtesy Shaun Machesney

During his time in Hanover, Taft was the head of the civilian police force for the city and surrounding district (Regierungsbezirk), including the towns of Hamelin and Rinteln. The entire area measured 3800 square miles.

He supervised 3000 police officers, including a 1465 regular man force for the City of Hanover, 880 Gendarmerie for the rural areas and 1300 vulnerable point police. He was responsible for policing 1,140,000 Germans.

Taft was also in charge of the fire brigades for the entire government district. In addition, he oversaw the staffing and supervision of the police prisons in Hanover and Hamelin, as well as the Prisoner of War Discharge Camp that, under Taft's tenure, 77,876 Prisoners of War were discharged and provided for.

On June 11, 1946, Taft was discharged from the Armed Forces and resumed his duties as a Detective Sergeant with the Winnipeg Police. He was quickly promoted through the senior officer ranks to Inspector (1946), Superintendent (1947), and Deputy Chief (1953) before being appointed Chief in 1954. His duties in Hanover no doubt helped when he took over the Winnipeg Police as he set about to modernize the department.

One of the first things Taft did as Chief was to hire several Commissionaires on contract to enforce parking by-laws and then to take over the serving of summonses. These changes freed officers for regular patrol duties and also reduced the friction between the driving public and the police.

In 1959 the Chief authorized the reorganization of the police record systems into a modern and efficient Central Registry. In June 1959, the Winnipeg Police also saw the establishment of the first [3-digit "999" Emergency Telephone System in North America](#). The calls for police, fire, ambulance and eventually the poison centre became the responsibility of the police to answer. In the early years, two operators were on duty 24/7 to handle the approximate 300 calls per day that were received on the switchboard.



Cst. Robert Taft, c. 1930
Courtesy Shaun Machesney

Prior to 1959, the public had to know a multitude of emergency numbers throughout 16 different municipalities in Greater Winnipeg. “999” was a single point of contact which replaced 32 different phone numbers. This easy-to-remember number allowed the citizens of Winnipeg to speak with a switchboard operator who could immediately connect the caller to the appropriate police, ambulance, or fire resources. By 1963 all the metro police departments would be connected by a single emergency radio system operating out of the Winnipeg Police headquarters building on Rupert Avenue.

Taft also introduced the new civilian rank of “Cadet” in 1960 to free up police officers from other duties. Cadets were young men 18 years of age who performed non-active and clerical work in the various divisions gaining experience so that they could apply as constables upon reaching the age of 21. This system also allowed more officers to work on the street rather than inside.

One of the last things Taft fought for was a new police station to replace the aging Rupert Avenue building and two sub-stations built 50 years earlier. He laid out plans for a new building as early as 1959. However, notwithstanding the crumbling infrastructure, voters declined to pass a money by-law in 1960 to build one. After several tours by the media of the run-down buildings, a new money by-law was eventually introduced (and passed) in April 1964 to build a new Public Safety Building for \$2.8 million on Princess Street. However, bringing radar to the streets of Winnipeg in 1965 is probably Taft’s lasting legacy.



Winnipeg Tribune, July 28, 1965



Taft’s term as Chief was marked by several high-profile disagreements with members of the Police Commission. Besides the building of a new station, Taft opposed a proposal for one-man patrol cars as the Commission’s response to his request for 100 more officers and ten more cars; and he refused to disclose the names of police informants to the Mayor (who felt the Commission had supreme oversight of the police).

On November 1, 1963, Taft was invested by the Governor-General of Canada as an Officer of the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem. The medal is awarded to those who have successfully demonstrated leadership at a regional level in a position carrying substantial responsibility or for having demonstrated leadership at a local level in a position carrying major responsibility. He was also a member of the Lions Club, the St. Andrew’s Society of Winnipeg (of which he was president in 1960 and 1961), the Masons (Ionic Lodge), and the Khartum Shrine Temple.



Winnipeg Police Commission met in special session today to lay plans for a new police headquarters following Wednesday's approval of a \$2.8 million bylaw. Outcome of the vote was hailed by the

commission members (clockwise): John Sampson, Ald Lillian Hallonquist, Police Chief Robert Taft, Mayor Stephen Juba, Dr. Murray Fisher, Ald Leonard Claydon and secretary George Parkin.

Voters approve a \$2.8 million money by-law to build a new Police Station. Winnipeg Tribune, April 9, 1964.
The new building opened to the public on May 18, 1966, six months after Taft's retirement.



