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Toronto's Fighting 75th in the Great War 1915-1919

A Prehistory of The Toronto Scottish Regiment (Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother's Own)

By Timothy J. Stewart

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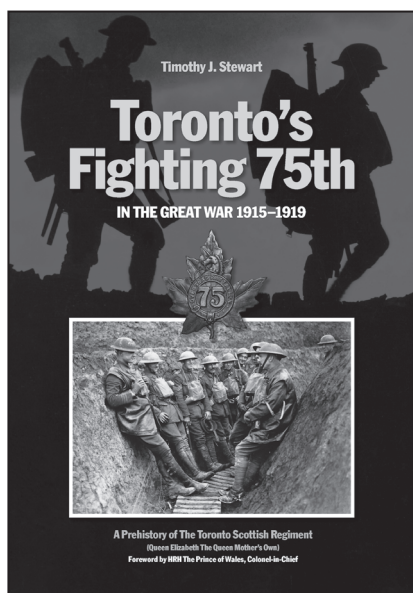
To mark the centenary of the First World War, popular histories, academic monographs, and various other popular history products have been released in the past five years or so. The history of the 75th Battalion in the Canadian Expeditionary Force by Timothy Stewart would seem to be part of this trend, but this is not the case. This was a fifteen-year project to cover the early years of the Toronto Scottish Regiment with a primary focus on the years of the First World War. The pre-war militia units that created the 75th are well detailed, providing useful context to the people who formed the battalion and played important roles in the war.

The years of research pay off as the author is able to provide vivid details of the pre-war years of the 9th Mississauga Horse through to the establishment and training of the 75th in Canada. The first major battle for the 75th is the best section of the book by Stewart. The attack on Desire Trench as part of the brutal and bloody Somme offensive in late 1916 is strikingly described. The battle of Passchendaele receives

extensive coverage despite the fact that the 75th did not even fight in that battle. The Hundred Days campaign is well covered beginning with the battle of Amiens and the push through the Drocourt-Queant in early September 1918. The author's description of the destruction of the battalion during the battle for Canal du Nord and the push north of Cambrai is well written and exemplifies the fierce fighting that took place in the final battles of the war.

Stewart's eye for detail is impressive as his analysis of events surrounding the 75th and the First World War in general is thorough and full of specifics. But the amount of detail that the reader is exposed could be seen as a drawback of the work as some

issues that are barely related to the 75th receive extensive analysis. For the example, the breakdown of the early war is covered in great detail as is the camp at Valcartier, Quebec, which was used for the first contingent of Canadian troops destined for England. The 75th was not part of the first contingent and trained in Toronto. The discussion of much larger events of the war that matter little to understanding the 75th's war are also ex-



amined. Stewart weighs in on the debate of whether Douglas Haig, commander of the British Expeditionary Force, wanted to attack at the Somme in the first place. These tangents rely on secondary sources and while this itself is not a negative, a work this narrowly focused should stay on topic to the best extent possible considering the excellent collection of primary documents used. Stewart's intended audience is difficult to determine. Larger events like the beginning of the war, and small details like soldiers' training schedules are described. By including this range of information, it appears that Stewart was writing for a wide audience, from someone with little to no knowledge of the First World War to the experienced historian. He is more successful in writing for the knowledgeable reader and therefore this work is recommended for that audience.

Stewart argues that the gas raid on Vimy Ridge on 1 March 1917 was a watershed moment for the 75th. The raid was intended to gather intelligence for the upcoming attack on Vimy, to cause destruction to the German defenses, and to take prisoners for interrogation. It was hoped that White Star gas, a mixture of phosgene and chlorine, would cause confusion in the German lines as the 75th moved in for the attack but the raid went wrong from the beginning. The gas caused many casualties among the 75th as the wind did not push the clouds into the enemy trenches. Lieutenant-Colonel Samuel Beckett, the original commander of the battalion, was killed in this disastrous raid. Many other members of the 75th died, thus weakening it for the eventual attack on Vimy Ridge on 9 April. Stewart focuses on the replacement of Beckett to highlight the importance of leadership in war. Beckett was replaced by Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Worsnop

who led the battalion through the Vimy battle. Worsnop was then quickly replaced due to interpersonal problems with officers from other units and because 75th officers resented being commanded by an officer from western Canada. Torontonians Lieutenant-Colonel Colin Harbottle replaced Worsnop after Vimy, and commanded the 75th through the rest of the war. The loss of Beckett and the many casualties taken during this raid weakened the battalion which led to the difficulties in taking Hill 145, now the site of the Vimy National Memorial, on the first day of the attack. Stewart does well in detailing the effects individuals can have on battlefield success and in showing the reinforcement difficulties of the First World War.

One of the strongest points of this work is the collection of visual materials. The maps of the various battles fought by 75th are full of detail and greatly aid in the understanding of the unfolding of important events of the war. The inclusion of numerous pictures of the men and officers of the 75th are a welcome addition. The years of research undoubtedly led to this excellent collection. Unfortunately, Stewart uses many Canadian myths of the war in his analysis. He highlights claims of British incompetence and Canadian leadership superiority. Stewart does not seem to be on the forefront of new scholarship as he presents these outdated ideas. Despite this, the story of the 75th Battalion itself is well done. The years of research paid off and Stewart has provided an excellent legacy for the battalion that, as he said, "...Toronto had forgotten for far too long" (xxiii). Certainly Toronto, and all readers of this book will know about them now.

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