"Good evening, gentlemen! I'm your Liberal candidate . . ."

Taft resigned from the Winnipeg Police Force effective December 15, 1965, to run as a Liberal in the federal constituency of Winnipeg North, losing to New Democrat David Orlikow. Two years later, however, he was elected to the Winnipeg City Council as an alderman for Ward 1. He was re-elected for two more terms, including the first Unicity council in 1971 as an independent councillor for the Riverview Ward in Fort Rouge.

Taft remained on City Council for seven years until October 23, 1974, when he decided not to run for re-election. During his tenure, he gained a reputation as an outspoken defender of the Winnipeg Police Force and the law.

After leaving City Council, Taft retired to B.C. He died on September 30, 1990, in Victoria, at the age of 86.

I wish to provide a special thank you to Robert Taft's granddaughter, Shaun Machesney, for her assistance with this article. After graduating from law school, Shaun carried on her grandfather's legacy, becoming a police officer with the New Westminster Police Department.



BACK ROW—Lieut. A. J. Hickmott; Lieut. J. W. Allan; Capt. R. T. Taft; F/L. A. J. Macdonald; Capt. G. J. E. Labrosse; Capt. W. F. Shepherd; Lieut. H. M. Orr; Capt. I. H. Gullion; Capt. W. V. Percival; Capt. H. S. Hunt; Capt. R. J. Stallwood; F/L. C. P. Wyman; Capt. P. C. Trendell; Lieut. H. T. Gouin; Lieut. A. C. Munich; Lieut. H. W. Pedrolini
 THIRD ROW—F/L. W. J. Hansen; Maj. R. T. Backhouse; Capt. H. I. H. Dietz; Capt. J. E. Fairbanks-Monette; Maj. M. Syrotuck; Maj. G. B. Fels; S/L. N. K. Skelton; Maj. C. H. Milton; Maj. J. D. Watt; Maj. H. T. F. Petterson; S/L. S. Smith; Maj. G. B. Slaven; Maj. J. Van Dyk; Capt. G. H. Davidson; Capt. T. M. Ewing; Capt. J. E. A. Fournier; F/L. H. D. Irwin
 SECOND ROW—Maj. J. P. Kempf; Maj. O. J. A. Barter, E.D.; Maj. H. J. Furminger, M.C.; Maj. J. D. Russell, E.D.; Maj. C. A. Chabot, E.D.; Maj. H. F. G. Bridges; Lt.-Col. J. Chalout, E.D.; W/C. E. B. Goodspeed, O.B.E.; Lt.-Col. H. E. Vautelet, E.D.; W/C. H. P. Rickard; Lt.-Col. A. R. M. O'Connor, E.D.; Lt.-Col. J. C. MacKeen, E.D.; Maj. W. M. Maxey; Maj. M. V. McGuire; Maj. W. T. Barnard, E.D.; Maj. G. P. R. Tallin; Maj. J. Leal
 FRONT ROW—S/L. P. F. C. Byars, G.S.O. II; Maj. R. H. Unwin, M.C., G.S.O. II; Maj. A. LeBlanc, G.S.O. II; Maj. A. N. Richardson, D.S.O., M.C., G.S.O. II; Maj. R. D. Mulholland, D.A.Q.M.G., R.M.C.; Lt.-Col. T. W. L. MacDermot, D.C.S.; Col. J. J. Hurley, E.D., C.I., R.M.C.; Maj.-Gen. H. F. H. Hartsberg, C.M.G., D.S.O., M.C., Cmdt. R.M.C.; Lt.-Col. T. F. Gellay, G.S.O. I; Maj. G. R. Blaikie, D.A.A.G., R.M.C.; W/C. C. C. Wyatt, M.B.E., G.S.O. II; Maj. K. M. Benson, G.S.O. II; Maj. J. W. Walker, G.S.O. II; Maj. J. S. M. Allely, G.S.O. II; Capt. C. B. MacFarlane, D.S.

Captain Robert Taft, back row, third from left.
 Royal Military College, Canadian Civil Affairs Staff, Course 2
 March 6 to April 29, 1944. Courtesy Shaun Machesney

NOTE: Anyone wishing to recognize a police member they feel made sustained and substantial contributions to policing in Winnipeg and its surrounding municipalities during the past 150 years is asked to send me their name and (if known) a brief description of their accomplishments.